

Unlucky for Some

The members at Kineford Oaks golf club had said for months that the thirteenth hole was an accident waiting to happen. Ever since the course restructure saw the tee boxes relocated, there'd been several near misses, so nobody was surprised when the hole claimed its first victim. Or shocked at the way Josh Willis was killed, smacked straight on the temple by a Titleist AVX that had come whizzing at rocket pace from the tee.

Of course, Martin Clough shouldn't have driven off until he was certain the fairway was clear, but it was impossible to see it all from the refurbished tees. That's why the committee had installed a bell halfway down the fairway, so players could let the group behind know when they were out of range. But some clown had removed the clapper—clubhouse gossip reckoned it was jobs from the council estate down the road—and so the situation was back, temporarily, to waiting for a shout or guessing. Unless the group on the fairway risked the wellbeing of their irons by using one to ring what remained of the bell.

Clough's threeball were adamant that they'd heard an "all clear" sounded, while the other two members of Willis's group—his wife Sandra and best mate Kevin Somerfield—were equally adamant they'd not yet rung the bell. Admittedly, they'd heard a clattering from a local building site that might have been mistaken for the sound. These facts emerged afterwards, because at the time people had other things on their minds.

Calling for help had proved a nightmare, with nobody in either threeball being able to get a mobile phone signal. Somerfield had hared off to find somewhere to ring 999, although that delay had probably made little difference to Willis's prospects. One of Clough's fellow players was a doctor, so the injured man had received medical support almost from the start, although support which had proved futile. Dr Ferguson had been more usefully employed tending both to Clough, who was in shock, and Sandra, who'd launched into a threnody of, "I told Josh to hurry up, but he *would* dawdle. If only he'd moved on, he'd have been safe."

The other golfer in Clough's threeball, George Carberry, who'd legged it back up to the tee to pass on the news and so prevent a repeat incident, had eventually borrowed someone's buggy and transported an almost prostrate Sandra back to the nineteenth hole. There she'd been swiftly administered a couple of stiff brandies and, when Ferguson returned to the clubhouse, sent home with a dose of sedatives.

It hadn't been an easy time for any of them, with a post-mortem and an inquest to be faced, then the funeral, but a certain amount of stoicism got everyone through and time soon started to work its usual healing. The club committee breathed a collective sigh of relief when Sandra said she wouldn't be suing Clough, or indeed anyone, concerning the accident. As she said, she was well covered by her husband's life insurance and his death had simply been a bizarrely tragic incident that could have happened to anybody. Once the thirteenth hole tees had been moved to a safer location, rendering the bell redundant, and the membership had been reminded both to shout "fore" and to take out adequate golf insurance, the accident simply became a matter of club folklore. Never to be discussed when Sandra was around.

That situation began to change when recently retired Chief Inspector Terry Bohun, new to both the area and the Kineford Oaks club, first noticed the small memorial plaque on the thirteenth.

"Used to be a death trap of a hole," his playing partner told him. "Unlucky by number and by layout."

Bohun listened to the bare bones of the tale with increasing interest. In his career, he'd come across at least one "tragic accident" which had actually been a convenient way to get rid of a spouse. It had been the familiar tale of one partner allegedly not seeing the other on the driveway when they'd been reversing and his rozzer's nose told him this might be similar. However, he'd not heard a single rumour related to Willis's death and if he or Sandra had been having flings it would have been the talk of the locker room. Bohun didn't want to stir up trouble, or risk people clamming up on him if he seemed too eager with his questions, so a strategy of identifying the club bore and gently probing *him* seemed best.

It soon became obvious to Bohun that Eric Wade could talk for Britain and would likely give all the information needed without realising he was being subtly interviewed. A match was arranged and after eighteen holes in which Bohun contrived to let Wade win one up, the loser purchased a nice bottle of red and the pair settled in a corner of the bar for a chinwag. Wade had mentioned the fatality when they'd played the thirteenth and promised to tell the newcomer all about it later, so it was easy to get the conversation going. Wade gave a long, more detailed account of Willis's accident than Bohun had heard previously, one which the ex-policeman didn't interrupt: there'd be plenty of time for questions later.

As Wade finally drew proper breath, Bohun said, "I played with Clough last week and heard him shout 'fore' when he shanked one. I'm surprised he didn't do it then."

"He did. Ferguson and Carberry backed him up on that. Apparently, the group ahead didn't hear him, although if you'd been playing here at the time you'd understand why. Builders were working on the new houses at the back of the eleventh and they made a hell of a racket, especially when the sodding piledriver was going. At times you couldn't hear yourself think at that end of the course, let alone a shout of fore or somebody trying to ring that bell with a driver shaft."

Bohun nodded sympathetically, although he noted that building site noise would have been a convenient factor to take advantage of. "Willis was bloody unlucky to have been killed outright. I guess it was a fluke, because of where the ball hit him?"

"That's what they said at the inquest. Sandra got a hell of a shock when it turned out Josh had a weakness on his right temple. Caused by a rugby injury before he met her, which is why he'd given up scrumming down and taken up golf." Wade took another swig of claret. "Poor Sandra. She already blamed herself for not making him get a move on the day he was killed."

"The old *what if?*" Interesting that Willis was vulnerable to a blow on that point of his skull. Even if Sandra hadn't been aware of the weak temple, any of Willis's mates might have, including the doctor or Clough himself. "I was told she still comes to the club, which is very brave of her."

"She's just about getting back into the swing of things at last—excuse pun—although it was touch and go for the others. Carberry said he was contemplating returning to archery because it was safer and Clough nearly ditched golf completely, until we persuaded him that there but for the grace of God went any of us. Kineford Oaks is a great place—it's not every club where a surgeon like Ferguson plays alongside a carpenter like Somerfield."

Bohun knew the men were respectively a GP and a high-end craftsman: hopefully, the rest of Wade's story would be more accurate.

"Nobody would have blamed Sandra for upping sticks, because it must stir awful memories whenever she plays the thirteenth, especially with that plaque the committee

insisted on putting there. Sandra thought it mawkish. She's done a lot of lobbying to get the hole made safer, though."

Wade began a soliloquy concerning improvements made to Kineford Oaks over the years, one to which Bohun only half listened. Maybe he was wrong, his instinct having misled him. Willis's death was surely one of those one in a million freak accidents, because while a motive for Clough committing the deed could perhaps be found, how could he engineer the means?

The following days saw Bohun spending hours at a driving range sufficiently far from Kineford Oaks that any members would be unlikely to use it. He could hit the ball miles, straight as a die, with the ability to fade or draw it where necessary, and only his erratic short game kept his handicap higher than it should have been. But try as he might, he couldn't drive the ball the distance needed with such accuracy that it would be guaranteed to hit the victim on his weak spot. He eventually concluded that not even Tiger Woods in his prime could have performed the feat. Maybe Clough had only meant to give Willis a fright and they'd both been unlucky, because Clough couldn't have known precisely where his victim was standing. Bohun decided he was barking up the wrong tree and turned his attention to improving his wedge play.

His suspicions had been put to bed for months and would probably have remained safely asleep, had it not been for a chance meeting with an ex-colleague at a barbecue. Gerry Hand, himself recently retired, had worked in fraud and when the pair discussed what they were doing with the spare time on their hands, he was intrigued to hear Bohun had joined Kineford Oaks.

"Kineford? That was linked to the last case I worked on. It never came to a prosecution because, as far as we could see, the suspect worked entirely on his own. So, when he died, the case died with him."

"You've lost me," Bohun said, before a prickle of excitement shot up the back of his neck.

"Sorry. There was a chap called Josh Willis, who—alongside his work as a respectable stockbroker—operated some dodgy schemes that promised the earth and, after an initial brilliant dividend, delivered diddly squat. He'd been reported and we soon concluded it was a case of fraud rather than bad luck with investments. The team was accumulating enough firm evidence for a prosecution when Willis was killed in an accident."

Bohun nodded. "Hit by a golf ball on the thirteenth. I've heard all about it."

Hand studied him for a moment. "Did you think his death was suspicious?"

"Of course I did, although I concluded that such a thing couldn't be done deliberately. Could have been an accident that coincidentally resembled a murder made to look like an accident."

"Our jobs made us over-suspicious, didn't they?" Hand snorted. "Maybe Willis was lucky, in a way. There are worse ways to hand in your chips than out on a golf course in the fresh air, playing the game you love. Better that than being done over by one of your victims."

"Who were these victims?"

"I can't tell you offhand but I can get their names. Scrawl down your email address and I'll come back to you once I have the information."

Gerry Hand's e-mail came a week later. It contained a list of some dozen names, with a note that there'd likely been more victims. Among those named were George Carberry and

Willis's supposed best friend, Kevin Somerfield. Unless those were two different men, with the names being only coincidental, Bohun had identified a potential motive for Willis's death, although he still couldn't work out how such a murder could have been staged or why Clough had been the murderer. Unless it hadn't been the ball itself that killed Willis, of course.

Bohun could imagine the victim being hit a glancing blow, one that would stun or knock him out. Dr Ferguson, perhaps angry on behalf of his defrauded friends, could have taken advantage of the situation by rushing to administer aid and, instead, quietly administering something that would finish Willis off. It sounded like a plot Agatha Christie might have written, but Bohun had come across several real-life cases that Dame Agatha would have thought too far-fetched to feature in her stories. He'd have to study the inquest report and talk to the doctor who performed the post-mortem, to see if all the bases had been covered at the time.

It didn't take long for Bohun to get in contact with her and, much as he hated dishonesty, he took a semi-official approach, telling Dr Mankad that he'd come across Willis's death and it had reminded him of similar cases.

"I'm checking for a pattern, because the other so-called accidental deaths were due to poisoning," he lied, glad that he was on the phone so she couldn't see his face.

"There were no signs of poisoning, I can assure you. I've got the report to hand and the PM sticks in my mind, anyway, because it was such an unusual case." The sound of pages being flicked through. "Willis had what they call an eggshell skull, made worse by a blow he took playing rugby. He was particularly unlucky that the golf ball hit him where it did but there were other weak spots on his cranium that could have been equally dangerous. I didn't specifically check for foreign substances in his system, because there was no indication his death was anything other than a tragic accident."

"No doubt you're right and I'm being over-sceptical." Bohun sighed. While this didn't count as an unsolved case, he hated not being able to put it to bed.

A fortnight passed, during which Bohun tried to persuade himself, without success, that there was nothing suspicious about Willis's death. But a man being killed in the presence of someone he'd conned the best part of a hundred grand from, whilst another dupe was playing alongside the victim, screamed foul play. Why the hell were Somerfield and Willis playing in the same three ball anyway, still regarded as the best of buddies?

Bohun decided to take one last crack at the case, starting with those present. The fraudster. Two of his victims. Someone with no skin in the game who played the fatal shot. A convenient doctor to give, or tactically withhold, medical aid. A wife to innocently—or not—bemoan the situation. All playing, ostensibly, as two separate groups on a hole where people would surely know there was no mobile phone signal, where they couldn't be seen if the green ahead was empty and where the constant racket from a building site could cover a multitude of sins. A hole which people had been saying for months would be the death of someone. If only the drive had actually been taken by Carberry or Somerfield.

And who says it wasn't?

That simple fact hit Bohun like a muddy divot to the back of the neck. The only evidence they had for what happened when Willis died—apart from the post-mortem—came from the other five golfers present. Easy enough for Carberry to have been the one to have teed off and the others to have covered for him, if they knew he had a motive that might be unearthed, a motive which could make the coroner doubt the accident explanation.

You're losing your touch. Easier still for death not to have been caused by a drive off the tee.

Who said that was what had happened? Only those present, who might have been acting in concert. Why couldn't the golf ball have been launched at shorter and more accurate range, striking Willis directly on the weakest point of his skull, from an adapted weapon such as a crossbow? Simple enough to then drop the device, dismantled if necessary, into one of the golf bags to take home for disposal. And Carberry used to be an archer.

This could definitely have been a deliberate killing, with well-rehearsed roles and stories for all involved. A murder highly unlikely to be proven after such a time, with any evidence long gone, unless one of the five got the wind up and made a confession. What Bohun needed was a plan on that front and the garrulous, well-meaning Eric Wade might be just the chap to lend unwitting help.

Rumours that Willis had been a con man were soon circulating round Kineford Oaks. *Eric Wade had it from a reliable source.* That reliable source had been Hand himself, invited to visit the club for a three ball with Bohun and Wade, and primed to let something slip when they reached the plaque on the thirteenth.

Inevitably, various people said they'd always suspected there was something dodgy about Willis—probably when they'd believed no such thing—although the overwhelming reaction was trying to establish if he'd conned any of the club members. Martin Clough kept stating, with absolute candour, that he'd not been one of the fraud victims, as did Dr Ferguson. The sensation soon died down, the prevailing opinion being it was a blessing in disguise that Willis had been killed before he could be charged and bring disgrace on both his family and the club.

The pot had been stirred, though. Bohun caught the occasional worried look being cast in his direction from Sandra or Kevin Somerfield, although the ex-policeman never said anything about the matter. He simply listened and watched.

The subsequent development wasn't of Bohun's doing—it came while he was still contemplating his next move. One of the members at Kineford Oaks was a TV producer and had attended a conference on real-life policing versus its small screen depiction. Dr Mankad was one of the speakers and had mentioned some cases where reality had mirrored the televisual equivalent. Including considering whether a killing at a golf course had been linked to other similar cases. She'd not given the name of either course or victim but the date and circumstances matched Willis's death. So, despite the fact she'd assured her audience this death wasn't suspicious, the story got brought back to the nineteenth hole and rumours started to fly as swiftly—and erratically—as a ball off Wade's tee.

Bohun's white lie to Dr Mankad was soon developing a life of its own, with conjecture rife that the club might be harbouring a clever serial killer, so clever that they'd deceived medics, police and coroner. Inevitably, the focus narrowed on Martin Clough, so it came as no surprise when he sidled up to the ex-copper and asked if he could have a word in private. Off the record.

"Privacy and confidentiality I can promise," Bohun assured him, acting the innocent about what this conversation might concern, "but there are certain things I couldn't keep to myself. If you made a disclosure regarding abuse, for example."

"This isn't like that." Clough ran his hands through what remained of his hair. "You must have heard about Josh Willis, the bloke who got killed on the thirteenth."

"I've been told the story, yes."

“Well, I swear I didn’t do it, despite what I said at the inquest. I’ve held my tongue all this time but now there’s so much gossip going around saying that I’m some sort of psychopath. I can’t keep quiet any longer. My drive didn’t go anywhere near him. The others placed the ball, once they’d made sure it had forensic traces on it. I wish I’d never got drawn into their plan, but Josh was such a bastard and the others had lost such a packet I wanted to help them get revenge...” He stopped, clearly having said much more than he’d intended.

“So, who killed him? Carberry, with his bow and a golf-ball-tipped arrow?”

“Ah.” Despite his torment, Clough produced a sheepish grin. “They thought about that but decided it wouldn’t be accurate enough. Better to rig up something they could hit Josh with at short range. Like a baseball bat with one of my Titleist AVX’s embedded in the top. I never saw the weapon itself.”

“The person who made it must have been handy...oh, of course.” The master carpenter, who now flinched every time he saw Bohun. “Did Kevin Somerfield make it *and* strike the blow? Might as well tell me, given how much you’ve already said. When this gets to the police, I’ll put in a good word.” He waited but Clough still wouldn’t answer. “Or else everyone here believes you’re that serial killer.”

Clough blew out his cheeks. “Look, Kevin made the weapon but it was Sandra who hit Josh. Her idea to get rid of him before he was arrested for his scams and the proceeds confiscated. Too fond of her comforts, is Sandra. I’ll make a proper statement whenever you want.”

“Thank you.” Bohun sat back in his chair, triumphant.

Unlucky for some, the thirteenth hole. Especially those like Sandra, who’d not wanted a plaque put up to mark a murder.