

Made to Measure

Scott MacCallum travelled to Cornwall to meet BIGGA's new Chairman, Richard Whyman.

It goes without saying that being the Chairman of an Association like BIGGA requires a certain amount of communication skill – the ability to make impromptu speeches on all subjects at the drop of a hat and the capacity to chat with members at every stage in their career, as well as top officials of greenkeeping and golfing bodies from all over the world.

So when Richard Whyman says, and indeed demonstrates, that he, “can talk for England”, and that 16 years as Devon and Cornwall Section Secretary have taught him to think and speak on his feet you get the strong suspicion that he is ready made for the job of BIGGA Chairman.

Richard is very well aware of the type of person he is, the style of Chairmanship he will employ and how his strengths differ from his predecessor as Chairman, Kerran Daly.

“Kerran has written in the magazine, and on the website, very well and has put in train the new Secretaries’ Website page which, once it is being utilised fully, will become an extremely useful tool for the Association. I’m a social, communicative person who prefers to talk with people and that’s how I will learn what’s going on in the Association,” said Richard, as we sat in the upstairs lounge of Bude and North Cornwall Golf Club, which had just hosted a Devon and Cornwall Section event, and which had been his place of work for 18 years.

For the last three years he has been Head Greenkeeper at the prestigious Burnham and Berrow Golf Club, in Somerset, widely regarded as one of the finest links in the south west of the country, a fact reinforced by the fact that during his Chairmanship year Richard will be preparing the course for the English Amateur Championship.

“I’d been extremely happy at Bude for 18 years but Burnham and Berrow was one of the few jobs in the south west which could have tempted me.

“When it came up I talked it over with my wife, Denise, and I thought that at 43 if I didn’t take the opportunity it might not come up again. It was the right time as my son, who has recently joined the greenkeeping staff at Carden Park, was just finishing school and my daughter was about to go to university. The easiest decision would have been not to move but I would have been here today and in my comfort zone,” said Richard, who was made a life member of the club when he left and who spent the Section Day catching up with many of his old members who recognised him and just wanted to say hello.

Richard’s entry into the greenkeeping profession came two years after he had taken up the game of golf at 14, he decided that he’d had enough of school at 16. A reluctance to work in a factory and a keen desire to work outside drew him to another of the fine south west links courses, Saunton, where he began as an apprentice.

“I’m a Devonian, born and bred in Barnstaple, and I started playing golf with my dad, who was returning to the game after a layoff. We joined Ilfracombe – Saunton was closer but prestigious and expensive to join – and, although I was never going to be a great golfer, I caught the bug.”

At Saunton he first worked under David Rawlins, and then Brian Summers and began his greenkeeper education.

“I started at the local technical college in Barnstaple but the golf club wanted a more greenkeeper orientated course for me so I did my City and Guilds on one of the first greenkeeper courses in the country at Warwickshire College.



“The course was still feeling its way. I remember one machinery lesson where we were picking up hay bales off the sports field,” he smiled.

When he was 21 he moved on, becoming Deputy Head at Lee on the Solent, home club to one of BIGGA’s most well loved characters and supporters.

“Jim Fry [a BIGGA Honorary Member] was the Chairman of Green when I was there and he used to drive us to Section events in the South Coast Section in his Roller. It was great pulling up at a golf club in a Rolls Royce, climbing out and going into a Section event.”

The lure of his beloved Devon and Cornwall drew him back to the job of Head man at Bude and North Cornwall, although the move was tinged with a little regret.

“When I left Lee and Solent were just about to start quite a bit of construction work and I would have enjoyed becoming involved with that,” said Richard, who despite his West Country roots is an avid Leeds United supporter, borne out of the Yorkshire side’s early 70s dominance in his formative years.

But the prodigal son returned, on the same day as the Brighton bomb nearly wiped out Margaret Thatcher and the Tory Government of October 1984, and his Association work was about to begin.

“When I returned it was still the BGGGA and I sat on committees quite quickly both on BGGGA and subsequently BIGGA. Gordon Child was Section Chairman at the time and he nurtured me along. I soon became Chairman



myself, although I never had any real desire to move forward with BIGGA. It just happened."

To demonstrate just how that works Richard explained that, when Chairman, he was called by the Section Secretary at the time, Jim Wood, to say he was leaving the industry to work for the War Graves Commission and he wanted to drop off the Section stationary.

"All of a sudden I was left with all this stuff and I'd become Section Secretary. I'll always remember my first meeting. It was at Teignmouth GC and I was worried. I had about 50 people turning up and I had to organise golf, meals, meet the speaker and then make a speech myself, all of which was new to me. I spent the night before rehearsing my speech which, by midnight, was driving my wife mad. It all went very well and when that happens you get a real buzz. I'm sure Don [Hunt, the D&C Section Secretary] got a buzz out of having 52 here today."

As Richard progressed in the role he became more and more proficient and, by his own admission, he enjoyed every minute of it.

"Although it took up a lot of time – I do gas for England, it's one of my failings – when I used to chase people up I couldn't just throw down the phone I had to have a chat about how things were and when I had 10 calls to make it could take all night."

He gave up the role when he moved to Burnham and Berrow, although he remained a member of the Devon and Cornwall Section, but he admits it was probably good for him to step back because much as his time at Bude and North Cornwall he was in a comfort zone.

"Meetings were much simpler to run by the end and the speeches just rolled off the tongue," he said.

"The biggest thing for me of being Section Secretary was that I learned how to use a computer. That has been very useful to me and I don't know if I'd be able to use a computer like I do today if I hadn't been Section Secretary," said Richard, who also credits the role as the reason he has made so many contacts within the industry and met so many people, including the Duke of York, whom he was introduced to at the opening of BIGGA HOUSE.

The call, which was eventually to lead to the Chairmanship of the Association, came one August evening in 2004.

"I'd just finished a barbecue with the family, and enjoyed a couple of beers, when the phone rang and it was Kerran inviting me to become his Vice Chairman. I had to think long and hard about it as it is a big commitment. I spoke with my wife, daughter, Nikki and son, Andrew, who were very keen and then the golf club and I was pleasantly surprised at how supportive they were, particularly when I explained the time commitment required."

So what sort of Chairman will he be and what does he want to achieve?

"As I said I'm a social guy and I'd very much like to visit every Region and meet as many people as I can but I do have work constraints, including that English Amateur Championship, and I might not get to as many functions as, ideally, I'd like.

"I'd like communication to improve and particularly from member to Headquarters because it is a two way thing and members must feed back as if HQ gets nothing back it will stop being fed down," said Richard, who

will also be doing whatever he can during his year in office to ensure a successful Harrogate Week 2007.

Another of his aims is to create a means for the next generation of Board member to come through the ranks.

"I'd like to see at least one youngster being elected to all Section Committees by the end of the year. We need people to be nurtured the way Gordon did with me, serve a couple of years on the Section Committee then, if they are good enough, progressing to the Region and then the main Board. Although we do have a committee structure very similar to the ones we complain about in clubs I can't think of another way of working and I believe the structure of the Association is good. However, what you don't want is a regurgitation of the same old people," said Richard, who at 46 sees himself as the last of the old school of greenkeeper.



2005 Chairman Kerran Daly, right, hands over the BIGGA reins to Richard Whyman

"I'm probably more passionate about this than most because my son has just entered greenkeeping and we don't want the next generation to be held back, not being given a chance and not having their ideas about running the Association coming forward," said Richard, who said he will be taking a step back once his term is over, although always be available in the background to help when asked.

"The best thing that happened to me was giving up the Devon and Cornwall Secretary job for two years when I joined Burnham as I had got very blinkered. I've returned with a different outlook and see no major problems at all when, as Secretary, there seemed many. It was good for me to take a step back and I'd recommend that to others – give it up for a couple of years, let someone else have a go and then return."

Richard is really looking forward to his Chairmanship and particularly the opportunity to attend the GCSAA Conference and Show, in Atlanta, and the Canadian Superintendents' Conference and Show when he will head to Vancouver where he first visited as a member of the very first Bernhard Scholarship trip.

One thing you can be sure about with Richard is that he will make the most of his year and enjoy it. He was, after all, made for the role of Chairman!