

Kite flies off into retirement

Steve Castle speaks to a greenkeeper whose highly eventful working life has all been spent at the same club



*Name: Alan Kite
Born: Coventry, 2 December 1947
Marital status: Married to Gill
with two sons
Handicap: 20
Hobbies: Cricket, football, golf,
walking*

It's a freezing December morning in 1962 and a 15-year-old boy is pushing his bike through thick snow to reach his first ever job at Sutton Coldfield Golf Club.

Trainee greenkeeper Alan Kite picked one of the worst ever winters to begin his career – with atrocious weather preventing any real work on the course from December to April. But Alan is now preparing for retirement after spending his entire working life at the same club.

He was just 21 when he became Head Greenkeeper, and during an eventful career he's had to cope with a devastating fire, various recessions and generations of irritating cattle.

The unusual heathland course commands 200 acres of the vast 2,400 acre Sutton Park, which is an SSSI protected site.

Joggers, dog walkers and families mingle with the cattle that roam the park – and the fairways – from April to October.

His tale is fascinating. He can recall a time where four greenkeepers would tine a green by hand over the course of a day, and golfers rarely ventured out in the winter months – and he reveals why he believes half a century in the same job is now impossible.

The biggest influence on his early career was former Head Greenkeeper Jack Toy. Amazingly, he also spent 50 years at the club – and Alan has emulated his mentor's longevity.

"I always wanted to work outdoors, and my mother knew Jack and mentioned I was looking for a job.

"But as soon as I got here, there was snow on the ground until April. It was unbelievable – I didn't see any grass for 14 weeks. I didn't have a clue where anything was – I remember disappearing into a bunker on the 14th when I was trudging round in this deep snow.

"All I did was shovel snow around the car park and I had to listen to these old men boring me about the past and as a young teenager, I didn't want to know.

"But later on I realised it had been the best education I could possibly have had. Formal education was non-existent so they gave me the benefit of all those years of experience.

"When I started we had three Gang Mowers, a little tractor, a spiker and some scythes which were used on the greens at that time. The rest were hand machines.

"The greens were pure fescue, cut twice a week.

RIGHT: Alan in 1968 and
BELOW: another of the course
from 1968



Four of us would take a day to tine a green by hand."

By now Alan had thrown himself into greenkeeping, and was determined to further his career.

He even took up golf – having previously never picked up a club in his life – and was quickly playing off a single figure handicap.

"Jack retired and I fully expected to take over from him at 18 – that shows the confidence of youth! I eventually took over as Head Greenkeeper at 21. People didn't pressure you and you learnt as you went along, and I also attended courses at the STI – now the STRI -

which was just starting up."

He was appointed Course Manager in 1979 - but three years before this appointment came the toughest test of his half-century reign.

Blazing hot summers in 1974 and 1975 had left the heathland like a tinderbox – and the famously scorching summer of 1976 triggered a series of fires which raged across Sutton Park, engulfing the course.

"There was no rain whatsoever for 11 weeks up to the end of August, and we'd had small fires here and there.





Alan Parton, Phil Rainsford, Alan Kite, Clayton Lee. Missing is Jim Guest

IMAGES ON RIGHT PAGE show Sutton Coldfield today and BELOW: cows

“Apart from foot and mouth and the year after the fire, we’ve had cattle on here every year. This year we’ve been picking up half a ton of muck a day”

Because the ground was bone dry, all it took was one fire and the embers would float off and start more fires.

“We held a big charity amateur tournament with the likes of Nick Faldo and Sandy Lyle, which we got through, but the tournament

ended and in the last few days of August the wind got up, a fire started and that was it.

“All the trees went, all the gorse, the fairways were burnt, it was horrendous. It was lapping over fences and people had to be evacuated from the nearby houses.

“We drew up a battle plan to repair the course, with the main focus on digging up scorched earth and replacing it with new soil. For months after, whenever you went out you would get black legs from all the ash.”

Remarkably it was closed for less than two months – although they were assisted by the scarcity of golfers as autumn turned to winter, something which has altered hugely during his tenure.

“We did so much of our work in the winter. People didn’t play much winter golf then, and they wouldn’t play if it rained because the rubber outfits golfers wore then weren’t waterproof. There’d be nobody out there from November to March, and even in the summer there was no play on Sundays.”

It’s safe to say that Alan has no plans to retire to a farm, or anywhere near cattle, after spending “48 years shoveling cow dung”.

“Apart from foot and mouth and the year after the fire, we’ve had cattle on here every year. This year we’ve been picking up half a ton of muck a day.”

However, Alan harbours a greater dislike of bunkers than of bovines.

“We should have designed inland courses to be without bunkers,

they’ve been the bane of my life. You’re told you’re never raking them properly and in the summer the finer sand blows away. Somebody should have said we’re not on the seaside and we don’t want or need bunkers. You can put other features in like gorse and bushes.”

He believes his generation will be the last to ever have ‘a job for life’.

“There’s no loyalty now either from the club’s side or the employees’ side. You’re not going to get people staying 50 years anymore. It’s not just this industry, society generally is more cut and thrust.”

He has no doubts when asked about the most satisfying part of the job.

“When everyone pulls together for a tournament. We do the best we can with what we have, and on the day the adrenaline’s flowing and it’s a great feeling.

“I do love this course. One of the best things is that it’s open to the public, so it’s not just the same old faces. I’ve got to know so many people down the years.”

Alan was a Midlands secretary for BGGGA – one of the forerunners of BIGGA – and was a big supporter of its 1987 amalgamation with the English and International Golf Greenkeepers Association and the Scottish and International Golf Greenkeepers Association.

“I passionately believed we had to amalgamate, it was common sense. We’d have been in a much worse position without BIGGA, but there’s still a way to go.

“Two things disappoint me. One is the number of Master Greenkeepers who seem to leave the trade.

“These young men are returning to their clubs after this fabulous achievement but aren’t properly rewarded, so they leave to become agronomists, advisers or do contract work. That means they’re not ploughing their knowledge back into the trade.

“Secondly, when I started we were considered as nothing better than a gardener. I have to say that some things haven’t changed.

“When the financial pressure is on, as it is now, some clubs don’t help us and our skills are still undervalued.

“Cutting back on greenkeepers is short-sighted because it will obviously affect the condition of the course long-term.”

It’s been a humbling experience to meet a man who’s poured his heart and soul into the industry and he’s also given me a priceless insight into how greenkeeping has developed over 50 years.

Happy retirement, Alan.



