

BIGGA'S 2008 LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD WINNERS

By Scott MacCallum

There can be no more fitting a duo to receive BIGGA Lifetime Achievement Awards. Walter Woods BEM and Jack McMillan MBE were BIGGA's first two Chairmen and their careers have followed similar routes to the top. Both arrived in greenkeeping from other routes – Walter from coal mining and golf and Jack from farming but both found their vocations immediately. Both moved south to better themselves and although Walter moved back to St Andrews both families have remained friends for years.

There can be no better known family within the worldwide greenkeeping fraternity than the McMillans.

Billy is the current BIGGA National Chairman and Course Manager at Tyrrell's Wood GC; Ian is a former winner of the Toro Award for Excellence in Greenkeeping and Course Manager at Walton Heath GC; Cameron is Course Manager at the new and prestigious Queenwood GC and Bobby is at Hendon GC while mother, Rita, possesses agronomic knowledge that could put a Master Greenkeeper to shame.

But Daddy of them all is Jack, a man who has been at the centre of greenkeeping since 1946, rising to Course Manager at the world famous Sunningdale Golf Club and who, well into his 70s, still acts as a consult for the European Tour and his own portfolio of clubs.

Jack was BIGGA's second Chairman, following on from Walter Woods, and it is therefore fitting that both should be awarded BIGGA's Lifetime Achievement Award in the same year, becoming the first greenkeepers to receive the accolade.

"I thought it was a lovely tribute to two old men," said Jack, as we sat in his home in Camberley, Surrey.

"I've had a lot of nice things but for this to come from your peers and your Association is as nice as you get."

Among those nice things is an MBE, and the picture of him being presented with it by the Queen sits among the vast array of photographs and pictures that adorn the house. Rita keeps a scrapbook which includes the letter from John Major at 10 Downing Street informing of the impending award, in 1993.

"Rita knew about it for six months before I did," said Jack, still sounding mildly miffed.

"If someone had told me back in 1946 that I'd receive the MBE for services to the golf course industry I'd never have believed it," said Jack, who suspects that BIGGA's first President Viscount Whitelaw may have been behind his nomination.

"He and I served in the same regiment, the Scots Guards, which may have had something to do with it, as he was fond of Walter and I."

Jack's route into greenkeeping didn't come through golf but from

agriculture. During the war effort, as a small boy, he worked on a farm near his home in Newton Mearns, near Glasgow.

"I loved horses and was quite happy working on the farm but when my father was demobbed he wanted me to stay on at school and certainly didn't want me in agriculture as there wasn't money or a future in it. But I was a strong willed boy and had made up my mind that I was leaving school and we finally agreed that I could leave as long as I went to night school."

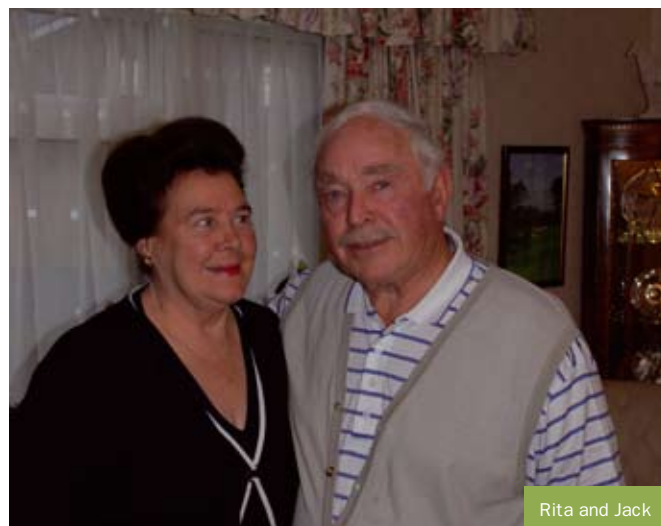
The greenkeeping link came when one of Jack's neighbours was called up for National Service and Jack was asked to replace him as a greenkeeper at East Renfrewshire Golf Club, working under Tom Dobson, who had won the Scottish Amateur Championship at Muirfield in 1925 and who was Pro/Greenkeeper at the club.

"That first year 1946-47 was one of the severest winters I've ever known, we were under snow for four months, but, like a lot of the kids who worked on farms, we were used to hard work and had an affinity with the land, I found that I was comfortable with that and loved the golf course."

When he was old enough Jack went into National Service himself and signed on for an additional three years – he was a Sergeant and a PT Instructor.

On returning to civilian life he didn't go straight back into golf but took a job cutting wood in Ayrshire for three years before taking a job at Elderslie Golf Club, near Paisley.

It was then that he became more involved with the design and construction side of the job as two holes which had been extended where causing problems.



Rita and Jack

"The 15th and 16th holes were such that two many balls from the 15th were being cut onto the railway line which ran alongside the hole so I asked Tom Dobson to take a look and he suggested reversing them so they were played clockwise to keep the balls in the property.

"There were no machines so there was a great deal of drudgery in the work involved and we used the knowledge that we had at the time but we made the course changes.

The Elderslie Centenary Book says that the only man who wasn't worried was the man who was doing the work. We also prepared the course for the first two Elderslie Trophies which is one of the main Scottish amateur events on the circuit, before I applied for and got the job of Head Greenkeeper at Cardross GC for £16 a week."

Again Jack and his team made their mark on the course extending three short holes the 11th, 12th and 13th into a par-3, a par-4 and a par-5. "We started in the autumn of 1964 and we were open for play in May '65 – two men, three boys, wheel barrows and manual work. It was a dreadful wet winter and we had a long way to move the shaping material," he recalled, adding that those holes are still played the same way today. While at Cardross Jack played in the first ever Ransomes Scotland-England match at Woodbridge GC.

"I'm delighted to tell you that Scotland won and that Walter Woods played for England!"

It was while on the trip that he became aware that greenkeepers were better off in England both financially and had greater resources to do the job.

"It was a thought to uproot six children and move south but I applied for a job at Bush Hill Park GC, in North London, and moved south."

Five years later they moved to Effingham GC.

"I liked Effingham. It was a lovely downland course, free draining and a great medium for a golf course as the chalk retained water and the capillary properties pulled water out in a drought. Fescue thrives on it."

But the opportunity of working at Sunningdale, one of the top golf clubs in the world cropped up and Jack applied. Hugh McGilvary was the Head Greenkeeper and was suffering from arthritis and felt he needed to move on.

"Hugh was a great friend of mine and I never thought he got enough credit for bringing the Associations together. He was a remarkable man and travelled to all the meetings in his own time and with his own money. "I'd played the courses in 1976 and thought they were two of the loveliest courses I'd ever seen. They were beautiful but the greens were like chewing gum.

"After I'd been interviewed and offered the job Keith Hammond, the Secretary, told me that when I'd left and the panel were discussing the candidates the Chairmen of Green said that he hadn't understood one word I'd said but that he thought I was the man for the job."

Jack remained at Sunningdale for 10 years and prepared the grand Old Course for a Walker Cup (in 1987) and a succession of European Opens, Brabazon Trophies and a Sunningdale Foursomes every year.

"Sunningdale was a joy to be there. It's a special place for everyone. The philosophy in those days was that presentation wasn't as important in those days as it is now. "What was all important was playing conditions tees, fairways greens. The objective was good firm tees, good firm fairways and good firm greens. Everything else was incidental."

"Sustainable golf doesn't need to damage the characteristics of the course. You want to make it visually attractive for the guys who want to play it. I personally think the problems are caused by preparing courses for Tour events. You can't blame young greenkeepers because TV cameras accentuate every flaw. Back then Walter and I were doing well but if you compared it to how well Carnoustie was prepared for The Open last year what we did doesn't come close. Things have moved on."

Jack took the courageous step in 1990, at the age of 59, of setting up his own consultancy.

"It was a big leap and I terrified myself. We had to find a home, take out a mortgage knowing that going into business for yourself that there are no guarantees. But working at Sunningdale does open doors and, although I hadn't started with any clients friends in the industry asked me to do work for them including former PGA Captain, Geoffrey Cousins, and Sky commentator and Sunningdale member, Bruce Critchley, who asked me to consult on a new Seve Ballesteros course in Provence.

He soon began a partnership with agronomist George Shields, forming McMillan Shields. Later, together with Walter, Jack worked for the European Tour, initially looking after five Tour venues each.

He has worked for the Tour ever since although just last year reduced his commitment, now looking after the UK based Qualifying School venues and Loch Lomond, where his close relationship with Ken Seims has worked extremely well. He also retains a small number of his longer standing clients.

However, you can't imagine Jack doing anything other than working as a man who has influenced greenkeeping in places including Sri Lanka Indonesia, France Germany, Holland, Switzerland and Russia.

His enthusiasm will never dull and he's kept bright by his own greenkeeping family and the extended greenkeeping family who are always made so welcome.

"The great thing is meeting young greenkeepers who have gone through the education system and seeing how talented they are in man management. My old management came from the Scots Guards. When you told someone to do something you expected it done and that's the wrong way to go about things."

He does still worry for the young Course Manager who is criticised by golfers who have no idea of the level of resource he has at his disposal.

"I still believe the three main constituents for running a golf course is staffing levels, equipment provision and a reasonable consumables budget. If these things are in place and the guys are capable of doing the job they can do the job."

Jack is extremely proud of his own family's achievements but also those of his extended family and he reckons over 40 of his former staff are now Course Managers. "When we're sitting at the family dinner golf courses will always come into the conversation, but also very proud of all the other young lads who are part of this family people like Jim Grainger, who is now at Ringwood in Manchester.

Of his fellow Lifetime Achievement Award winner Jack couldn't be more praiseworthy.

"I'm fond of him. He's good at what he does and he's a good friend. I don't know or a kinder person. Sometimes we'll agree to disagree. He's a cracker! I admire him for what he's achieved and it was a joy to be in the States when he got his Old Tom Morris Award.

Right at the end of the chat Jack said something which probably sums

up the greenkeeping industry better than anything.

“For me, I’m comfortable when I’m among greenkeepers.”

How well put.



There’s currently no more famous a name in golf than “Woods”.

Of course there’s Tiger, who has been the best player in the world for almost 10 years while greenkeeping’s own Woods – Walter, has been the best known face in the greenkeeping world for decades.

It’s therefore fitting that he, along with the head of the best known family in greenkeeping, should be the first greenkeepers to be recipients of BIGGA’s Lifetime Achievement Award – following in the illustrious footsteps of BIGGA President Sir Michael Bonallack OBE, who received the inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005.

Walter is not unfamiliar with receiving awards. He holds the BEM, while he was awarded the Old Tom Morris Award by the GCSAA in 2002, joining such luminaries as Arnold Palmer, Bob Hope, Jack Nicklaus and President Gerald Ford.

“Winning the Old Tom Morris Award is the finest achievement I’ve ever had. I was so proud and humble, but the importance of getting an award from your own Greenkeepers’ Association means more to me than anything because it is coming from your peers – the people who you have been working with over the years,” he explained.

I’m so pleased to be receiving it at the same time as Jack as we have been good friends for over 30 years and he is someone I’ve always looked up to. He’s very knowledgeable and a great friend. Rita is a great woman and I’m proud of every one of the family,” said Walter, who revealed that he, Caroline, Jack and Rita will be enjoying a cruise together early next year.

Walter is quick to share much of the credit for his success, and that of the Association, the formation of which he played a big part, with fellow greenkeepers.

“I was lucky to be right man, in the right place at the right time when things occurred. Before BIGGA I was President of SIGGA and worked with some very enthusiastic men in the run up to the coming together of the three existing greenkeeping associations. People like Jimmy Kidd, Chris Kennedy, Alistair Connell, Cecil George and Jimmy Neilson - there are too many to name them all. SIGGA was a very go ahead Association,” he recalled.

The origins of BIGGA go back to the mid ‘80s when there were moves by the PGA to bring greenkeeping under its auspices.

“I remember a meeting with a fellow from the PGA who suggested that we might join with them. We all thought this might be quite good and were quite enthusiastic about it. But then something began niggling me. I wasn’t sure what it was, so I thought I’d speak with Michael Bonallack, then Secretary of the R&A.

“I mentioned it to him and he didn’t think it was the way to go as we would be losing control of our own destiny and losing all that we’d done in the long history of greenkeeping. He thought it would be better if we formed one Association out of EIGGA, BGGGA and SIGGA and said the R&A would put funding into a new Association.”

Walter then began travelling up and down the country meeting with representatives from the other Associations, including Bill Lawson, who was in the BGGGA and was very enthusiastic about it, and in Walter’s view, perhaps the biggest supporter of the lot.

With consultants paid for by the R&A guiding the three Associations’ representatives through the process at meetings in centrally-placed York the new Association – BIGGA - began to take shape.

“There were arguments and suspicions between Scotland and England and people with sentimental attachments to their own Association but ideas came out of the meetings.”

When it was all resolved and BIGGA came into being in 1987, Walter became the first Chairman and Jack the first Vice Chairman.

One of the early things they did was appoint an Executive Director and the interview panel was most impressed by the quite confidence and common sense displayed by Neil Thomas, who was to lead the Association until his untimely death in early 2004.

“Looking back 20 years on the progress that has been made has been unbelievable. I was a Board member for a lot of years and notice the improvements more than most people,” said Walter, who still recalls the many, many train journeys he has made over the years to and from York and Leuchars, near St Andrews.

“It was sometimes five or six time a year, more at the beginning, and I started to know every crack in the railway line.”

All this time Walter was still in charge of the most famous golfing land in the world St Andrews Links where he was the Links Superintendent.

“I don’t think if it was today, and I was in Gordon Moir’s position, I would have been able to do it. I used up all my holidays working for BIGGA and was putting in extra time on the course at weekends but it’s a much harder job now than when I was working there.”

A lot of water had passed under the bridge prior to Walter’s arrival in St

Andrews and what had gone before was very much the making of the man who prepared The Old Course for four Opens – in '78, '84, '90 and '95 – and countless other top tournaments.

Surprisingly Walter didn't always want to be a greenkeeper. In fact he started out by working in a woollen mill and a grocers before working on the pit head of a coal mine.

"That's where fate comes in as I remember the Pit Manager, a Mr Gold, knowing that I was a keen golfer, saying to me that the President of Tillicoultry Golf Club, a Mr Stevenson, a coal merchant, had mentioned that the club was short of a greenkeeper and that if I was willing I could work there in the summer and if I didn't like it my job would be kept open for me at the pit," recalled Walter, whose golfing prowess has seen him play county golf both north and south of the border.

"I took the job and immediately knew that I'd found my niche. I knew greenkeeping was the job for me.."

Walter revelled in the producing a golf course, making it look good and having people tell him it looked good.

"You must remember there were no powered mowers in the early days and you didn't apply much fertiliser because if you did you had to cut it much more," said Walter, who has his very first push mower from Tillicoultry. It's still used on a lawn which looks immaculate.

Tillicoultry provided him with a good basic apprenticeship giving him a chance to pick up all the skills and before long he was asked by a golfer friend to take over at Braehead GC, near Alloa.

"I was Professional/Head Greenkeeper on £18 a week, although it was mainly greenkeeping, and Caroline looked after the bar. Together with our three kids, we lived above the bar and locker room."

Walter worked his socks off, he'd never been fitter, extending the course to 18 holes with the help of volunteers and it began to improve, to the extent that they were taking £100 a week in green fees and the same over the bar. But the extra work involved in maintaining 18 holes wasn't reflected in his pay packet and when he saw a job advertised in Golf Illustrated at Stanton-on-the-Wolds GC, near Nottingham, he applied and was successful.

"We moved into a modern semi-detached house and I thought we were in heaven. It was a parkland course with plenty of grass and was easy to look after – and I had five of a staff! Can you imagine that? It was unbelievable. Having five men made greenkeeping very simple but the guys didn't know what had hit them working with a guy who had been used to working on his own."

To Walter, Stanton-on-the-Wolds was a brilliant golf club but it wasn't long before his head was turned by another.

"Playing county golf I came across Hollinwell and I'd not seen a course like that in my life. I thought to myself if the job ever came up I'd apply for it. As fate would have it the greenkeeper retired not long after. I applied for it and got it.

"This was perfect for me as I was looking after one of the most beautiful golf courses in the whole of Europe, and one of the finest clubs in the world, working for some of the loveliest people with a select membership of 300. If I needed anything I just put it on paper and I'd get it.

"Ransomes triplexes were coming in but people were suspicious of them because they thought being able to cut greens in four or five hours would cost jobs. I thought the opposite. If I could get the job done quicker I could get the team onto other jobs and make the course better."

During his time south of the border Walter had the time to become more involved in education – attending BGGGA courses, visiting Bingley and reading books – and this passion for education has stayed with him ever since, whether it be his own personal education or forging a path for greenkeeper education as a whole.

"I started writing basic reports about how many men it took to do certain jobs and how long they took, fertiliser information and time sheets and I began to feel more professional."

When the job at St Andrews came up Walter never for a moment thought he'd get it but he was interviewed and was taken in by the smell of golfing history when he walked round.

What did strike him however was that none of the professionalism of Stanton-on-the-Wolds or Hollinwell was in evidence.

"It was just chaotic – divots everywhere and not much organisation – and while I thought I could handle the golf courses I wasn't sure what else would confront me.

"I was asked back for a second interview which was in the R&A Clubhouse and I was taken into a big room with a long table with one big chair at the end and four fellows down each side. My first thought was that at least I was near the door. It frightened the wits out of me.

"I told them that while the greens and tees were in superb condition I didn't think it was terribly well presented and a bit chaotic. I got the impression they knew that."

A week later he was called to say he'd got the job, and Walter's reaction?

"I immediately wished I'd never applied! I knew I'd be leaving Hollinwell to take on something I wasn't sure I could handle, but I came up to St Andrews and the rest is history."

He enjoyed his 21 years at St Andrews, meeting famous people like Jack Nicklaus and President Ronald Reagan among others and being involved in bringing St Andrews up to spec with improved practice facilities, irrigation systems, new maintenance facilities, the re-designed Jubilee course.

But he is quick to say that the courses have never been better than they are now.

He also found time to be Chairman of Elmwood Colleges Advisory Committee and helped shape the greenkeeping curriculum across Scotland, liaising with City and Guilds and the modern variations.

"You get great satisfaction in seeing improvements in young greenkeepers and I'm very proud to have pushed the Association and the education system forward. My contribution would be very small but I was there to kick start it at the beginning.

"I've been away from the Board for a year now and it's only when you've been away that you realise how much the Association has progressed. It will only get better as time goes on and I'm proud as blazes of the thing."

Walter and Jack are two of the guests on Have We Got Views for You Harrogate Week's newest attraction on Monday January 21st in the Majestic Hotel at 7pm for 7.30pm. Make sure you are there to hear from the legendary pair along with Stan Zontek from the USGA; Ken Siems MG CGCS and Andy Campbell MG CGCS. Anyone with a question can email it in advance to education@bigga.co.uk