



MEET THE CHAIRMAN

Kenny MacKay is an ambitious, driven man and as Scott MacCallum found out he will be giving his year as Chairman his full attention

If BIGGA's new Chairman invests just a fraction of the commitment and energy on Association business that he has used in his own greenkeeping career, you can be sure the future is in good hands.

Kenny MacKay doesn't stand still, not for very long anyway. As Director of Golf Courses & Grounds at The Belfry he is used to packing as much into a day as is humanly possible - in modern parlance, going "eyeballs out" then paying for it later.

"I go flat out for about six weeks, then take a holiday when I either sleep or go down with something," he explained, while revealing that he'd been laid low over that Christmas holiday.

But don't go worrying that with such a huge job Kenny will not have the time to devote to BIGGA business over the next 12 months.

"Personally, I think the size of the job here makes it easier to take on the Chairmanship because I have so many more guys on my team than most large staff with team leaders and a structure which makes it easier for me to delegate," he said.

That's not to say Kenny didn't take time to think it over when Billy McMillan called him in November 2006 to ask if he'd consider becoming his Vice Chairman, and in line to become BIGGA's 21st National Chairman.

"I spent a week talking to people before making the decision. Obviously I discussed it with Maria, my wife, first and she said that if I thought I could do it, bearing in mind how busy I was, I should do it. I also spoke with Quinn UK, including Nigel Gray the Operations Director for Quinn UK, who is my direct boss. They felt it was quite a feather in The Belfry's cap as well as my own," said Kenny, who also spoke with Billy and John Pemberton about the time commitment that is required from the Chairman.

Having give the answer in the affirmative Kenny can look forward to what his year as Chairman will have in store.

"I'm a busy type of person anyway and while I feel there will be pressure I do feel I'll handle it. I'll pick and choose the things I'm going to do and know that I won't be able to accept every invitation which comes my way.

"Billy has been a fantastic Chairman, as I knew he would be. I didn't actually do much to stand in for him at all, but that might not be me this year. That's the beauty of a different Chairman as there are many different ways of tackling the role."

Kenny was born in Glasgow and brought up in East Kilbride. A mad keen golfer and footballer he reached a very acceptable standard in each –

playing junior football (the equivalent of lower non-league in England) and being a 2 handicapper at Torrance House Golf Course.

My ambition really was to be a golf pro and with 2 being a decent handicap at the time I could probably have done it. I did speak with John Dunlop, the pro at Torrance House, but there was no real money in it and I just couldn't have afforded to be a pro," said Kenny, whose love of Glasgow Rangers is well known among the greenkeeping fraternity.

With that, he initially became an apprentice welder at Browns, of Cambuslang, but that wasn't to be a long term career as he didn't enjoyed it and left after six months. He then did a variety of jobs and travelled around Europe until he reached his mid 20s when he decided he needed to buckle down.

While doing work for some friends in Bournemouth he found himself working at Queens Park Golf Club, working in the bar and helping out the Head Greenkeeper, Bob Walker, also playing for the scratch golf team.

Greenkeeping appealed to him and, having decided that he'd enjoyed life for long enough and that a career was required, he looked into Elmwood College and signed up for a full time National Certificate.

The six week work placement which accompanied the course was carried out at St Andrews under Eddie Adams and when he finished his course he was fortunate enough to get a job working on the construction and grow-in of The London Club courses – incidentally with his new Vice Chairman and current London Club Courses Manager, Peter Todd.

"I went from Assistant to First Assistant within the space of six months at The London Club and worked there for about four years, during which time I studied for a HNC and HND at Elmwood via distance learning, before I got a great break when I went to Hanbury Manor as Assistant Course Manager. I spent 14 months working under Sylvain Duval before he left and I became Course Manager."

Quite a steep learning curve and all more so when you consider that not long after he took over the English Open came to Hanbury and Kenny had the added responsibility of preparing for a European Tour event.

"Things were certainly happening very quickly – boom, boom, boom, boom – but I really enjoyed the buzz of Tour events."

He did three English Opens at Hanbury and when the tournament moved to the midlands and Forest of Arden, under Marriott, the hotel group which had recently bought Hanbury Manor, Kenny was asked to move to the Forest - in effect, moving with the tournament.

"Once I'd established myself at Forest of Arden I became Group Golf Courses Manager where I oversaw course management at all Marriott courses and assisted the Course Managers in raising standards."

Using a system of agronomic bench marking covering areas grass species, thatch levels etc, developed with agronomist Robert Laycock, Kenny was able to identify areas where improvement at certain courses was not at the expect levels and often the reasons for it and put actions in place to address the issue.

"For example, sometimes you'd see that a thatch level had increased since the previous test and establish that, for instance, the Course Manager had been put under pressure by a Director of Golf or Hotel Manager and aeration had suffered. By presenting the figures we had I could go in and demonstrate that a more intensive aeration programme was needed."

Kenny remained at Forest of Arden and Marriott for another three to four years before he was approached by the new owners of The Belfry,



the Quinn Group, about taking over at the four time Ryder Cup, and multiple Tour event, venue.

It's a huge job. With three 18 hole courses and a desire of both the owners and Kenny himself to take them to a new level of condition presentation and condition there is not a moment to rest. With the Quinn Direct British Masters in September, and live on BBC, those Belfry standards are very much under the microscope.

"One of my strengths is solving issues and putting things in place which are ideal skills for preparing for Tour events and we've done a lot of work since I got here, thanks to the fantastic investment we've had from The Quinn Group,

"Drainage was a big issue on the Brabazon Course, particularly on the front nine and we've worked hard to get the drainage flowing through the site as well as improving the irrigation."

While the Brabazon Course itself has come on leaps and bounds as a golf course, since the Ryder Cup was first played over it in 1985, further improves have recently been made with improved bunkering and a radical change to the 6th hole on which the fairway has been levelled and the green moved behind the lake making it a much more interesting challenge for both pros and the many many visitors and corporate guests who flock to The Belfry.

"We have also changed the strategy for the PGA Course to make it much more of an inland links to The Brabazon's manicured parkland. This means that visitors to the hotel can enjoy a completely different golfing experience if they are playing both courses during their stay."

Kenny and his team are very strong on environmental issues on the golf course and did well in the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition, sponsored by Scotts, Syngenta and Ransomes Jacobsen last year.

"We do a lot of mulching and saved 50% of our irrigation water reduced our fertiliser inputs while we've take out a large number of trees in the last two years and also planted and moved some specimen trees in strategic areas as part of our woodland management programme - the new hotel which is planned for The Belfry will be the most environmentally

friendly hotel ever built. However I make no bones about the fact that this is a highly manicured golf resort. That's what it is marketed as and that's what it is."

For all that Kenny has risen through the greenkeeping ranks he has not experienced working at a conventional members' golf club.

"Some guys are much better and more experienced in working for committee type clubs. I could be like a fish out of water in that situation whereas I'm suited to more commercial resort venues and I'm aware that people might say that it's alright for me with a staff of 40 while he's only got five. It would be easy to shoot me down and if I were in their shoes I might be saying the same thing. I do believe it's a case of sharing rather than preaching and we can all learn from each other," said Kenny, who puts the passion he has for attention to detail down to his time at The London Club where it was drummed into every member of staff.

As Chairman Kenny has an ambition to increase the membership levels to new heights.

"We have around 6500 members now and I estimate there are around 14-15000 greenkeepers in the country, so I'd love us to have a membership of 10,000 plus. It might take us another five years but I think it can be done and with initiatives of new group memberships and new categories for mechanics, and potentially groundsman in the near future, I'd love to see it," he said, adding that he was also keen to work on the perception among sections of the membership is that the Association is not as open as it could be and also would be very happy to talk to any individual about issues that they have with the Association.

Whatever time he does have outside of his job and, for the next 12 months, BIGGA Kenny enjoys with his family. Maria and he have three children Iain (12), Ruth (10) and Cameron (2) and where he did spend time on his own golf he now follows Iain, who is a good young player, playing on the British Junior Tour and competing at national and hopefully international level.

Kenny is an ambitious guy, whether it be for his career, his Association or his family and you can be sure that within the next 12 months he will work hard to make ambitions become reality.

