



# Thanks for the education, Cecil!

Scott MacCallum enjoys a few hours in the company of the latest recipient of the BIGGA Lifetime Achievement Award

**I'd only been with BIGGA about a month when I travelled to Dornoch for the Scottish National Championship, ably run by Elliott and Edna Small, and found myself sharing a hotel with Cecil George and Jimmy Neilson.**

They regaled me with stories long into the night – I had been warned what to expect – and breakfast was taken with a delicate head the following morning.

But it had been an experience and spending those few hours in the company of Cecil and Jimmy was instrumental in bringing me up to speed on BIGGA and the greenkeeping profession as a whole. In short, it was an education.

Indeed, I was only the latest member of a huge band of people who owe Cecil for providing us with an education.

While mine was face-to-face as we sat at a bar, thousands of others have every reason to thank Cecil for their own education, even although they may never have had the pleasure of meeting him in person.

Cecil is the latest recipient of BIGGA's Lifetime Achievement Award and while he spent 37 years as Head Greenkeeper at Lenzie Golf Club, just outside Glasgow, he was nominated for the Award for the pioneering work that lead to the development of formal greenkeeping education – a programme which was subsequently followed throughout the rest of the UK and then worldwide.

"I'm so proud to have been given the Award, it's a great honour and thank the Association and Board of Directors for nominating me."

Cecil, who turned 83 in January, fell into greenkeeping as a 15 year old.

"I started out as a gardener, working for my uncle, but at the end of my first summer he told me that I'd be finishing at the end of the week as there wasn't enough work for me.

To lessen the blow he gave me tu'pence and told me to go to the big white house and ask for a lemonade.

I knew that the building was Whitecraigs Golf Club and as I drank the lemonade – they wanted

Had he not done so he would have been fighting in Germany with the infantry.

"It took nine months to train a para and I was about to be sent out east when the atomic bomb was dropped in Japan, so instead I was sent to Palestine and saw action when we had to hunt down some guys in Iraq," said Cecil, who undertook 109 jumps, many of them from as low as 500 feet.

On his return to civilian life he didn't think he'd go back to greenkeeping but instead follow a career in engineering.

**"I started out as a gardener, working for my uncle, but at the end of my first summer he told me that I'd be finishing at the end of the week as there wasn't enough work for me" Cecil George**

the bottle back – I chatted to the man who asked me what I was doing.

When I told him that my uncle had just sacked me he told me that there was a job going at the club for a greenkeeper," recalled Cecil, as we chatted in his magnificently manicured garden on a sunny day last month.

For the next two years Cecil worked as a greenkeeper before the Second World War intervened and saw him join the Army in 1944.

He spent four months with the Cameron Highlanders before volunteering for the Parachute Regiment.

After an interview with a Pollockshaws-based engineering company Cecil was told that if he returned the next morning there would be a job waiting for him.

"But I didn't go back. I was in the pub that night and met the Head Greenkeeper of Whitecraigs who said I should go back to the golf course as I'd enjoy it. I went up, had a go on one of the machines and was hooked. If I hadn't met him that night I'd have become an engineer and wouldn't have been here talking to you."

It was during the next phase of his career that Cecil began to become frustrated.



ABOVE: Cecil with his wife, Margaret

"I thought to myself that it was stupid. I had a job but I didn't know half of what I was supposed to be doing! So I decided to go to agricultural college at night school.

"It was in Blythswood Square, in Glasgow, and I went there for two years. I learned an awful lot – not necessarily about the grasses that I wanted to grow - I learned about the feed grasses rather than bents and fescues - but the basics were the same.

"I did learn about soil analysis, fertilisers, what they did and what they were. We didn't have weed

killers or selectives then but we did have preventatives and the greatest of them all was Lead Arsenic which was absolutely marvellous for worms and leatherjackets."

Cecil was Secretary of the West of Scotland branch of SIGGA by this time and, having experienced what studying had done for him, felt that the College could offer something for young greenkeepers who wanted to be educated.

The first person to go through the system at Glasgow Horticultural College one day release was Davie Gall, who went on to become Head

Greenkeeper at Cardross Golf Club - taking over from Jack McMillan - who became the world's first apprentice greenkeeper.

"Davie got papers for what he did and you could say was the world's first Apprentice Greenkeeper."

Cecil went on to become Chairman of SIGGA, while Bob Moffat took over as Secretary and together they approached Charles Crossan, Principal of Woodburn House, the Glasgow Horticultural College, to see if it would be possible to develop a City and Guilds qualification for greenkeepers.

“Charlie asked what greenkeepers were required to do and we outlined that we cut greens, fertilised knew about soil, drainage, overseeding etc. This information was sent to the City and Guilds Headquarters in London to be assessed but we were told that there wasn’t enough in it for a City and Guilds. Charlie then suggested that we add something about tree management and pruning roses. We sent it back and this time we were successful and we were awarded the first City and Guilds for greenkeepers.”

Cecil and Bob both taught at the College and put together some of the syllabus.

“Bob did the machinery while I did the practical greenkeeping side. I’d do weed and chemical identification while I’d get them to dig a six by six bed, lift the off the turf, delve it, rake it, fertilise it and put the turf back down again. All in an hour and a half. You want to see some of the messes we got,” he chuckled, thinking back over his time at the College.

With other colleges in Scotland taking up the mantle too, offering education for greenkeeping Cecil wrote to the five main colleges in an attempt to have the education programmes co-ordinated.

“We had greenkeepers moving from Glasgow to Dundee and discover that the college was in the middle of the curriculum that they’d just finished and they were going over old ground.

“Initially the colleges said they couldn’t possibly change, as their main client was the local council, but I asked them to write out what they did and then we reordered it for them to about 90% uniformity. It worked out very well.”

The next stage was to develop an HNC, and both Woodburn House and especially Elmwood College, worked hard on this with Cecil on this although it took six years of toing and froing, particularly on the language required to frame questions, it was achieved. With it eventually in place the HND was much easier and was in place around 18 months later.

“Everyone latched on to this and I was quite surprised at that. It went around the world apparently and it all started with our work at Woodburn House and two guys saying I think I could get a guy to go to agricultural college and learn how to be a greenkeeper.”

Cecil’s own career had taken him from Whitecraigs, to Ferenze and Cathcart Castle before he saw the job at Lenzie advertised in 1954.

Within a few years the Lenzie pro



ABOVE: One of the Lenzie Golf Club signs which decorates Cecil’s garden

RIGHT: Cecil receives his award at The Open, from Walter Woods, flanked by Paul Worster and Andy Mellon



**“It went around the world apparently and it all started with our work at Woodburn House and two guys saying, ‘I think I could get a guy to go to agricultural college and learn how to be a greenkeeper’”**  
Cecil George

had moved on and Cecil offered to take on the pro duties as well – running the shop, repairing clubs and giving golf lessons.

“I was never much of a pro but as a greenkeeper I did an honest day’s work on the golf course. I had two guys with me and it was all hand machines, motorised but we walked behind them. We didn’t have ride on machines,” said Cecil, who has been married to Margaret for 56 years.

“In those days golf didn’t generally start until around 4pm and weekend medals didn’t start until noon. Everyone worked.”

Cecil worked hard to improve the golf course both on the quality of the playing surfaces and the general layout.

“The greens were around 80% moss when I arrived so I borrowed Cathcart Castle’s scarifier and tore the greens to pieces and reseeded and they came away beautifully. When I left in 1991 the greens were 90% Bents.

“I also changed the layout and planted 10,000 trees of which 5,000 are still growing,” said Cecil, who said that in those days he was getting £8.10 a week and the annual subscription to be a Lenzie member was £5.

“I was very happy at Lenzie. They very much left me to get on with things and although I was down to the last three when Walter (Woods) got the job at St Andrews I have never regretted staying.”

As Cecil enjoys his retirement and a garden that provides much of the family veg, as well as a wonderfully tranquil retreat, he can look back at a life that has done so much to improve the lot of the greenkeeper.

“What I always strived for was better wages. If we got better wages we’d get better men and better students. With better greenkeepers we’d get better golf courses.”

Thanks for the education, Cecil!

