



Living life to the full

Scott MacCallum catches up with, Gordon Child, the latest recipient of BIGGA's Lifetime Achievement Award.

A smile is never far from the lips of BIGGA's latest Lifetime Achievement Award recipient.

Gordon Child has lived life to the full and in, modern sporting parlance, not left anything out on the park. His greenkeeping career was carried out at some of the finest golf clubs in the country and he watched some of the finest players in the world playing courses he'd prepared. His BIGGA career saw him become the only Chairman to date to serve for two years and spend 10 years as Regional Administrator for the South West and South Wales, while his own golfing ability was good enough for him to play in two Open Championships and now sees him beat his age virtually every time he goes out.

"I've been very lucky in life," said Gordon, as we sat in the upstairs living room overlooking some stunning Devon countryside.

"I'm greatly honoured to get this award and to be thought of in the same company as those who have already received it is quite humbling. I thought when I was asked to become Captain of Chuston Golf Club in 2009 that it had completed the circle for me but here comes another great honour."

Gordon joins Sir Michael Bonallack OBE; Walter Woods BEM; Jack McMillan MBE; George Brown and Cecil George as recipients of BIGGA's top accolade.

Anyone who knows anything about Gordon's background would have no doubt that BIGGA's Lifetime Achievement Award could have been introduced specifically for him and that his entry into the Association's most exclusive club

is a fitting tribute to a man who has achieved so much.

Gordon was the son, and grandson, of greenkeepers so a career on the golf course may well have been preordained, but from starting work as a school leaver at Dore and Totley, in Sheffield, he made the most of his opportunities.

"It was while I was there that I enjoyed one of the pieces of luck which I've enjoyed all my life. I started work in 1947 and at the time there were only two colleges in the UK which did turf culture and one of them was Leeds College of Art and Technology while the other as in Scotland. The college was in easy reach of my home so for three years I was able to study three nights a week and one half day for which the club gave me time off. It provided me with the foundations for my whole career."

It also saw the beginnings of a friendship which was to last for over half a century.

"It was while at college that I met Jim Arthur who was working for the STRI at the time and who was one of the lecturers brought in by the college," said Gordon.

Friendship with the legendary agronomist lasted until Jim's death at the age of 84, in 2004, and ironically saw the pair of them living just a few miles from each other in Devon – Gordon in Churston and Jim in Budleigh Salterton.

Following his time at Dore and Totley Gordon joined the Army and the Liverpool Regiment where he served in Korea along with another well known BIGGA figure, the late Bert Cross, and when he got



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back his grandfather told him that he was to take up a job at Royal Birkdale.

"I was told I was going. I wasn't asked. Going to an Open venue was his idea, his feeling being that I'd worked on a parkland and that I should learn how to work on a links course."

As career advice goes it couldn't have been much better, as having Royal Birkdale on his CV was the passport to what was to come.

"I was at Royal Birkdale for quite a while, never more than an Assistant, but I built up my knowledge base."

Gordon left Birkdale to become Head Greenkeeper at Blackburn Golf Club but before long moved south to St George's Hill, in Weybridge.

ABOVE: Gordon Child (centre) with his award, beside Paul Worster and Jack McMillan MBE

"I think having worked at Royal Birkdale helped me get the job and I absolutely loved the place. It was a gem of a club and I loved the people there. The course was hewn out of a pine forest and it was one of the those courses on which you only saw the people on the hole you were playing.

"The club was on a very upper class estate and a lot of celebrities were members, but once you were in you were a part of the club somehow.

"I met Eric Sykes there and he was a great help to me. We were like a big family and I can tell you it was very hard to leave."

What eventually did prise him away was the prospect of working at one of the biggest clubs in the country at the time – Moor Park, in Rickmansworth.

"Even when the job offer from Moor Park came in it took me a long time make up my mind to move."

Moor Park had two stunning golf courses as well as the tennis courts and the gardens, while Gordon also managed the local municipal course on behalf of Rickmansworth Council.

It was also one of the premier Tour venues at the time playing host to a number of events

including the Uniroyal, the Martini, the Bob Hope and the Tournament Players' Championship.

"One year we had two tournaments within the space of two months when the brand new Foxhills wasn't ready to take the TPC."

One of the highlights for Gordon was watching a young Seve Ballesteros win his first UK event, in a play-off with Nick Faldo.

"I watched Seve play the greatest shot I've ever seen in my life that week.

"He was on a severe downslope with the hole cut just over a bunker on the 17th but he sized it up following week we all tried to play the shot and no-one could keep the ball on the green never mind anywhere close to the hole," recalled Gordon, who also remembered Greg Norman playing a ball from off the television gantry.

After six years, six tournaments and, at the age of 50, Gordon accepted the job which was to see him through to his retirement and provide him with home for the next 30 years of his life.

"The Chairman of Green at Churston played Moor Park and came and spoke to me about coming down to Devon.

"The timing was right because if I had stayed at Moor Park I wouldn't have had the time to get involved with BIGGA or the other work I've been able to do since," said Gordon.

Gordon was on the Board of the BGGGA when the amalgamation talks started in the mid 80s and was actually delivering a paper on Parkland Golf at a St Andrews conference, chaired by Walter Woods, when the R&A got involved in bringing the BGGGA, EIGGA and SIGGA together with a view to forming what became BIGGA.

When it became a reality in 1987 Gordon, ably assisted by wife, Marion, who has been a constant companion, became a volunteer Regional Administrator for the SW and South Wales and remain so until the role became a salaries position in 1997.

He is particularly proud of the Westurf Show, at Long Ashton Golf Club, which ran for 10 years and which ensured that the Region was financially secure for many years.

Another success was the creation of the Cannington College golf course for which he was a key mover, along with Jim Arthur and, another close friend, golf course architect, Martin Hawtree.

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The following year Gordon became BIGGA National Chairman and he is still the only man to date to have held the position for two years.

Highlights during that time was the Duke Of York officially opening of BIGGA HOUSE in 1998 and being Captain of the Rest of the World team for the Hayter International Cup in Atlanta, Georgia, that same year.

"I've got so many wonderful memories of my time as Chairman and particularly meeting so many great and wonderful people.

"I remember some superb trips to the American and Canadian Conferences and meeting motivational speakers, Frank Dick and Simon Weston at Harrogate.

"Frank Dick's speech is still the best I've ever heard," said Gordon who continued to be BIGGA's representative on the GTC and the Region's Education Officer for several years after his Chairmanship.

Another one of the coincidences which have followed Gordon through his life occurred when he retired.

"I took over from Jock Millar, at Moor Park and when I retired from

Churston Jock's son, Kelvin, took over from me.

"The families have both been close and I have to say Kelvin has done a wonderful job since he took over.

Since retiring Gordon has had his fair share of health issues and now boasts a new knee in one leg and a new hip in the other while he is a superb advert for a Plymouth-based Scottish heart surgeon from whom his quadruple by-pass represented 286 successful operations in a row.

"I was playing in the final of the Devon Seniors at Yelverton recently when a friend came over and said that a guy wanted to meet me.

"I went over and he looked familiar but I couldn't place him.

"Then he said, 'I'm the guy who saved your life and I've been hearing about your golf so I must have done a good job!'"

Marion had encouraged him to take up golf again and Churston initially gave him a handicap of 12.

It was cut in half by the end of the first season and he is currently standing at 4, with his 80th birthday in May.

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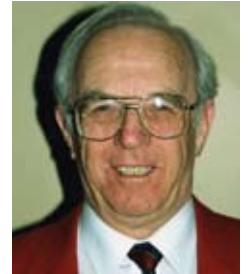
it," said the man who still plays three times a week, often 36 holes in a day, and only on a rare bad day does he fail to beat his age.

"As he prepares to enter his 80s Gordon will have another shot to play with so that achievement will go on for some time to come.

"My final golfing ambition was to be playing to single figures when I hit 80 so I think I'm going to make it," said the man who still plays three times a week, often 36 holes in a day, and only on a rare bad day does he fail to beat his age.
Marion Child

Indeed, the quality of his golf saw him play off +2 in his prime and compete in two Open Championships - the Centenary Open at St Andrews in 1960 and five years later, appropriately at Royal Birkdale.

As he looks back on a life full of enjoyment and achievement is it any wonder that smile is never far away?



Gordon Child

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