



BY GEORGE!

The latest recipient of the BIGGA Lifetime Achievement Award is Turnberry's George Brown. Scott MacCallum visited him to talk about his life and times.

George Brown was born into the golf business. His dad was Caddie Master at Prince's Golf Club, in Sandwich, his mum was a Cook in the Club kitchen, while young George was a Caddie Boy before he started as a greenkeeper as soon as he'd finished school.

You certainly wouldn't need too much time staring at tea leaves to determine that the game would play a significant role in his life. However, the extent to which George would make an impact on the game itself would have been less easy to predict.

He has gone from caddying for the great and the good to playing with Champions, Presidents and Princes and is known and respected throughout the world of golf as the face of Turnberry. Indeed, when he retires, after this year's Championship, at the age of 71, he is being retained by the new owners, Leisurecorp, as an Ambassador/Consultant for the Resort.

Sitting in the magnificent Turnberry Clubhouse we reflected on a life that has seen George, Golf Courses and Estates Manager, steer the iconic world-renowned Resort through the last two and a half decades and four different owners. It is a measure of his achievement that the Ailsa Course, venue for this July's Open Championship, is currently ranked best in the country by two leading golf magazines.

He also found the time to commit to the BIGGA National Chairmanship in 2003, one of the most traumatic and difficult years in the Association's history.

George is the latest recipient of the BIGGA Lifetime Achievement Award following Sir Michael Bonallack OBE; Walter Woods BEM and Jack McMillan MBE onto the Roll of Honour.

"I'm not often lost for words but when John Pemberton gave me the news I was genuinely gobsmacked. I just feel most humble to get it. In many ways I'm not sure I deserve it as there are many other guys I know who have done so much more for BIGGA than I have and who have gone unrecognised," said George

"I've just been so fortunate in my career really going back over 50 years not just in greenkeeping, but in golf in general."

Having started as a caddie at the age of 13 or 14 – he carried for Douglas Bader and Viscountess



Lady Astor, the first lady MP, among others – he moved on to the greens crew.

"There were times in the long hot summers at Princes, pushing that mower up and down with no engine, that I thought there must be something better than this," said George, who also recalls being extremely fit, and thin, at the time.

One thing he did feel extremely fortunate about was his own golf.

"I lived right in the middle of three famous Kent

golf courses – Princes, St George's and Cinque Ports - and I was in the Artisans' Section of them all. It was 10 shillings for each, per annum, so for £1.50 in today's money I had the choice of three Open Championship venues and could play every night of the week."

Becoming a professional was an option and it was a losing bet that saw George move to become a pro/greenkeeper at his next club.

"In the early 60s I played with Mike Ingham,



a Button Boy and one of the longest hitters in the country, several nights a week and there was not a lot in the results. He said I was wasting my time in greenkeeping and that I should try and get a job as a professional. He bet me half a crown that I could and I bet him the same amount that I couldn't. The first job that came up was for pro/greenkeeper at a nine hole course in Alton, Hampshire. I went for the job, got it so lost the bet."

Ironically it was the lack of playing opportunities that decided George to move on from Alton.

"They were good times and a nice part of the world to work. They didn't have a push mower. At Alton it was an Atco - with an engine - so I was going up in the world, but all my pals were playing golf at the weekends while I was working in the shop and I didn't like that."

His next move, in the early 70s was back to Kent to work on a private estate for a wealthy family before returning to Princes, this time as the boss, and it coincided with the arrival of the triplex.

"We didn't have many staff at the beginning - just four including my young brother-in-law, Chris Latham, who is now at Broome Park Golf & Country Club, and Chris Allen, who is now in Sussex - but I well remember getting up at 3.30 on some Sunday mornings, cutting all 18 greens

with the triplex, then rushing off to the next county to be on the tee for 9.30 to play 36 holes for Kent before driving home again."

He left Princes in 1979 to go to Broome Park Golf & Country Club as Director of Golf.

"It was a Donald Steel designed course with squash and tennis courts, a swimming pool and time share development and was one of the most upmarket golf and country clubs in the country at the time.

"I carried out the role of the Secretary, booking in the golf societies and running the golf tournaments. It was my first management job and a real challenge. I've worked under some excellent General Managers and Marketing Departments and learned an awful lot," he said.

However, it was when he became responsible for the bars and restaurants as well that it started to get too much and he was delighted when he got a call asking if he'd like to take up the challenge of getting Turnberry ready for the 1986 Open. The previous Course Manager, Russell Brown, who, coincidentally, had followed George as Course Manager at Princes, sadly died in November 1985.

"I don't know really why I was in the frame for the job, although most of my experience had been on links courses, but the call came at the right time as I was ready for a move," he said, although knowledge of his soon-to-be new home was fairly scant.

"I knew very little about Turnberry. To be honest I had to get out the map to pin it down.

When he arrived the hotel was about to be closed for refurbishment - much as it is at the moment - and George was the only resident.

"I can remember looking out over the golf courses, the lighthouse and the Clyde and thinking 'This will do me'."

And do him it has.

With a current staff of 32 including mechanics, admin staff and gardeners it has moved on from '86 when with The Open looming he had one experienced man on the team, his Assistant, a very young Derek Wilson, who is now Course Manager at Bogside, the rest of the team comprised of mainly YTS guys.

"It was a fantastic Open. The boys all rallied round and worked very hard and between us we put on a good show," recalled George, who still has many of those guys on his current crew.

The '86 Open will be remembered for Greg Norman's win, and a stunning 63 in the second round, and it produced a superb leaderboard with Woosnam, Langer, Faldo, Ballesteros and Zoeller all finishing in the top 10. Norman's 63 included a makeable putt miss on the 17th and three putts on the last.

"One of the finest rounds of golf I've ever seen under the conditions," said George, who recalls poor weather, narrow fairways and tough rough.

He also remembers one particular newspaper featuring Seve praising the course to the hilt on the Tuesday and then proclaiming it impossible and a joke two days later, in the same paper.

His second Open in '94, won by Nick Price, he remembers how that during the week before

the course was beginning to burn up but that he resisted watering. They then had 50 mil of rain over the next four days and he read in the papers that Turnberry had a new irrigation system and that the course was too green as a result!

"People talk about sustainability, education and training but when it comes to actual playing conditions it's the man upstairs who has the last word."

During his time at Turnberry George has played with a host of luminaries and such is his easy manner he has been an ideal partner for anyone from Prince Andrew and President Bill Clinton to young assistants at Section events. He has also played with Champions such as Gary Player, Bobby Locke, Max Falconer and Sandy Lyle.

George was BIGGA National Chairman in 2003, the year in which BIGGA's first Executive Director, Neil Thomas, was to be struck down with a brain tumour which was to cost him his life in early 2004.

"It was a difficult year for everyone with Neil's illness - his family, the BIGGA staff and myself. I was with Neil in America and Canada, he always organised everything down to the last 'T,'" said George.

"One of the things I'm proud of is that I was instrumental in the appointment of John (Pemberton) and we've got a lot to thank John, and the Board, for in steering us through these difficult times which are likely only to get more difficult."

George has some thoughts on those members who see the Chairman's role as elitist and just a jolly.

"I certainly didn't need the Chairmanship for my CV. It is very time consuming and a huge responsibility. Some of those who criticise the role should give it a shot because it's easy to an armchair critic," said George, who does advise anyone who undertakes committee or voluntary work to remember that their day job should always come first.

"My work has always been my priority and people who forget that have often lost their jobs. I've been very fortunate that I had the full support of my General Manager, Stewart Selbie, and also from my three Head Greenkeepers, Martin Lothian, Jimmy Johnstone and Tom Cuthill - not forgetting Jim Campbell, our mechanic, and, the one who keeps everyone and everything in order, Jackie McDowall, our Secretary."

The fact that he loves his work so much has made it such a pleasure for him.

"As a young man I was keen on fishing and hunting so I could have been just as happy being a Gillie or a Gamekeeper. I've combined a hobby with my living. How lucky can you get."

In the run up to the 2009 Open, George is working alongside his recently appointed successor, Euan Grant, who will shadow George until after The Open when he will take over permanently.

"My one wish for the year is that our new owners, Leisurecorp, and all the staff at Turnberry, have a fantastic and successful Open and that we all get the results we are looking for."

After over 50 years in the business George does not deserve anything less.