

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 so 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 if we are to create a future which is worth having."

It is this harnessed to his genuine love of golf - he was a Cambridge Blue - that has seen the unique work at Lyshott Heath being carried out.

He also learned the game from the ground up working as a teenager in the summer holidays at Dunstanburgh Castle Golf Club on the north east coast close to the family estate.

"The Head Greenkeeper was a very traditional Scotsman and we used bone and blood and were putting the grass cuttings back on to the greens. It was a very traditional set-up," recalled Will, of the time around 1960.

That experience planted a seed in Will, whose ambition it became, to design and build his own golf course and the opportunity presented itself

in the mid 70s.

"I decided to leave the farm partnership I was involved with at the age of 28 and that gave me money to invest in a site to build my golf course."

At the time he was working as a Whitehall civil servant and he set himself the task of finding a site within an hour of London.

"Having represented Cambridge University I'd played all over the world and picked up many ideas but I had a dream of a sort of typical English heathland like Woodhall Spa, combining elements of Saunton Sands with a little St Andrews thrown in," he explained, and if you look around the finished creation you'll find double greens and flavours of those others mentioned.

"I wanted a fairly wild, natural course, not a highly manicured parkland and I was fortunate in 1975, after three years of constant looking, to find this green field site which had nine acres of barley and planning permission for a golf course.

"In those days there were very few golf courses being built - it was before the boom in the 80s. I was keen to build it myself so I knew I was going to take a long time over it. It was basically a hobby and I generated cash from cash flow rather than borrowing money," explained Will.

He commissioned the STRI who did a report of the site, tested the soil and specified a very high fescue mixture for the greens.

"It is a very sandy soil here. If you dig down for about a foot you'll find white sand so it means the entire course is very free draining," explained Will.

That was no coincidence because,

along with being within an hour of London, sandy soil was one of the principle pre-requisites.

"I think it's mad to build a golf course on heavy clay soil. Many have done but it would break my heart to play on such a course, and try to look after it, because it is just not suitable.

"I've played on a lot of heavy clay parkland courses and it is pretty murderous. You are battling against the elements the whole time instead of nature being on your side," he said.

There were no trees on the site so the first thing Will did was plant them, 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 stubble 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.

"I wasn't a novice as I'd built new greens and tees and I knew the sorts of things to avoid."

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 anti cyclones - easterlies and north easterlies. It was an obvious error."

In total it took five years to complete the course - which was then known as Millbrook after the local village - and it opened in 1980.

During the construction Will had to make several important career decisions.

"We reached a crucial point when I had to decide whether I was going to stay with my career, working for the Department of the Environment, or take a couple of years off to make sure the course got started and the cutting regimes were established."

As you may have guessed the golf course won and he took the time required before returning to Westminster to become a Management Consultant...at least for another four years before he was lured back to the golf club.

"In 1989 I left my career in the city again to come out here and build the clubhouse and Ron Mills, my Head Greenkeeper, and I managed the project and did all the electrics and the plumbing.

"I've never gone back to my job in the city. This place has become like a great big mushroom. It has just grown and took over my life."





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 in 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 done 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 used 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 Lyshott 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 Lyshott 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 Lyshott Heath may be seen as a trail blazer on the road down the only route available to golf courses.

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