

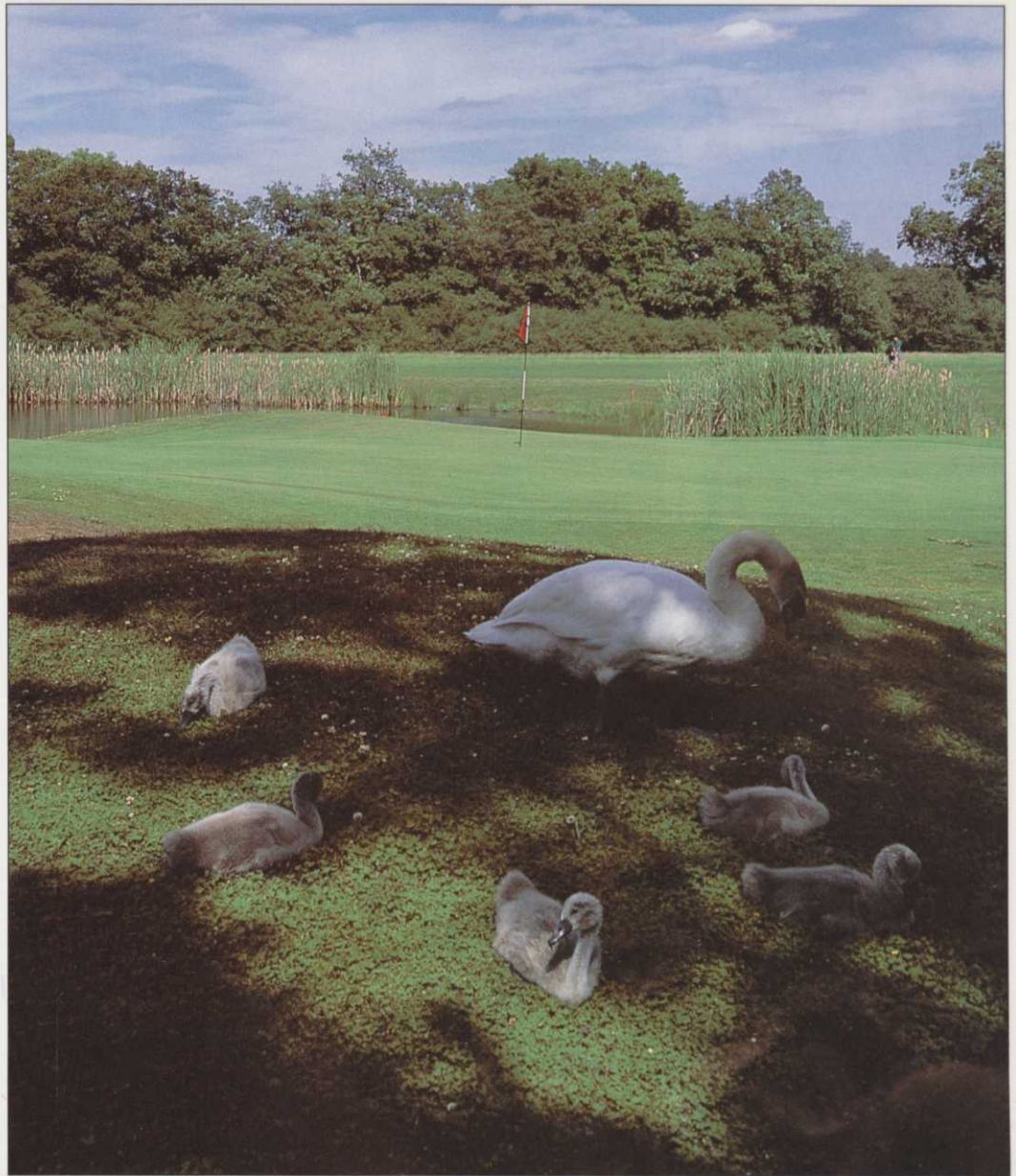
It used to be 'wet, yellow and miserable' but now Surrey's Wildwood has a superlative sward. David White reports on the transformation.

Some folk collect postage stamps, others get their kicks by hoarding harmless little items like china pigs, cigar bands, or press cuttings relating to Princess Di. One eccentric I know even has a collection of several thousand used score card pencils!

Me? I collect golf courses. I'm well advanced now into the mid three hundreds, having hacked my way through a dozen different countries, harbouring ambitions now of at least making the magic four zero zero before being called to account to The Great Handicapper. Rich variety can make any golfer choosy and, since I've played my share of 'dogs' as well as delights, it certainly makes this golfer ultra-critical.

Recently an exceptional extra was added to the score with a tasty round played at one of Surrey's newest, though by no means rawest, parkland creations; the Hawtree designed, oh-so-natural-it-looks-as-though-it's-been-there-forever course at Wildwood, situated between Guildford and Horsham. Adding more than just an extra number to my total, Wildwood seemed to me a copy-book example of how an architect's skill, coupled with artistry from the man who nurtures and cajoles its acres into early maturity – plus a healthy belt of modern technology – can set a place apart. About that, more later.

I yield to none in my admiration for the golf courses of Surrey, a relatively small landlocked patch which offers as fine a selection of strategic park and heathland courses as anywhere inland, particularly as the place is a treasure trove of classics by the likes of Harry Colt, Willie Park, Tom Simpson and J F Abercromby. They were clever blighters, those ancient land artists, for they took what nature gave them; gently massaging the old girl's contours rather than pushing and shoving them around. Thus it was easy for this seasoned observer to see from which source Hawtree's had drawn inspiration in fashioning this latest creation at Wildwood. In an age when it is all too common for architects to out-do and



The taming of Wildwood

out-spend their contemporaries in attempting to create yet another self-styled 'championship' course – especially true of many American architects, where little thought appears to be given to construction or maintenance costs – there was never a greater need for natural enhancement than at Wildwood, whose rolling acres had previously echoed only

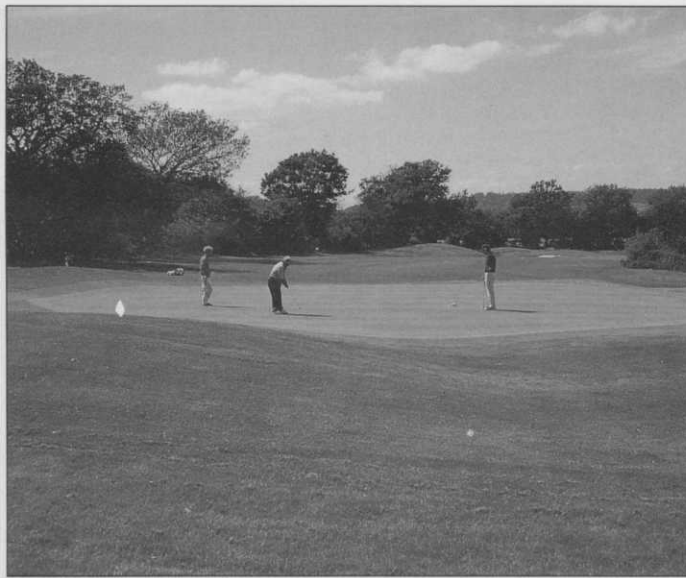
to the thunder of horses hooves. Top marks, then, for Wildwood's minimalist architecture.

While making a short list of first division architects whose work is prevalent in Surrey, it further occurred to me that the county has another claim to fame: it is the stamping ground of the most prolific family in golf today – bar none. Of course I

refer to the clan McMillan, the Surrey arm of which includes brothers Billy, Ian, Stewart, Bobby and Cameron, plus their illustrious father, Jack, now a consultant. Between them they hold something of a monopoly in managing currently or having managed in the past no less than ten per cent of all Surrey's courses. It must raise their status

still further for readers to learn that the McMillans are linked essentially with first division courses boasting first division architects.

The story began in 1990 when Jack was called upon to offer his expert advice during the formative stages of Wildwood's life. What he saw dismayed him, for much of the design and especially the construction was strictly non-kosher (in Jack's words, they were using rootzone material that would have been better used making cement). Jack was bold enough to opine that a complete un-doing and a return to the drawing board would be the club's only salvation. Courageously the owners agreed, though they knew it would be a painful and costly exercise, and thus Hawtree and Sons were called upon to remodel, re-design and in some cases relocate greens and tees, thus creating effectively a new golf course. Their model properly utilised the hitherto



untapped good of the land, while giving utmost attention to land drainage, consistency of quality materials and the following of USGA Green Section specifications for green construction.

Ask the experts; they'll tell you that the most critical time in a golf course's existence is during grow-in, that period of weaning and cajoling the infant into early maturity, at least to get it toddling.

Moving ahead to late 1992, we see Jack McMillan approaching Roger Mossop and David Siddon at the ICI (now Zeneca) Green-

keeper of the Year awards, propositioning them. "Wildwood's just a baby," he told them, "and in some ways it's bucking the old tradition, with USGA spec greens sown to bentgrass, but there's a hell of a lot going for it ...and my son Billy is the course manager, he's been in charge since the seed hit the ground." Enough said.

The idea was for the Zeneca team to take a look, see just how much they could contribute to the development of the infant golf course, a learning experience for both parties if you like and, in Jack's words, "a lovely exercise for Zeneca to put their products to the ultimate test, to show how good they were and to use Wildwood as a guinea-pig, a testing ground."

Forward now to February 1993. David Siddon explains: "We've always tested impeccably, we've seen our products through many tests with the STRI and other triallists and of course we've seen how well they perform on established courses, but we'd never before had the opportunity to go with a bentgrass/USGA spec from the very beginning, to use it for our own learning curve, to work one to one with a manager of Billy's standing and on a course of Wildwood's obvious potential. We have a similar experiment under way at Slaley Hall in Northumberland, and the idea of doing the same in the south excited us.

"What their soil analysts found," said Billy, "was a somewhat impoverished course (remember, the earth had been moved around twice or even three times, which alone creates problems), one that was wet, yellow and miserable." That stated, both David and Billy were excited by the project and they both agreed, notwithstanding the harsh winter that had not yet passed, that there was everything to 'go for' and at the same time

they would not forget that the course was - is - a commercial entity. "The object of the exercise," Billy exclaimed vehemently, "is always to keep the customer satisfied."

Elaborating, Billy explained that maintaining a tidy golf course was always his goal, an integral part of that being provision of good grass cover. In the beginning this desired cover was minimal, "So we must stimulate sufficient vigour, vigour we can use to present the course - what the client will not accept is no grass cover," he emphasised. "This urging process of stimulation is not something we'll be doing forever," he added, "once we've got a manageable sward we'll likely reduce fertiliser input, but it's important that we have something good to present."

So how did something wet, yellow and miserable become the superlative sward we find today? Soil tests from every green were taken for analysis (a free service offered by Zeneca), revealing pH readings averaging around 5.0 with 4.6 being the lowest. Not surprisingly, the findings suggested also that there was very little phosphate present, that potassium levels were low and magnesium levels were very low. Phosphorus, the analysts declared, was important for root growth and energy transfer level reactions within the soil, though it was acknowledged that high levels of P might encourage *Poa annua* and a small quantity only was recommended as a remedial treatment.

David and Billy studied the analyses long and hard, discussing the findings thoroughly, each reaching the same conclusion. Their jointly planned result was a one-off programme, a plan tailored exclusively for Wildwood incorporating 'Longlife' fertiliser, 'Longlife' Fine Turf Autumn Feed with higher K levels and small amounts of Mg (5:5:15). Additionally, all tees were treated with new 'Mini-Gold' granular (31:0:0) at 30 gm/m². Wildwood's nine hectares of fairways were declared acceptable in their nutrient levels, though extra grass cover was certainly called-for this spring, 'Mini-Gold' granular at 30gm/m² coming to the rescue with exceptional results. This was the start of a long-term



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'Longlife' programme.

Fast forward now to July '93, where further analyses revealed little variation, though with pH averaging a point lower. Nothing suggested deviation from the plan and a further course of 'Longlife' Fine Turf Autumn Feed was recommended – things were coming along very nicely; there were compliments flying. "The baby is thriving," said Billy, who was beginning to feel much more relaxed, his confidence boosted.

Explaining a few subtle points, he said: "When you look at the programme you'll see we used the whole range of Zeneca products. We used conventional fertilisers, some that will give eight weeks, through to the 'Mini-Gold' that will give 10-12 weeks nitrogen release, but we used a programmed approach and used also what is classed as an autumn fertiliser in the spring."

"If you look at what they are doing you'll see that they're using a variety of our products in an interesting but totally practical way," added Roger Mossop.

"Talking practicalities," David chips in, "it's all down to setting the base; the soil analyses we provide. We're doing nothing different at Wildwood than we might do at any golf course in the UK, and we're finding more and more course managers coming over to our programmed way of operating."

Those who talk of throwing tons of money at a course might well use Wildwood as a salutary example of how not to squander, rather than how to. Billy's budget is by no means in the loads of money bracket, far from it. It is

decreed commercial sense to spend minimally for maximum output. We all made mental calculations and arrived at a sum suggesting that what extra had been spent at this critical stage amounted to little more than the cost of, say, 25 green fees. Of far greater importance though, the extra outlay could be seen reflected in quality sward, in turn encouraging paying customers to return and negating any thought of excess.

Let Billy have the last word. "Never before in my life have I had greens that I can turn on and off like these, they're so predictable. If we have a major tournament, for example the Futures Pro Tour event which we staged in March, which came to us with just three weeks notice, I can tailor the programme to fine-tune them to any given day. I often use Ultra-Green between fertiliser applications and find it quite splendid in giving the greens a quick boost, indeed when I presented the course for the Futures professionals, albeit at such short notice, its prior use as a management tool proved invaluable – an absolute Godsend. We have exceptional Penneagle bentgrass greens, praised for having a truer roll, for being more predictable and smoother, all made possible by denser growth and finer blades. The Tour players, who above all others know what they want and what they like, compared them favourably with the best in the land." A clear case, as Billy had said earlier, of keeping the customer satisfied. You can't get much better than that.

The ICI/Zeneca solution at Wildwood

1993

March: Greens treated with Longlife (5:5:15) @ 35gm/m²
Tees treated with Mini-Gold (31:0:0) @ 30gm/m²
April: Greens treated with Mini-Gold (31:0:0) @ 30gm/m²
June: Greens treated with Longlife (15:0:5) @ 35gm/m²
Tees treated with Mini-Gold (31:0:0) @ 30gm/m²

September: Greens treated with Longlife (5:5:15) @ 35gm/m²

October: Greens treated with Longlife (15:0:5) @ 30gm/m²

In addition, Ultra-Green (N:P:K) was applied to greens/tees in April,

July and August @ 20kg/hectare

1994

March: Greens treated with Longlife (8:0:0) @ 35gm/m²
Tees treated with Mini-Gold (31:0:0) @ 30gm/m²

April: Greens treated with Longlife (5:5:15) @ 35gm/m²
Tees treated with Mini-Gold (31:0:0) @ 30gm/m²

May: Fairways treated with Mini-Gold (31:0:0) @ 30gm/m²

June: Tees treated with Mini-Gold (31:0:0) @ 30gm/m²

Ultra-Green (N:P:K) is used for added colour and toning when required.

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