

# The BIGGA Golf Course Fund

Scott MacCallum chats with Cecil George, whose dream is for BIGGA to have its own golf course

**The BIGGA Golf Course Fund, launched in Harrogate at the AGM nearly two years ago, is the vision of a man who has identified a BIGGA built and owned golf course as a means of securing the Association's long term future.**

Cecil George retired from Lenzie Golf Club in the mid-90s but, at 82, his commitment and drive on behalf of BIGGA is as strong now as it ever was when he was a key figure in the development of the Scottish greenkeeping education programme, or sitting on the interview panel for the Association's first Executive Director, Neil Thomas.

Cecil is a man of strong conviction and ever since SIGGA investigated the possibility of building its own golf course in the '70s, long before that Association became one of three which joined to form the new BIGGA, he has carried the torch for the idea.

"We have over 6000 members, yet we don't have a golf course of our own. Don't you think that's peculiar – an Association of greenkeepers without a course?" said Cecil, speaking a short time after returning from playing in a West of Scotland Section event.

Those Scottish SIGGA members obviously thought so, and they even got so far as discussions with Ayrshire County Council on the matter.

"We intended to build a golf course. The late Harry Diamond, Head Greenkeeper at Ayr Belleisle, was very much involved and personally negotiated with Ayrshire Council, who actually said that if we were to build a course they would be willing to give us the land for a penny a year.

"It didn't get any further than that. I'm not sure what held us back, probably money like everything else."

But the idea has stayed with Cecil to this day and after raising the matter at a number of AGMs he finally got approval for the setting up of the BIGGA Golf Course Fund at the 2008 AGM and he proudly

handed over a cheque as the first contribution.

He is under no illusion of the sums required to make it work but is adamant that the money would have to be raised through donation before starting any work.

"We would have to have the money in place before we started and I certainly wouldn't want to get in debt to the banks. Look at what has happened at other clubs where the banks have called in their loans. I wouldn't want to risk the future of the Association."

In fact, Cecil sees the project as offering security rather than the reverse.

"It doesn't take any great intellect to realise that BTME can't go on forever and BIGGA must find other ways to fund its operations."

Cecil has gone as far as earmarking a part of the country where he believes the new course could be built.

"I've been looking at a map of the country and believe that we could find extensive land – preferably links – between Scarborough and Bridlington, where there are currently only around seven existing courses. Both towns are reasonably sized holiday destinations to bring in visitors and I believe there would be a good membership catchment area."

Once the finance has been raised, and Cecil believes that greenkeepers would make a million pounds go a long way, a committee of "sensible thinking people" would be formed to ensure that all interested parties are involved.

"I would see greenkeepers volunteering to work on the building of the course – a working holiday along the lines of the Support Team at The Open. I don't know a greenkeeper who can't do construction work. We have all the expertise it's just a case of tapping into it while I'm sure we could rely on our friends within the industry to lend us the necessary machinery."

Once completed Cecil would see the BIGGA Headquarters

relocating to the new site and a small accommodation block and greenkeeping teaching academy being built.

"We could accommodate those people who have travelled to the course for training courses while I'm sure we would get regular visitors coming to see the course from all over the country and it would be great for them to be able to stay," said Cecil, who would expect the course to have a full time Course Manager and team but offering opportunities for others to learn and train on the new facility.

The new course would be built to the very best specifications and taking account of the modern day professional golfer in terms of length and difficulty with around 125 acres required – although 300 acres would make so much more possible.

"If we were to build a links, and knowing that the likes of Lytham St Annes can't go on hosting The Open forever, I'd love to think that BIGGA's course would host the Championship one day. You never know..."

If successful Cecil doesn't see it stopping at one course and can one day envisage a group of around four or five BIGGA courses spread around the country.

"When we are clear of the current financial difficulties I'd love to see this project move forward. We'd need to be aware of all the stumbling blocks but only through the eyes of an optimist can the difficulties be overcome. You never get anywhere if you're a pessimist,

"I know that some people think that the idea of a golf course is just a pipe dream but if we don't look to our own future with an optimistic point of view there will be no future," said Cecil, sounding as eloquent as ever.

Anyone wishing to support the BIGGA Golf Course Fund should send donations to BIGGA Golf Course Fund, BIGGA HOUSE, Aldwark, Alne, York YO61 1UF.



Cecil George makes the first contribution to the fund at the 2008 AGM