



# A LIFETIME IN GREENKEEPING

*Scott MacCallum travelled to Bristol to meet Past Chairman, Ivor Scoones, on the eve of his retirement*

**Cast your mind back to 1962. For those old enough to be around it will seem a while ago but for younger readers it might as well be 1066, so far in the deep and distant past it will appear.**

West Side Story won the Best Picture Oscar; Moon River was the Record of the Year; Arnold Palmer won The Open at Troon and Jack Nicklaus the US Open at Oakmont; Harold – no relation to Billy – Macmillan was Prime Minister; Marilyn Monroe was found dead in her bed and three days later your Editor was born.

I mention all of this because that was the year that former National Chairman, Ivor Scoones, started work at Long Ashton Golf Club, in Bristol, moving to the club as Deputy from Filton Golf Club. He retired last month 44 years later.

“I remember the winter after I started in ‘62/’63 that there was snow on the ground in April and we had terrible damage from snow mould. It took ages to get rid of it and our best friend, would you believe, was annual meadow grass. That was the only thing that got us out of trouble,” said Ivor, as he cast his mind back to when he started at the course as a Deputy.

He is a fund of wonderful stories and opinions and, sitting in the greenkeeper bothy which he brought to the course, he was more than happy to reminisce about greenkeeping then and now.

“We had push mowers when I started and we used to cut the greens twice a week. Takes some thinking about now but there was not much play then.

“In 1966 we got our first powered mower, a Mark 1 Certes, and thought all our Christmases had come at once! I’d cut nine greens a day, a colleague, also called Ivor, would cut the other nine and we’d meet up to mow the putting green together.

“If we saw two golfers out on the course in the morning that would be about average. People would be in the clubhouse, often bank managers for example would turn up to read newspapers and use the club for that,” said Ivor.

He also has fond recollections of his pro, Wally Smithers, in those early days. A close friend of Henry Cotton he would often return from a tournament and, if he’d done well, dip his hand in his pocket and bring out some money and say, “Buy the boys a drink”.

“That was very unusual because the pros used to struggle the same way we did,” said Ivor.

He became Head Greenkeeper 18 months after starting at the club taking over from Mark Ashley, another in the long line of Long Ashton staff who stayed at the club for many many years.

“One assistant who was here during my time was a 2 handicap player, Henry Burge, who worked here for a total of 47 years and that didn’t include the two World Wars. He worked until he was over 70 driving a tractor and gang mowers.

“I’ve always run a happy team and given everyone a reasonable amount of responsibility but tended to shield them for committees. I’ve never been an aggressive sort of person and never asked anyone to do something I wouldn’t or haven’t done myself.”

Ivor has shown his dedication to the task many times over the years but not least in assisting the club when it came to lack of machinery.

“If the club couldn’t afford a piece of machinery I’d often go out and buy it myself just to make sure I could do the job as well as possible. Maybe I’m unusual in that respect. I’d rent it out to other local clubs but it would always be there for Long Ashton.”



Among the pieces of Scoones' kit which he bought are a turf cutter, tractor hedge cutters, rotaries and a hydraulic winch.

"At the end of the day if you live the job you do these things and let's face it it did make my life easier as an individual and helped to provide a service to the members."

Asked which one thing had led to the most fundamental change in greenkeeping over his period the answer was not the vertidrain or the ride-on triple or a new chemical but something you certainly wouldn't have expected. "The One Armed Bandit," came the reply.

"It made a huge difference in our world because all of a sudden golf clubs had money to spend and we were able to buy more machines, fertilisers everything really. One Armed Bandits made an awful lot of money for golf clubs and was certainly a key factor in the development of greenkeeping."

He does have some concerns about the future of the game, however, with regard to expectation levels and demand for play which now exist.

"America led the way with the televising of the Masters and the US Open – we only saw the tournaments at the top end which people don't seem to take on board. What you see on television looks great but you wouldn't want to play the golf course for three to four months afterwards as it very nearly destroys them.

"I've got a horrible feeling that we're going too far when it comes to standards. Golf clubs need to be able to support financially the level of standards they are demanding and clubs can't always cope.

"This course was 100 years old in 1994 and wasn't designed to take the volume of play, especially in the narrow areas. Everyone wants to play 365 days a year and people have a lot more leisure time... except greenkeepers that is. A lot of people retire a lot earlier and there is more and more demand for electric ride-on buggies which all put pressure on a golf course.

"We will either need to lower expectations and make golf more cost effective or make the changes to cope with demand and quality requirements which will cost clubs a lot more money."

Ivor was born and grew up not 50 yards from the boundary of Long Ashton Golf Club and, not only was it where he learnt to play golf, reaching a handicap of 8, it was his playground as a child. The village of Long Ashton holds a very dear place in his heart and, to put something back, he has served on the Parish Council for the last nine years, the last two as Chairman.



Ivor with his successor, James Braithwaite



"It started as a problem over footpaths. They were the club's responsibility and at one stage I cleared them to make them more accessible but was accused by some local people of raping the countryside so the council asked me to stop," explained Ivor, who looks anything but your average rape and pillage merchant.

"I decided I'd had enough of people telling us what to do so I got elected to the Council where the committee skills I'd acquired in BGGGA and BIGGA were very useful.

"I've been Chairman of Highways and the Burial Grounds committees, while just last night at 6 o'clock I was involved in discussions surrounding the music festival which is due here shortly. It's all very interesting."

A former Chairman of BGGGA, Ivor was one of those involved in the amalgamation talks instigated by the R&A and involving themselves EIGGA and SIGGA.

"A lot of people, some of them still involved in BIGGA, put an awful lot of time and effort into forming BIGGA and at the end of the day I think we've really benefited from what we did," said Ivor, who became the fourth National Chairman in 1990.

"I was the first Englishman," he added, proudly.

In both BGGGA and BIGGA there is barely a position he has not held within either Association at Section, Region or National level, while he was responsible with others for launching Westurf, the Regional Show, which used the extensive Long Ashton practice area as its permanent home and raised money for the South West and South Wales Region.

"I'm very pleased with the way BIGGA has developed. In the early days we worried where the money would come from and if we'd ever get anywhere but with R&A support and the support from the trade things have gone better and better, far better in fact than I ever envisaged."

Ivor is being succeeded as Course Manager by his long time Deputy, and former Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year, James Braithwaite.

"He had a very good education before he came here and he has done very well over the last 11 years," said Ivor, as his successor returned to the bothy from the course.

The first question to James was an obvious one. What have you learnt from Ivor?

"Patience," was the one word answer.

"We are returning to the older ways now. For example we hardly fertiliser the fairways at all now but we have to be on the ball all the time now to be aware of potential fusarium. I don't believe in preventative spraying but we must be aware of when we are likely to get it. I do feel that the Sustainable golf debate is not relevant to parkland or heathland courses and where here is so much competition for golfers."

James is also aware of the changes to the Course Managers role in recent years.

"There has been a change in priorities with a lot of paperwork, which I try to do out of hours, while a Course Manager has to be much more of a public relations officer now."

So would Ivor like to be in James's position now – taking over a high quality members' club and moving it forward.



"There are good things and bad things. It is very much a Rat Race in many ways, especially with the new health and safety and environmental legislation. That is a nightmare to deal with in itself, but if you look at my hands and the arthritis I've got and you do appreciate that our health is looked after a lot better now than before," said Ivor, who had just returned to work having had a knee replaced.

"One of the things that still stands out for me is having to go on a Thursday to get our wages. We'd go up, take off our caps and stand outside the Secretary's Office, knock and wait for him to bring the wages out. Or I'd have to go and ask if I could have money for something to spray the greens. That's another thing which has improved so much."

Ivor is not liable to become a pipe and slippers man and will keep working during his retirement.

"I'm going to set up a little grinding business and do some machinery maintenance to keep myself busy and compensate for the fact that Mr Brown has damaged our pensions," he said.

"I'll certainly still come to Harrogate and be one of the old miseries," he said chuckling at the prospect.