THE ROLE of Director General (DG) of The Caravan Club is a coveted one. Indeed, since this title was created in 1971, only four men have sat in the big chair at Club headquarters. The latest incumbent is Nick Lomas, Director of Marketing at East Grinstead since 2005, who replaced the retiring Trevor Watson at the beginning of May. However, Nick’s ties with the Club go back much further than five years. He and his wife Caroline have been paid-up Club members for some time, and while working at Frizzell Nick was responsible for marketing the Club’s credit card. Now, he is the man at the helm of an organisation serving one million caravanners, motor caravanners and trailer tenters. Here we get his thoughts.

You are one of a select few DGs of the Club – you must feel very proud?
I feel very proud and honoured because the Club is a very special organisation, one of the biggest membership clubs in the UK of any type. I never, ever imagined when I first started dealing with the Club that nine or 10 years later, I would end up as chief executive of it.

Can you tell us a little about how you were appointed?
The Club has a very open and thorough process where it engages an external search and selection consultancy. This consultancy took applications, both internally and externally, and also carried out a search process in the travel, tourism and membership organisation marketplace. It then formed what it called a ‘long’ list of names. From this list they presented a shortlist of candidates to a four-strong sub-Committee of the Executive Committee, led by the Chairman. This sub-Committee looked at the shortlist, before carrying out interviews with some of those candidates. Then there was the final interview stage where they asked me to present my ideas for the future of the Club, and I presume all the other candidates had the same brief. We also had to undergo a series of psychometric exercises. They then used all that information to decide on the right applicant for the job. It was a long and intensive process. I understand from the Club Chairman Grenville Chamberlain that it was also a very exhausting process from their point of view. They felt the weight of responsibility because they had to find the right person to run the Club on their behalf and look after its members.

What are the biggest challenges you face in your new role?
I think the biggest challenge is managing the problems that come with success. The Club has grown steadily and consistently for a number of years, and as Director of Marketing I’ve been part of that growth. We’ve expanded the number of members, we’ve expanded the number of sites we have, but we’ve also raised the consciousness in Britain again for domestic tourism and holidays, and that makes the Club’s Contact Centre, our website and our site network busy. It also means that other people are waking up to the attractiveness of caravanning and domestic holidays, which means competition increases. The other challenge is that the Club is quite a large organisation with about 1100 staff at peak periods, all over the country. Communicating with them...
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and making sure everybody understands what goals we are all working towards to benefit members is hard work.

H as your predecessor, Trevor Watson, given you any words of wisdom?
He told me to be me and always to be honest, because he says that is the easiest way to be comfortable with the decisions you make. He’s always been very straightforward and plain speaking, and that is a good quality.

So, you plan to continue in that vein?
Yes, I do. A lot about the Club works very well and it’s really great to come in as a chief executive knowing that the organisation is successful. I certainly wouldn’t want to change those bits that are successful.

W hat plans do you have to change how the Club operates?
I don’t have any major plans to revolutionise anything at the Club; I think there will be steady and progressive change. It’s clear that technology continues to be very important. So many people book holidays online now. They are obviously very conscious, especially in a recession, about what they pay for services, and the Club has tried really hard in the last few years to balance how much it charges for things like the site network, at the same time as being faced with very high increases in energy and fuel costs. Equally, from the members’ point of view, the cost of putting petrol and diesel into their tow car or motor caravan has also gone up, and that is something we’ve tried to shield members from where we can. Inevitably, I think, there are cost pressures in what we do and, as the recession comes to an end, we won’t be able to avoid passing some of those costs onto members.

A s D G, I assume other non-C lub responsibilities come your way?
The Club, of course, can only survive through the work it does in Europe, particularly as we send 40–50,000 families overseas every year, if we have an alliance with European clubs to help with breakdowns and recovery problems that members might have. So the Club is a member of the FIA (Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile) and I’ve recently been to the organisation’s spring meeting in Italy to meet my European counterparts for the first time in my new role. You would have thought that caravanning was a relatively benign leisure pursuit, but it involves people driving on roads, it involves driving licences and it involves road traffic regulations, while we have to have planning permission to build new caravan sites and make sure we’re good custodians of the countryside. These things mean that we have to get involved with government. Obviously there’s a new government in place, so I will continue the work the Club has done for many years, of working with regulators and legislators to stand up for the rights of motorists and holidaymakers in the UK and in Europe, and for caravanners specifically.

W hat do you see as crucial to the C lub’s success?
Remembering we are a Club, and remembering that members are at the heart of what we do. We have to run the Club organisation professionally and in a business-like way, and that’s what the staff at the Club do, guided by the Club committees. We are not a commercial organisation and have to keep that almost-impossible-to-define balance between maintaining sufficient financial return to keep us sustainable for the future, for the next 100 years, with making sure we do as much as we possibly can to service members as well as we possibly can.

Should the C lub get more involved with the caravan industry?
I’ve always been very clear that the Club should remain a critical friend of the caravan industry. We do a lot of work through the Caravan Design Awards, the Motor Caravan Design & Drive Awards, through liaison with our Technical team here at East Grinstead, with the National Caravan Council and the various technical committees that there are for British standards and so on, to make sure our members get a good deal. I think we should work constructively with the manufacturers and I’ve built good relationships with many of them. We do the competitions and so on so we can improve the quality of the product that members get and, if you just look back over the last decade, the quality of the product has improved dramatically. That’s good for members. But equally we should support the caravan industry. If you look at the stability of sales in the UK and compare that with France or Germany, for example, where there isn’t a strong club presence in the same way that there is in the UK, the industry finds it much harder. I think the fact that we are a voice for caravanners and we are a voice for domestic tourism has helped maintain the market here in a way that it hasn’t in parts of Europe.

You are a keen caravanner – will your new role allow you to continue to enjoy caravanning breaks with your family?
I really hope it will. I’ve always been a keen traveller. My wife Caroline and I used to travel all over the world, but longhaul became less of an option when our little boy was born in 2000. So, we bought a trailer tent and joined the Club. My daughter then came along and we bought a caravan and have really enjoyed seeing the UK and Europe, parts that we’d never seen before. I’ve not seen it in any way as a drawback to not go to far-flung places, as there are so many great things to see in the UK and Europe. I’ve got several holidays planned, although obviously I’m pretty much tied to school holidays.

I assume members approach you when you’re staying on a Club site?
If someone recognises me or asks what I do in general conversation, then I’m more than happy to talk about Club matters. But everybody deserves a few days off, so I certainly don’t volunteer who I am if I am genuinely on holiday. In fact, it’s good to experience things, to hear members’ comments when you’re on a site in a kind of anonymous way, as you perhaps understand a little bit more about the real situation. They might change their behaviour if they know who I am.

Finally, what would your message to the C lub membership be as we see a change of D G for the first time in 15 years?
The core values of the Club of quality and heritage and wanting to be a cornerstone of British tourism are not going to change. Now that the Club has got its new computer system, I hope we can use this to serve members better, more efficiently and tailer services to them better than we have done before. I hope members will be pleased that the Club continues to grow and has the resources to continue to invest in more services.