

THE BIG INTERVIEW

A YEAR ON FROM THE COLLAPSE OF THE MERGER WITH THE IOG, BIGGA'S JOHN PEMBERTON TALKS ABOUT EXTENDING THE SCOPE OF MEMBERSHIP AND HIS PRIDE IN THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE GREENKEEPER'S ASSOCIATION

BIGGA eyes up fresh fields

WANT a job that would test the patience of Job? Try running a trade association where a miscellany of opinions must be moulded into a single voice.

At almost every turn, you are damned if you do, and damned if you don't!

These largely unelected organisations have the thankless task of trying to be all things to men (and women). The only common denominator is that the members work in a single specialist sector. Aside from that, they have individual views, contrasting opinions and a variety of responsibilities and needs.

"I guess we are no different from everyone else," says BIGGA's chief executive John Pemberton. "We have a core of highly enthusiastic members who help drive the Association forward, we also have those who think we are less than perfect! In the middle are a considerable number who just wish to belong, and not necessarily get involved. But then I guess, many of us are like that with clubs or organisations we belong to".

But make no mistake if every trade association in the land was disbanded overnight, within hours there would be groups of like-minded people saying "we ought to get-together".

"Too true," says John, "the 'united we stand, divided we fall' attitude."

And therein lie the benefits. Trade associations exist to be a clearing house of benefits, of education and of representing specialist interests.

But as the world moves on and evolves, these bodies themselves face new chal-

lenges. In order to prosper and grow, they must react to new commercial pressures - and they must reflect the changing nature of the sector in which they operate.

Some may fall by the wayside - resulting in the creation of a 'Mark 2' - others see benefits in mergers or a tie-up with a complementary organisation.

All of which makes it highly appropriate to catch up with John Pemberton on the eve of another Harrogate Week, and also 12 months after a planned merger with IOG (Institute of Groundsmanship) was scuppered by the sudden withdrawal of the IOG.

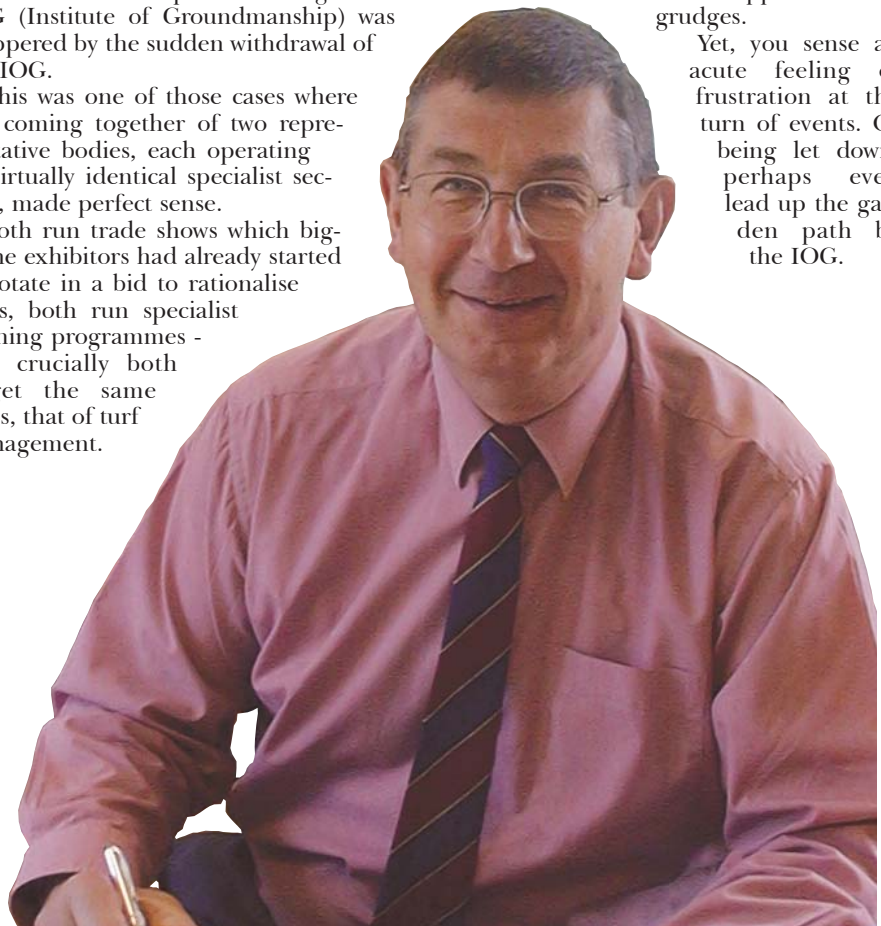
This was one of those cases where the coming together of two representative bodies, each operating in virtually identical specialist sectors, made perfect sense.

Both run trade shows which big-name exhibitors had already started to rot in a bid to rationalise costs, both run specialist training programmes - and crucially both target the same skills, that of turf management.

It was never going to be a marriage made in heaven, these things rarely are. The benefits would come from the combined membership infra-structure, elevating the profession as a whole.

JOHN Pemberton is a pleasure to interview. Open and honest, he wears his heart on his sleeve but in a soft and quiet manner, never putting down nor disparaging others, nor on the surface does he appear to bear grudges.

Yet, you sense an acute feeling of frustration at the turn of events. Of being let down, perhaps even lead up the garden path by the IOG.



LAST minute briefing from Royal Birkdale's course superintendent Chris Whittle ahead of the 2008 Open Championship



It is true that those who watched the merger developments could never quite get their head round it actually coming about.

Indeed, according to Pemberton "We only got so far in talking about the practicalities of a merger, and there were many issues not discussed and unresolved when the talks were ended".

It is a matter of record that the call aborting any further talks came out of the blue on 3 December 2007 from IOG's chief executive, Geoff Webb, the day before a further meeting had been planned.

He said, "We take the view that the net gains to the IOG would be minimal, further talks would only result in mounting costs - and the proposals would have been unsellable to our members".

From the BIGGA camp, the view was that the principles remained sound, the benefits of a unified voice unarguable, and the rationalisation of training and educational resources would have been a real spin-off.

But all that is now water under the bridge. John Pemberton says, "We tried and gave it our best shot - it is time to move on".

And one of the ways BIGGA sees that it can use its undoubted resources is to offer membership to those who work in the turf-care industry - but not necessarily in golf.

Recently, it put out for membership consideration, a revised set of membership categories that are now written in much more general terms.

A Full Member, for instance, is a person employed in the 'maintenance of sports turf at a sports facility'.

That means golf of course, but also those who are managers or a qualified in the broader turf-care sector.

At first glance, this looks like a direct attempt to poach or recruit members from under the nose of IOG.

But John Pemberton doesn't see it like that.

"We have to be outlooking - and in a specialist market like turf-care, need to attract the right quality of membership. It doesn't matter whether they care for greens and fairways, or football or cricket pitches - the principles of turf-care are the broadly the same".

"Barriers in the profession have come down in recent years, many locations operate golf courses as part of a larger sports facility, and often use the same staff. So many of our members have to be all-rounders".

The golf sector is having a testing time at the moment - and there is evidence of some migration of greens staff into other areas like landscaping and lawncare.

"We wouldn't want to lose any of those members because of restrictive rulings on

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membership criteria," says John Pemberton. "nor do most of them want to have to give up BIGGA membership. This is another way in which are reacting to changing conditions."

So this isn't a snub to the IOG - and an attempt to invade their territory?

"People will interpret this in different ways, but I believe that this is a progressive move, wholly reflective of the way the market is moving," says John. "In any case this is not a numbers game".

"We don't see a rush of membership applications as a result of this move. The people we are aiming to attract will be qualified, seasoned professionals, often in a managerial or supervisory role".

It is true to say, that there is some concern in BIGGA's ranks about this move - and John Pemberton fully understands their views

BIGGA has always been a focussed and specialist body for those working in the golf industry.

As such the name, the title, the description of its membership is clear to all.

'Greenkeeper' is a definitive role. Those outside the industry relate immediately to the profession, whereas 'groundsman' is still a loose generic title that can encompass a raft of individuals and responsibilities - the perception being that most of them are non-skilled.

BIGGA is fortunate that it can demonstrate a unity of purpose at high-profile events like the Open Championship where its support teams are in evidence constantly during the event. The association maintains close links with the R&A, golf's ruling body, with the R&A Treasurer sitting on the BIGGA board.

"We are very fortunate in having terrific relationships with all the golf governing bodies and home unions," says John, "and we are regarded as an integral part of the infra-structure of the game".

This close affinity with a single sport,

“ . . . this is an acceptance that we need to be more flexible in the current climate, without in any way weakening our commitment to golf ”

perhaps gives BIGGA an unique advantage over the IOG which has to be all-things-to-all-men in matters of turfcare.

It is also one of the reasons why BIGGA membership is valued so highly by its members. They enjoy a unique relationship with their sport - and many members take advantage of courtesy golf when they visit other clubs as part of their ongoing education.

Again, John Pemberton is keen to dispel their worries. "This is not a headlong rush into the much wider turfcare market, but an acceptance that we need a little more flexibility - whilst still retaining our total commitment to the golf sector".

"I truly believe that we have established high standards for our membership in recent years. They display a professionalism and skills set that are recognised throughout the golf world - and hopefully are a benchmark for all those who work in turfcare."

Inevitably, we touch on shows and exhibitions - and John is quietly ambivalent about the present set-up. "we don't see it as an either/or situation for Harrogate Week or SALTEX".

"Harrogate is uniquely timed at the start of the year, and provides an unrivalled education package, exhibition - and let's not forget, a lively social setting which everyone can get something out of".

"Of course it is a challenge to us that we don't have some of the major exhibitors every other year, but that is something that we have to cope with and address by working harder to improve the 'quieter' year. That is certainly the case this year - and I am pleased that the show is shaping up really well."

THERE is little doubt that the manner of the ending of merger talks with IOG still rankle within BIGGA headquarters. And perhaps raises the question whether there might have been more focus if those talks had been held in the present economic climate as belts tighten in every sector.

But such was the fall-out that it is highly unlikely that any such move would be revived for a long, long time.

What it has done is focus the mind. BIGGA, like every other representative body, has its critics. What cannot be disputed is the way it provides a professional support service for its members.

Whilst a very high percentage of UK golf courses have BIGGA representation amongst its greens staff, the Association reckons that there is still plenty of scope to increase membership from those individuals who are not yet members.

"I suppose that is our biggest challenge," says John Pemberton, "and also delivering a much stronger and consistent message to members about the value and benefits afforded to them by their Association".

Sometimes, events have a strange way of turning out in a better and unexpected end-result - and you have a feeling that John Pemberton believes that might indeed be the case for BIGGA.



BIGGA's united front - the course support team at the 2008 Open Championship held at Royal Birkdale