

# CEO Q&A

This year's Harrogate was the first that BIGGA's CEO Jim Croxton had faced in the role. After a long and tiring week he took time to reflect on BIGGA's most important event of the year



## **A few days on from the Show, what are your thoughts?**

I'm genuinely very proud of the efforts of the BIGGA team. It was a big week and everyone worked extremely hard and effectively to make it a success. I'm very satisfied that all the areas in which we, as a staff, had a direct influence we controlled well. Without ever being complacent, it shows that when we do what we do properly we can put on a really good "show" - in its broadest sense.

We need to make sure that we build on that and take the good will that we received for all parties and push on. The overall outcome was a positive well attended show, enjoyed by exhibitors and visitors alike.

## **How important was it for the Association that not only was it successful but it was perceived to be a success by the people who attended?**

It is absolutely vital because BIGGA members have such an important role to play in the golf industry in terms of presenting quality playing surfaces in a professional way for their employers. The show itself - BTME - is a really important service to our members. It is a festival of greenkeeping, but it is also a superb shop window for the profession. The week is our opportunity to get like-minded individuals together who are involved in fine turf management.

So it is important to have a good week as it also gives us some momentum going into the new year.

I'd looked at the stats from previous years and there are many visitors from outside of golf because so many of our exhibitors are relevant to the whole of turf, but I was surprised to see how important it was to other sports. For example, I understand that the ECB Head Groundsman held a meeting during the week. So I was pleasantly surprised to see that our efforts to attract people from other sports had paid off and that other people do see it as an important week for them as well.

I also believe that our members, indeed all visitors, stepped up and presented themselves in a positive way. It doesn't really matter how many people come through the doors if they are not having productive conversations with exhibitors, but the feedback from the exhibitors has been very positive. Their feedback was that they had a lot of constructive conversations with turf managers about how they will spend their budget, and that they feel that that is a major reason to attend our Show.





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**What surprised you as an organiser, having attended as a visitor in the past?**

Mainly how tiring it all was! My feet have never been so sore and by the end of the week I'd lost my voice. You are involved in a huge amount of talking and listening.

I was genuinely amazed at what goes into building the stands. I hadn't seen them being built from scratch before and watching these huge structures grow out of empty halls on Saturday evening is quite staggering.

I was also very impressed by how choreographed the whole process is – the detailed pre-event management to make sure trucks arrive at the right time and everything goes to plan is not appreciated by those who turn up to see the final results.

The other major surprise came when I witnessed the queues of people waiting patiently to get in at 9am for the Show and Education. I'd only attended as a Day Visitor previously so I'd arrive around 10am and hadn't ever seen the queues. It amply demonstrates

just how committed our visitors were to making their trip to Harrogate worthwhile. I was impressed by that.

**What sorts of things did you find yourself dealing with during the week?**

My job was very much to have conversations, put names to faces and make sure that the Association was well represented in all areas. It was fascinating to watch the whole BIGGA team look after their particular areas of responsibility and see everything that goes into it – Education, the Organiser's Office, the Media Centre and our own BIGGA Stand. Everyone was dealing with their own issues and very little of it actually had to be dealt with by me although I was made aware of all the things that went on behind the scenes.

I was actually very pleasantly surprised by how little I had to deal with. My job was to be a Front Man and make sure that anyone who needed engagement with BIGGA was able to do so.

**What did you make of the Continue to Learn Programme that runs alongside the Exhibition?**

Well, I think the numbers speak for themselves, nearly 4,000 hours of education took place with numbers up 17.4% on the excellent programme in 2011. We should congratulate the Learning and Development team for putting on such a first class programme - there was something on it for everyone, meaning all sections of our membership had the opportunity to improve their knowledge and skills.

Again it was heartening to talk to delegates who were attending the education for the first time as well as those for whom it has become a fixture in their diaries. I had dinner with the various speakers and trainers on the Sunday night and they were all incredibly positive about the willingness to learn of the delegates and the overall organisation. The Seminar programme was another huge success with a record number of full rooms.



**What was your personal highlight of the week?**

There were three actually. Our 25th Anniversary Celebratory Evening on the Tuesday and having the opportunity to listen to two legends of golf who have brought the game to where it is today.

Our President Sir Michael Bonallack and Ken Schofield both spoke passionately about the importance of our members in getting the game to where it is right now, and then the role they have to play in the future. It was quite inspiring.

The whole evening was a great celebration and there was such genuine warmth towards BIGGA and its members.

But there were two other things which were memorable to me. The first one was seeing a Course Manager who had told me a few months before that he hadn't been to BTME in 35 years of greenkeeping and never really thought that he would.

But there he was with his boss and two Deputies, and saying that they couldn't believe that they've not been before and what a fantastic time they'd had.

That was a highlight because it showed that we don't spend all our time preaching to the converted.

The other was to have an exhibitor come to me on the final day, someone who had been critical in the past of some of our activity, and telling me that it was the best show that he'd have the privilege of attending in 20 years.

We have many clients who are very engaged with BIGGA, but to find someone who was, not totally convinced, to be that positive about what we'd done was a highlight.

Those three things stand out for me.

**Attendance figures were very encouraging and positive. What do you put that down to?**

Two things. One is transparency. I've been very open and I think we should all be very open about what the Show is about for us – what's important and why people attend.

I don't want people to think that they have had their arm twisted or that we are begging them to attend.

I think they should want to attend and we worked hard to explain to them why it is important that they do. It is important to them and also good for the Association.

I think the other thing is that we've very much tailored our marketing to the appropriate audiences.

We've explained to our members why they should come and how to convince their employers if necessary why they should come and our exhibitors have embraced that and communicated to their own customer base and explained why their attendance is important to the whole event.

**What would you say to someone who hasn't yet been to a BTME to encourage them to come next year?**

I think it is very simple. A well planned visit to BTME makes you a better turf manager and if it were me I wouldn't be comfortable letting my competition – the thousands of other turf managers out there – improve themselves that week while I didn't.

**Conversely how would you encourage those who are regular attendees to keep doing so?**

I would ask those people who are regular visitors, and who have already penned in next year's date, how can we make it more relevant to you in 2013?

The key is that our show is not static. It needs to evolve, it needs to improve and it needs to meet the needs of both markets - the visitor and the exhibitor - and we welcome all feedback.

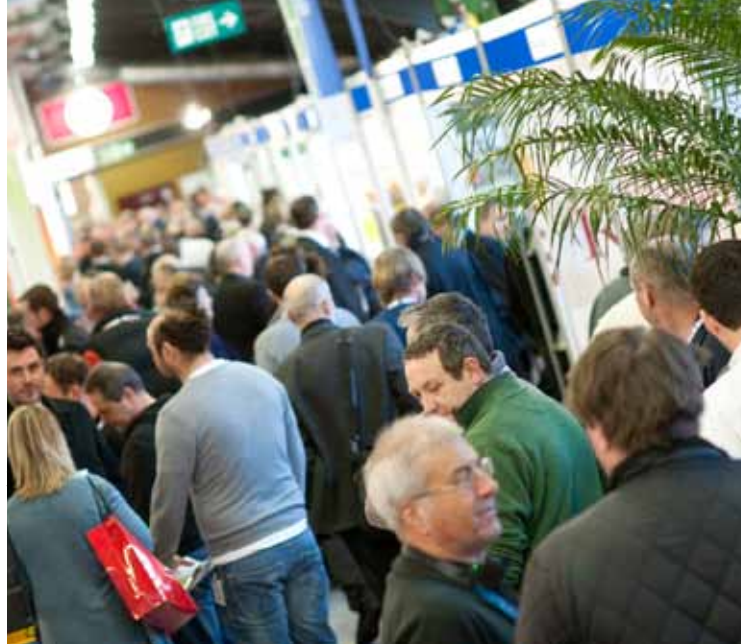
**What can you think of that could go towards improving it for next year and beyond?**

One disappointment this year was that some of our seminars were so successful they were oversubscribed and people were turned away. I know that disappointed some, who had perhaps based their day around attending a particular seminar.

So we need to work hard in conjunction with the venue to find a cleverer way of meeting demand.

It's hard to know what the demand will be for the free seminars but it is always a disappointment when someone can't achieve what they wanted to achieve while at the Show.

We have also got to find a way of making the final day more vital for all parties.



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**We celebrated BIGGA's 25th anniversary during the week. Looking into your crystal ball what do you see for BIGGA's next 25 years?**

As the golf industry toughens up and the facilities – the owners, management and committees – really come to realise that their unique selling points are their golf course and the customer experience that BIGGA, and more importantly its members, will become more and more at the core of the golf industry and that the skill of the profession will be properly recognised.



I think alongside that we will become increasingly recognised as one of the leading education focused bodies within the game.

We will also become more recognised as good stewards of the environment and resources as well as the playing surfaces themselves.



That is something I've taken from the week – there is a massive focus on sustainability and looking after the environment and natural resources and also this huge desire to present courses as well as they can be presented.

