



New BIGGA Chairman

Chris Sealey became the new Association Chairman at BTME 2014. Steve Castle met Chris to find out about his greenkeeping philosophy, the major construction project he's overseen at Chippenham Golf Club and his love of Bristol Rovers FC

BIGGA's new Chairman was typically candid when I asked him if, as a teenage apprentice greenkeeper at a parkland course near Bath in the seventies, he ever envisaged becoming an Association Chairman.

"I never dreamt I would. I was on the South West Section committee, then a vacancy came up on the Regional Board, then I was asked to be Regional Chairman, then a vacancy came up on the National Board when Jeff Mills left as South West & South Wales representative.

"I always thought that would be as far as I would go, just getting on to the National Board and representing the Region was a great honour, and I was happy to be involved with decision making and the future of the Association.

"Then Tony asked me to be Chairman. I don't like the word gobsmacked, but I can't think of any other way to put it, and I was also really touched to be asked.

"I never set out with the goal of being Chairman."

He officially took the reins during BIGGA's AGM at BTME.

He said: "Undoubtedly the highlight of my career is being asked to be chairman.

"It's a fabulous honour and I look forward to representing the Association with distinction."

Chris has already been heavily involved in various events as a National Board of Management member including interviewing Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year candidates and attending numerous events.

But what else stands out during his many years of involvement with the Association?

"BIGGA has given me so many chances to develop myself profes-

sionally and personally.

"I wouldn't otherwise have had these opportunities and I think that's a very important message for anyone thinking of joining the Association, or any members who have not yet made the most of their membership.

"I've volunteered at the 2007 US Open at Oakmont Country Club, the 2008 Ryder Cup at Valhalla, the 2010 Ryder Cup at Celtic Manor and five Open Championships.

"The main thing I'm looking forward to during my time as Chairman is simple – meeting people.

"All the other things you get to do are lovely, but the people are the biggest strength of the Association.

"The support network amongst greenkeepers is superb and there can't be many industries where relationships are so strong and enduring."

Chris's greenkeeping career began purely by chance in 1970.

He said: "I started off caddying for my dad's friend at a nearby club and he told me they were looking for an apprentice.

"I thought it seemed a good way of earning a living."

So the enthusiastic, sports-mad youngster was offered a three-year apprenticeship at Lansdown Golf Club, a parkland course and private members' club on the outskirts of Bath.

He ended up staying there for 12 years, steadily rising through the ranks to Deputy, before moving to Salford Golf Club in Bristol, a similar parkland venue.

He enjoyed eight years at Salford before clinching his first Course Manager's position at Chippenham in 1990, and much to his amazement "they've somehow put up with me for nearly a quarter of a century!"

The Bristolian's first involvement



PROFILE

Name: Chris Sealey
Born: Bristol, 24 April 1955
Role: Course Manager
Handicap: 18
Favourite Sports Team: Bristol Rovers
Hobbies: Playing golf, watching sport mainly football, golf and cricket



in the Association was playing in golf days organised by BIGGA in the eighties.

But he then recognised the need to increase his range of skills so he enrolled on the first Management courses which BIGGA ran at Aldwark Manor adjacent to what is now BIGGA House – just as his predecessor Tony Smith did.

He said: “When I became a Course Manager I knew I needed some extra skills in addition to those I’d already gained as a Deputy so I completed four or five of the week-long management courses and that was very useful for me.

“It was the first real formal education on offer to greenkeepers and I knew I had to take advantage of it.”

He then joined the South West committee around 1995 before becoming Section Chairman.

I travelled south to see for myself the work that Chris and his team have put in at Chippenham – a Wiltshire town which lies between Swindon and Bristol – and discovered a frenzy of activity probably unparalleled in the club’s history.

Firstly, a new clubhouse with much improved facilities and extended offices opened in December 2012.

Next, it was decided that time had caught up with the course. Although various modifications and improvements had been made to the course over the years, it was now too short for the modern day game. It is currently 5,720 yards off the white tees, and after the alterations it will be close to 6,300 off the whites.

Chris explained: “We did a deal with a local farmer to rent land at the back of the course which will house four new holes, and we’re combining four of the existing holes to make two long par fives.

“It’s the first time I’ve been involved in such a major project. When I was at Saltford we built individual greens and renovated tees but it’s the first time I’ve been part of the build and grow-in processes on this scale, so it’s been a real learning curve for me.

“It was meant to be a 12 or 14 week project, so we pencilled it in for when the weather should have been at its best by starting in April 2012.

“It was a nice idea in principle! Of course, as soon as we started, in common with most of the UK it didn’t stop raining all summer so that meant a few delays.

“But I learnt that you have to be flexible.

“Obviously I know the weather always has a huge effect on golf

courses, but this is particularly true when you’re working on a major construction project.

“Also, so many unforeseen things can throw a spanner in the works.

“For example, on a Bank Holiday Monday we hit an old water pipe potentially wiping out the water supply to several nearby villages.

“I’ve been lucky enough to be involved at Chippenham at probably the most exciting time in its history, and this last couple of years has been the highlight of my professional career.

“The whole team, which currently numbers four after the recent departure of Kyle Knight to Bowood to further his career, have worked incredibly hard, ably assisted by the expertise of Mike Smith from 1st Golf and golf course architect Matt Maryon.”

The weather is still posing problems – Chippenham had 70mm of rainfall in the first nine days of 2014 – but Chris is convinced they are on track for the new holes to be in play in early summer.

So what’s his agronomic philosophy?

“Conservative, lean and mean”, he replied. “I don’t overwater or overfeed.

“I do as much aeration and topdressing as I possibly can, but I don’t take it to the degree of starving the greens and trying to get fescue.

“We’re on a clay site, the greens will always have poa in them so I manage them as poa greens; they are a poa/bent mix.

“The new greens have still got a lot of fescue in them at the moment.

“So the biggest challenge now is to get the clay push up greens and the new sand greens to perform as close to each other as we possibly can.”

It was clear from the banter in the car park I saw at Chippenham that Chris enjoys excellent rapport with members, and one of his initiatives was the Greenkeeper’s Revenge charity day.

In a format which will be recognised by mischievous greenkeepers across the land, the team deliberately used a range of tricks to make the course devilishly difficult.

They rolled some of the greens ten times achieving up to 19 on the stimpmeter, cut holes on collars so members had to putt off the green and placed tee markers behind trees amongst other fiendish ploys.

It was all in aid of Help for Heroes and £1,000 was raised, as Chris said “there were some interesting scores!”

The new section of the course under construction last summer



He lives with Pat, his partner of some 20 years.

In his spare time he follows the usually grim fortunes of Bristol Rovers FC (which he described as his “main handicap”) and he’s also very keen on playing and watching golf.

Another of his passions is cricket, and he’s recently been trying (and failing to) dodge abuse over England’s dismal Ashes showing.

He laughed: “I’m surrounded by Aussies.

“Jaey Goodchild at Bowood just sat there grinning through the last Section meeting, and our General Manager at Chippenham Leighton Walker has been giving me plenty of stick too.”

A hugely successful BTME 2014 has certainly got Chris’s period as Association Chairman off to a flying start. He concluded:

“BIGGA is going from strength to strength and this was evident at BTME. I am greatly looking forward to the next 12 months.”

Contact Chris

Chris is keen to hear from members on any subject. You can email him at coursemanager@chippenhamgolf@btconnect.com or call him on 07817 294632.



Leighton Walker, General Manager at Chippenham, had this to say following Chris's appointment: "Chippenham Golf Club and its members are extremely proud that Chris Sealey will be Chairman of BIGGA in 2014. It's a great honour for Chris and I know the members at Chippenham join me in congratulating him. It's fair reward for the hard work and commitment that Chris has shown to both the Club and the industry as a whole and we're sure he will make a success of his time in office."

TEAM PHOTO (LEFT TO RIGHT): Kyle Knight, Seb Cavilla, Chris Sealey, Chris Bell, Steve Randall