Will Sutherland's father talked of chemicals as the "Devil's Dust" so when Will built his own golf course he carried on his father's philosophies...

Where there's a Will...

Put any group of greenkeepers, agronomists or golf course architects into the same room and eventually the conversation will turn to the doomsday scenario... the day when chemical usage is banned on golf courses.

A few years ago this may have been discussed in terms of "if" but now it is very much in the "when" category and some of the best brains in the fine turf industry are examining the implications for the great game of golf.
Where there's a Will...

There are a number who do not see it as necessarily as a bad thing but there are others who predict major headaches for the game in the next few years.

One man who doesn't have to stare into a crystal ball to foretell what might happen, but has first hand experience of what can be expected when the moratorium does arrive, is Will Sutherland.

Will built his own golf course in the late 1970's and has managed it using methods which are likely to become the modus operandi if current chemical products are unable to be used. Lyshott Heath, in Bedfordshire, is a living example of what can be achieved and shows that, far from being the potential death of the game, the future may welcome a more naturally healthy nation of golf courses.

"My father was a very traditional organic farmer who, even in those days after the war, spent a lot of time worrying about the use of chemical fertilisers," explained Will.

"He said it was all going to end in tears with many people putting on the Devil's Dust. My philosophy was basically coloured by my father but then, subsequently working in politics, I became very concerned. You just need to look at statistics all over the world to see that the levels of poisons in the soil correlates with the levels of cancer," said Will, who also attended the famous Earth Summit in Rio De Janeiro and published their Alternative Treaties.

"I'm very active in green politics and have an acute awareness that mankind urgently needs stewardship and have an acute awareness that mankind urgently needs stewardship. I've never gone back to my job in the city, and not just a few. Over 100,000 have been planted since the project started.

"We created fairways by planting the trees and it is wonderful now 20 years on to see what we had imagined on some holes having become a reality. We played shots off the stump to see how it was going to work," said Will who used the experience he had built up while running a golf course on the edge of the family estate in Northumberland since he was 20.

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Even his major mistake is something which hints at someone who is used to working at a sophisticated level.

"It was silly in retrospect but I just assumed the wind would be from the west and put all my irrigation on the west side of the greens but in a drought you've got anticyclones - easterlies and north easterlies. It was basically a hobby and I generated cash from cash flow rather than borrowing money," explained Will.

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Will now lives in Ireland where he grows all his own food and teaches self-sufficiency to students who travel from all over the world to attend. Will, Ron and the staff of three continue to use traditional green-keeping methods on the course and they have been rewarded by a course which rarely offers up disease problems.

"We get a little Fusarium but it's very small and goes away immediately and that's because we manage the microclimate, keeping the soil healthy and full of good bacteria the whole time," said Will, who, like a good wine expert, uses his nose to detect the sweetness is the soil or, alternatively if the dankness which indicates a bad fungus or organic substance which has not broken down.

"Our biggest operation every year is the hollow tining programme which is do in the autumn to rub sharp sand into the greens and otherwise we scarify regularly to keep the thatch down. By avoiding large amounts of any sort of fertiliser we don't have the tremendous ups and downs and imbalances caused by chemical application.

The one thing which Will hasn't found an answer for yet, is the feeding of the greens.

"At the moment I'm using a slow release fertiliser because I feel it is the least damaging but I'd like to get a composting technique that perhaps uses sawdust and grass clippings and various additives to create a top dressing material that could be used to replace the fertility in the greens. But I must confess we haven't sorted that out yet."

One benefit of the Lysnoth Heath's approach is that the land produces so much food. "We've got crab apples, sweet chestnuts, walnuts, masses of cherries and mushrooms. We've got cowslips, newts in the pond, frogs, toads, dragonflies butterflies, hedgehogs, badgers, deer, foxes and any number of little furry things all due to 20 years of no poison or fertiliser. People don't realise that butterflies are killed by sprays," he explained.

"I believe absolutely that the golf course should be a wonderful feature of the countryside for people to enjoy as countryside. It is a disaster that so many modern golf courses are so sterile. I feel very strongly that golf offers a wonderful opportunity for city people, particularly to see the countryside as it should be. We don't have to kill every bramble and broadleaf thing."

He is aware of the need to educate the golfer away from the desire for the Augusta approach to golf course management.

"We are up against that problem that some people are looking for something that is highly manicured whereas here we do have dandelions and clover can be a problem. You can spray these things and they're gone in a flash but we don't do that. Golfers have to learn that this is the downside which they have to accept to be able to see all the lovely birds and wildlife and be able to lick their balls."

So as Will Sutherland and his team at Lysnoth Heath have proved, you can produce and manage a golf course without recourse to chemicals. At the moment it is a more than acceptable alternative but in future Lysnoth Heath may be seen as a trail blazer on the road down the only route available to golf courses.