

PITCHCARE

The turfcare magazine from pitchcare.com

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DON'T MISS

2020 not out

Worcestershire CCC's Tim Packwood faced new challenges as he prepared for the new season with a shrinking team and a set of Covid protocols



FOOTBALL IS JUST THE BEGINNING

When you hear of St. George's Park, you immediately think of the home of England football - twenty-seven teams to be precise! It lies within 330-acres of stunning Staffordshire countryside and Assistant Head of Estates Matt Arnold and his team have the enviable task of developing and maintaining the estate to offer visitors the 'wow' factor

Hats off to Mark

Like all sports, racing is facing up to big changes thanks to Coronavirus. One of National Hunt's best-loved courses is preparing for an extra change. Mark Cornford, Plumpton's long serving Head Groundsman, and in recent times its Clerk of the Course too, is retiring at the end of the year

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WELCOME TO

PITCHCARE

Two steps forward, one step back?

2020 continues to be an extraordinary year in every respect and, whilst it is now possible to visit sites and carry out inspections, demonstrations and the like, it certainly does not feel as though there's any significant momentum building at the moment.

I think much of this is due to the government's recent announcements and actions. It would appear that pubs may have to close again when schools return next month - I haven't quite worked out the correlation there - whilst there are more and more countries and localised UK cities on the lockdown list.

Some sports venues were due to open their doors to spectators again in August, only to have the decision overturned at the last minute. Indeed, the Snooker World Championships had already allowed in spectators to the first day of the event when the government announcement was made!

I fell foul to a two-week isolation period recently, when the rules for quarantine changed whilst I was away in Lanzarote. When I left the country, both the government and media were encouraging travel. Then, whilst sipping a G&T poolside, it all changed. My point... how do we, as an industry, get things moving and pick up the pace when things are changing so quickly and there is so much uncertainty about R-rates and future lockdowns?

The decision to cancel BTME - which was inevitable given the Harrogate Convention Centre could possibly be a Nightingale hospital right through to March - was expected by many. As I write this, we are waiting for a firm venue and date from BIGGA for the proposed 'Festival of Turf' and I know many exhibitors and visitors alike who are enthused and looking forward to

what will be a different type of show around June time.

In my interview with BIGGA CEO Jim Croxton recently, he highlighted that the safety of everyone is paramount and that they would not consider hosting a show where this was compromised. GMA Chief Executive Geoff Webb recently reflected this view. He, however, is confident that (under government guidelines) Saltex will still go ahead in March.

Chatting to many people over the past few weeks, it's still hard to comprehend how we can embrace a 'socially distanced show', but I'm sure venues like the NEC are hard at work making this a possibility from 1st October when the government has given the green light to stage events.

On a more positive note, we have started to conduct article interviews again (obviously in safe conditions) and, if you'd like to feature in the magazine, drop me an email.

With more sport being played, albeit behind closed doors, the maintenance of many venues is returning to a new normal and the positivity on social media is building.

Keep safe.

Kerry Haywood
Editor



SAY THAT AGAIN!

"I don't think you can really teach this job. You have to suck it up like osmosis, the more you do it, the more bits you pick up"

Mark Flack, Victory Sports Ground

"I think the only way to raise our profile is to do it ourselves. By that I mean pushing for opportunities to promote what we do, and if someone wants to do an interview, jump at the chance"

William Kirkwood, Glentoran FC

"I had to invest in some decent tools at first - jacks, proper sets of spanners and so on, as there was only a socket set when I arrived"

Alan Meyricks, Warley Wood

"I try and get across to the team that; it's one thing to go out and cut grass, but it's the finer points and the attention to detail that make the difference and set us apart from everyone else"

Matt Arnold, St George's Park

"One of the advisories we had, which came as no surprise, was that our machinery is old, and it would be wise to invest in some new equipment"

Paul Bowden, St Blazey AFC

"Gary Barwell at Edgbaston set up a regular zoom meeting and it's been very helpful - we've all come together much more for the sake of the sport"

Tim Packwood, Worcestershire CCC

"If we don't get more young people involved, soon people like myself will be working until we are eighty years old, and I do not want to do that!"

Rob Bennett, Westhoughton CC

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Issue 92 August/September 2020

Matt Arnold, St George's Park

COVER STORY: Football is just the beginning

When you hear of St. George's Park, you immediately think of the home of England football - twenty-seven teams to be precise! It lies within 330-acres of stunning Staffordshire countryside and Assistant Head of Estates Matt Arnold and his team have the enviable task of developing and maintaining the estate to offer visitors the 'wow' factor. **P36**

GOLF

Lockdown over ...

If you have just dusted off the clubs after no golfing action for the past few months and fancy a few rounds on an idyllic well maintained course, then add Ballyclare Golf Club to the wish list. Chris McCullough paid the venue a visit just as it reopened to see the efforts to which the greenkeepers, under Head Greenkeeper John Beggs, had gone to keep the course in such good shape. **P12**

Carry on camping!

In the first week of the return of golf after Covid-19 lockdown, on what was a perfect day for a round of golf, Lee Williams headed to Northamptonshire to meet up with Tony Hunter, Silverstone Golf Club's Course Manager. Not being able to shake hands and having to follow the social distancing rules made conducting the interview a little different, but it was great to get back into the 'swing' of things. **P20**

CONSERVATION

If you go down to the Woods today

Warley Woods, a West Midlands historic landscape is gaining national recognition as a community trust reaching out to secure vital funding, including the help of a national treasure, as Greg Rhodes discovers when he meets Trust Manager Viv Cole and Golf Course and Park Manager Alan Merricks. **P28**

WINTER SPORTS

Presenting the perfect pitch

Is there such a thing as the perfect football pitch? Anyone who has played at The Oval Stadium, home to Glentoran FC, would say this pitch is as good as they get. Chris McCullough took a trip to Belfast to meet groundsman William Kirkwood to see for himself. **P44**

A window of opportunity!

Lee Williams headed to the village of Cranfield, a few miles east of Milton Keynes, for his first face-to-face site visit since lockdown restrictions were relaxed. He was there to meet Wesley Matthews - at a safe distance, obviously - the award winning groundsman at Cranfield United Football Club. **P54**

Blazing a trail

St Blazey lies on the south coast of Cornwall, just a mile or so inland from the popular Par Sands. This is grockle country 'par' excellence. The town's football club competes in the South West Peninsula League Premier Division West and is considered to be among the most successful clubs in Cornwall. Lee Williams met with Paul Bowden, the club's volunteer groundsman, amongst other things! **P62**

SCHOOLS & COLLEGES

Nursing the pitch back to life

Loughborough University is a public research university in the East Midlands. It covers an area of 438 acres (1.77 km²) and, after getting lost on the expansive site for around twenty minutes, Lee Williams eventually met up with Kris Nurse, 34-year-old Team Leader, outside the impressive University stadium. **P68**

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SUMMER SPORTS

2020 not out!

After serious flooding at Blackfinch New Road, Worcestershire CCC's head groundsman Tim Packwood faced new challenges as he prepared for the new season with a shrinking team and a set of Covid protocols. Jane Carley met up with him as play finally got underway again. **P76**

Dad's army take the flack

During a typical Friday in June, the final preparations would usually be being made to the square at The Victory Ground but, instead, it is routine mowing and watering that is the order of the day. Operating the Toro Reelmaster 5410 is Head Groundsman, Mark Flack, with his father and Grounds Director, Bobby Flack, hand watering. Their involvement in this proud Suffolk sporting institution has spanned decades, and their passion and love for 'The Vic' is shared by many. **P82**

All smiles at Driffield

After a delayed meeting due to the Covid-19 crisis, Lee Williams, finally caught up with Mark Goddard, the club's Head Groundsman and his right-hand man, former Head Groundsman Phil Skelton, on what turned out to be a sunny day in July. **P90**

Taking care of business

What do Westhoughton Cricket Club, Farnworth Cricket Club (in the Bolton League) and Littleborough Cricket Club (in the Lancashire League) all have in common? They are all expertly tended to by Rob Bennett of Rob Bennett Groundcare. Lee Williams caught up with him at Westhoughton CC. **P96**

PUBLIC PLACES

Brodsworth Bounces Back!

Brodsworth Hall, virtually unchanged since the 1860s, is one of the most complete surviving examples of a Victorian country house in England. Located in Brodsworth and close to Doncaster, this Grade 1 listed building is often referred to as English Heritage's flagship property in the North. Unable to visit due to Covid-19 closure, David Mears was invited to return recently and spent some time with Senior Gardener, Edward Watchorn. **P102**

EQUESTRIAN

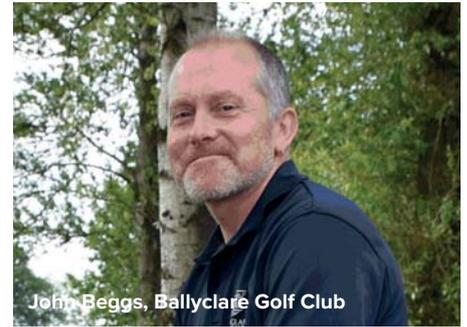
Hats off to Mark - both of them

Like all sports racing is facing up to big changes thanks to Coronavirus. One of National Hunt's best-loved courses is preparing for an extra change. Its long serving Head Groundsman and, in recent times, its Clerk of the Course too is retiring at the end of the year. Neville Johnson visited Plumpton to talk to Mark Cornford to get his thoughts on how 'the turf' has changed for him. **P114**

TRAINING

How to Give Bad News

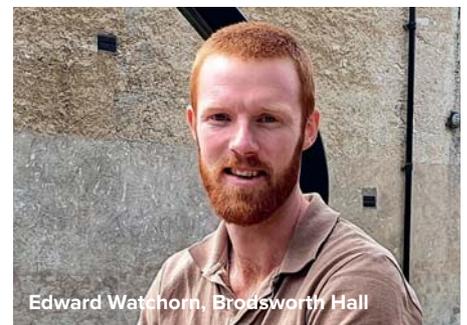
Trainer and Conference Speaker Frank Newberry looks at how to give bad news to people in the workplace. Giving bad news can be hard on everyone. It needs to be handled well if everyone's morale and performance levels are to be sustained. **P122**



John Beggs, Ballyclare Golf Club



Mark Cornford, Plumpton Racecourse



Edward Watchorn, Brodsworth Hall



Tim Packwood, Worcestershire CCC

BTME cancelled

With health the priority, BIGGA cancels annual turf exhibition

The turf industry's premier annual gathering, the BIGGA Turf Management Exhibition (BTME), will not take place in January 2021 as anticipated, with an alternative 'festival of turf' planned for summer 2021.

The event's organisers, the British & International Golf Greenkeepers Association, has cancelled the popular trade exhibition due to the ongoing uncertainty relating to the coronavirus pandemic, having prioritised the health and wellbeing of its members, exhibitors, staff and other attendees.

The decision was taken following consultation with members of the association and regular dialogue with representatives of the Harrogate Convention Centre and other major stakeholders. It was agreed the hosting of a gathering of turf professionals from across the globe would create an unacceptable risk of infection, potentially putting lives at risk.

BIGGA's world-leading education programme, Continue to Learn, is held alongside BTME each year and will still take place during January 2021, albeit as an online event and with an altered timetable designed to reflect the new digital platform. A full programme of speakers will enable BIGGA members to access the world class education they have come to expect from the comfort of home or at their place of employment.

The announcement of an alternative event in summer 2021 will enable BIGGA to explore options for hosting the event outdoors, which current understanding of the infectious disease indicates will make for a safe event and will allow improved social distancing measures to be implemented. It is hoped that many of the exhibitors who had signed up for BTME 2021 will support this cost-effective event and BIGGA will be liaising with exhibitors over the coming weeks to discuss the opportunities it presents.

The Harrogate Convention Centre, home to BTME since its inauguration as the European Turf Management Exhibition (ETME) in 1989, has been utilised as an NHS Nightingale Hospital since the peak of the outbreak in April



and BIGGA is incredibly proud to be associated with a venue that has been transformed to enable the treatment of COVID-19 patients, should the need arise.

However, the alteration of dates will require a new venue to be found and discussions are underway with potential event hosts. Details will be released in due course.

It is anticipated that BTME will return to the Harrogate Convention Centre in January 2022.

BIGGA Chief Executive Jim Croxton said: "The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has sent shockwaves across our industry and BIGGA members have worked admirably in difficult circumstances to enable the continuing success of the facilities they maintain. The work they are doing in a safe and socially-distanced manner is admirable and has undoubtedly led to an increased confidence in golf as a safe pastime during these uncertain times."

"With member health and wellbeing being BIGGA's absolute priority, it was immediately clear that to invite thousands of turf professionals from across the globe to attend an exhibition during a season when there is anticipated to be an increased risk of disease transmission would be negligent and expose attendees to undue risk."

"BIGGA considers it important to host an annual event and BTME plays a vital role in the

calendar year for the turf industry. BTME is an opportunity to come together to celebrate the achievements of the previous year, while building new contacts and looking forward to the future. We feel it is important to retain this community spirit where possible, especially considering the hardships we have all faced, and so we are exploring the possibility of hosting a safe and accessible alternative event in summer 2021. I'm excited about the possibilities presented by this and am confident our new 'festival of turf' will be as exciting and influential as ever."

BIGGA Head of Member Development Sami Strutt is responsible for the organisation of Continue to Learn, working with members to develop an engaging and relevant education programme each year.

Sami said: "Although the association will have no physical presence in Harrogate during January, we will be hosting Continue to Learn as a digital event and I'm certain the spirit of Harrogate week will be as strong as ever before."

"We have engaged with BIGGA members through our annual Members' Choice survey and are in the process of building an incredible series of online learning that will enable BIGGA members to continue their professional development, wherever in the world they may be."

Amenity Forum Conference will be online format

Following full consideration of the external circumstances, the Amenity Forum has decided to switch delivery of its annual conference being held on October 15th 2020 to a fully online format using specialist professional conferencing facilities. The theme will be "Planning for the Future".

The event has an impressive range of specialist speakers and the programme will include an address from a senior government representative. This is a particularly important time for the sector, not just because of the challenges arising from the pandemic but also given the ongoing review of the National

Action Plan relating to weed, pest and disease management. There is also a review of pesticide policy being undertaken.

This is a great opportunity to hear and debate current issues and get up to the minute information on the reviews. There will also be focus on innovation and new methods and approaches emerging from research and technological development.

This full-scale conference will be easily accessed online for full participation, and includes:

- Full conference programme including adequate comfort breaks
- Information-rich presentations from specialist speakers
- Conference materials provided in advance,

including speaker biographies

- Speakers presenting, accompanied by slides, using a professional online conference platform (easy for delegates - we'll provide full details)
- Opportunities for questions with all speakers
- Full slide presentations cleared by speakers will be made available to all registered delegates afterwards as a permanent record of the proceedings

The delegate rate is £50 + VAT

For further information on the programme, how to book or for more detail, contact Admin@amenityforum.net

B&S file for Chapter 11

Iconic small engine manufacturer Briggs & Stratton file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection

Century-old small engine maker Briggs & Stratton, one of the industry's most iconic brands, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Eastern District of Missouri on Monday 20th July 2020.

A Chapter 11 filing in the United States means that a company and its creditors work out a reorganisation plan that enables the business to continue to operate.

In what's known as a 'stalking-horse' deal, it was also announced on Monday that a New York private equity firm called KPS Capital Partners, through a newly formed affiliate, has entered into an asset purchase agreement with Briggs & Stratton Corporation, under which KPS will acquire substantially all of the assets of Briggs & Stratton, including equity of foreign subsidiaries, for approximately \$550 million.

In an official statement, Briggs & Stratton said they had obtained \$677.5 million of debtor-in-possession financing that would help fund operations during the bankruptcy proceedings. \$265 million of that figure has been committed by KPS and the remaining \$412.5 from Briggs's existing group of lenders.



Briggs said this would mean that they would have sufficient liquidity to continue normal operations and to meet its financial obligations during the Chapter 11 process, including the payment of employee wages and health benefits, continued servicing of customer orders and shipments, and other obligations.

Todd Teske, Briggs & Stratton's chairman, president, and chief executive officer, released a statement saying, "Over the past several months, we have explored multiple options with our advisors to strengthen our financial position and flexibility. The challenges we have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic have made reorganisation the difficult but necessary

and appropriate path forward to secure our business. It also gives us support to execute on our strategic plans to bring greater value to our customers and channel partners. Throughout this process, Briggs & Stratton products will continue to be produced, distributed, sold and fully backed by our dedicated team."

Co-founder and co-managing partner of KPS Michael Psaros released a statement saying, "KPS intends to grow the new Briggs & Stratton aggressively through strategic acquisitions."

He went on to say, "The new Briggs & Stratton will be conservatively capitalised and not encumbered by its predecessor's significant liabilities."

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£7m investment

Club Preparation Fund boost for grassroots football as over 3,000 grants awarded

Football's return has been given a financial boost through the Premier League, The FA and Government's Football Foundation.

Following £7m of investment through the Pitch Preparation Fund, which is helping clubs get their playing surfaces match-fit, the Foundation announced it is awarding 3,383 grants worth £1,691,500 to organisations across the country through the Club Preparation Fund. This was open to applications in the first half of July.

The Club Preparation Fund will help clubs prepare their buildings to safely reopen in line with Government guidance around hygiene and social distancing, and The FA's plans for a phased return that were announced on 18 July.

The Club Preparation Fund's impact in numbers:

- A total of 3,383 grants awarded
- £1,691,500 of investment
- A total of 40,131 football teams benefiting
- 32,921 grassroots teams benefiting



- 6,742 teams in The FA National League System will benefit
- 197 teams in The FA Women's Football Pyramid will benefit
- 10 grants awarded to clubs in the Welsh Cymru Premier League
- Facility maintenance work, such as repairing hand basins and hot water provision
- Professional inspections that may be necessary due to the prolonged period of closure resulting from the pandemic - including inspections of water quality, gas and ventilation

These grants will help football sites to satisfy the extra hygiene measures that Government guidance requires. This includes:

- Installing hygiene facilities, such as hand sanitiser dispensers, soap dispensers, paper towel dispensers and waste bins
- Modifications, such as safety screening, contactless payment systems and signage

The FA also released bespoke guidance for outdoor facility providers to help achieve the Government's guidelines. Providers will need to carry out a COVID-19 risk assessment, then adapt their facilities via three key 'controls': promoting good hygiene; keeping facilities and equipment clean; and maintaining social distancing and avoiding congestion.

'Turned' out nice

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STRI Group Appoints New Directors



Internal promotions to Board will drive growth says CEO

Head of consultancy Richard Stuttard (pictured left), and head of business development Andrew Brooker have been promoted as STRI directors with immediate effect. Both will continue to manage their existing departments.

Stuttard will lead the Group's interests in delivering design, build and project management services to major sports projects across the globe.

Brooker will be instrumental in ensuring STRI continues to grow globally, inside and outside the sports sector, through developing strategic

acquisition and investment opportunities.

Commenting on the appointments, STRI chief executive officer Mark Godfrey said: "STRI has continued to grow as a business and it was the right time to expand our board. Richard and Andrew have been important senior figures at STRI for a number of years and are helping drive change and growth across new markets."

Stuttard said: "It's an exciting time for STRI. Our consultancy department has grown quickly in the last two years and we are now delivering a premium end-to-end service to new and existing clients. Our planning, design,

construction and operation model is going from strength to strength and I look forward to continuing to support its growth."

Brooker added: "STRI is expanding its operations locally and internationally, developing strategic relationships and commercial partnerships for customer and company benefit. STRI is committed to continuous expansion of our range of innovative and sustainable solutions so that our customers receive greatest value."

Tom Shinkins - GKB UK

In their last issue, Pitchcare published an article in my name entitled '3G playing surfaces - Maintenance is essential'. The piece written utilised a previously written article supplied by a third party. To the best of my knowledge, it was an original piece of work, penned by the person who gave it to me, and that said person owned the copyright. I now know that not to be true as a large part of the material was taken from the published works of Curtis Allen. I offer my sincere apologies to Curtis and confirm that the article will not be used by me or GKB Group in the future. I have also asked Pitchcare to remove it from any electronic storage they may have.



Richard Stuttard



Andrew Brooker

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Contact the Amazone Team on: **01302 755 725.**



AMAZONE

And the winners are ...

Pitchcare and Syngenta 2019/20 Fantasy Football League Winners Announced

Another season comes to an end with **Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool being made to wait a little longer to win their first league title in thirty years. Congratulations to The Winner Andy Weeks.**

Having conceded only 33 goals in their 38 league games this season, unsurprisingly a trio of Liverpool players formed the top of the defenders points standings, with Alexander-Arnold (210), Robertson (181) and Van Dijk (178) taking the top three spots. Managers looking to make savings across the back this season will have no doubt reaped the rewards of a steely defensive performance from The Blades, with four Sheffield United players making it into the top ten points scoring defenders.

Real value in-between the sticks was seen away from the usual suspects, with Burnley's Nick Pope the top scorer with 170 points, closely followed by yet another Blade, Henderson (160).

This season's Golden Boot and top scoring Fantasy Football striker went to Jamie Vardy with 23 goals (210), edging out Southampton's Danny Ings (198) and Arsenal cup final hero Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's (205) 22 goal hauls.

With the departure of Manchester City midfielder David Silva after 10 seasons, 309 league appearances, 9 goals and 101 assists, another City midfielder took top spot overall. Kevin De Bruyne amassed an impressive 251 points, which is the 9th highest points total in a Fantasy Premier League season. The Belgian's 20th assist on the final day of the season against Norwich also equals Thierry Henry's long-standing premier league assist record.

Those 'Tinkermen' amongst you were no doubt excited by the arrival of Bruno Fernandes to the Premier League from Sporting in January, with the Portuguese star scoring 117 fantasy football points from the final 14 games for Manchester United.

Pitchcare would like to thank this season's sponsor Syngenta and all of you who took part.

To claim your prize: Winners must email sales@pitchcare.com with their name and contact details. Subject to meeting the terms of entry, a cheque will be sent out to you.

Visit www.pitchcare.com to play in the 2020/21 Pitchcare & Syngenta Fantasy Football League

Place	Team Name	Manager	Prize Money
1	Ain't Got A Kalou	Andy Weeks	£500
2	Zapf Renaissance	Steve King	£250
3	flying with out ings	Paul Martin	£150
4	Strategic Patience	Tim Mackay	£100
5	To much upset	Alan Loose	£75
6	The Billy Wolys	Joe Taylor	£60
7	Athletico Grandad	Tony Fairburn	£50
8	Too Late to say Sari	Conor Johnson	£40
9	No Kalou	Anthony Laverick	£30
10	dybala-cal	David Greaves	£25
11	Neville Wears Prada	Ryan Purkess	£20
12	FC SALTYBALLS ★★★	Matt Salter	£20
13	Macadamia FC	Greg Bolton	£20
14	Chiellini Con Carne	Michael Dixon	£20
15	Doomed FC	Alastair Cuthbert	£20
16	N'Dombelieve it	Jack McCormack	£15
17	Delph and Safety	Callum Fry	£15
18	Banner Boys	Brian Mooney	£15
19	Game of throw ins.	Mike Sage	£15
20	Real Mabridger	Andy Bridger	£10
21	Lithal Weapon II	Michelle Li	£10
22	Pinky & De Bruyne	Chris Lynch	£10
23	Willian Dollar Baby	Stevie Bates	£10
24	barca footy	Peter Strat	£10
25	Winnie the Pukki	Stuart Chan	£10

BASIS Points for magazine subscribers

BASIS awards two CPD points for 'paid-for' subscribers to the hard copy version of Pitchcare magazine, due to the "diverse range of content that relates to the control, management and use of pesticides".

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register, simply by paying for a subscription to the 'hard copy' version of the Pitchcare magazine.

Anyone wishing to claim their points should email their full name, BASIS membership number, date of birth and postcode to editor@pitchcare.com.

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Lockdown positive

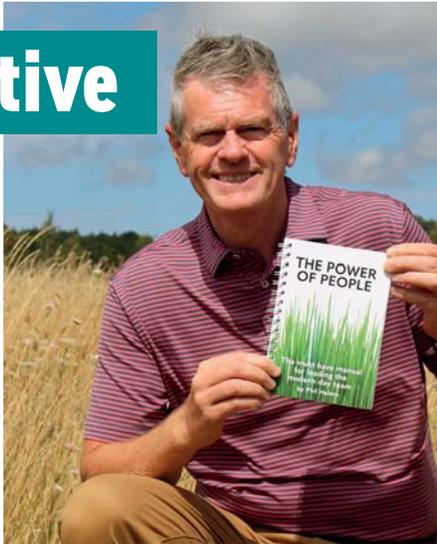
During Covid-19 lockdown, Master Greenkeeper Phil Helmn found a positive to work on

They say that everyone has a book in them, but for Master Greenkeeper Phil Helmn, it was combination of Covid-19 lockdown, a distance learning degree course and the desire to remain sane, that prompted him to complete a book that he pretty much 'stumbled into'. Phil takes up the story:

"I never believed I had the ability to write a book. I never started out with the intention of writing a book, it just happened. That sounds a little odd, I know, but let me explain. I've always been driven to push myself academically and to learn new experiences in my field of sports turf and sports turf management.

In the middle of 2019, I enrolled on a distance learning business leadership degree course. My goal was to develop, learn and embed the knowledge I'd already gained from thirty years of managing greenkeeper teams, and the idea was that I could do the course alongside my busy work schedule. It took a little time for my head to grasp the new level of learning required but, eventually, I began to make progress. A major part of the course centred around the completion of eight key 'units' (or dissertations) which were designed to be approximately 4,000/5,000 words long on the subject matter.

When Covid-19 struck, myself and most of my team were placed on 'furlough' along with most of our industry, I had only managed to complete three units. When this happened, I quickly realised that, if I didn't channel my efforts into something positive, I would struggle mentally to cope with the isolation and solitary situation I faced. I threw myself into my college work and disciplined myself to wake up at 6.00am and sit at my dining table by 7.00am every day. I only stopped for half an hour for lunch each day and didn't leave the table until 5.00pm, when I went for my one hour government approved walk to get some much needed fresh air.



I did this every day for seven weeks solid whilst on 'lockdown'. Once I had completed my eight units 'quota', I realised that I actually needed more as I was still off work, so I rang my tutor and asked for four more units! She was a little puzzled but sent through the extra works, which I smashed out in rapid time.

It was only at that point did I realise that I'd actually written something that could be developed into a book. I'd been so engrossed in my work by trying to stay positive and keep motivated, whilst trying to keep stress, anxiety and worry at bay, that I genuinely hadn't noticed!

I was thankful that, by writing it, somehow helped me stay focused. I also realised that other fellow greenkeepers might not have been so lucky to have such an escape mechanism, which is why I hope to donate some profit back to the greenkeepers benevolent fund in recognition of that fact.

But then, when it was finished, doubt crept in! Was it actually any good? I had no idea. I decided the only way to know for sure was to print some copies and send them to six of the top course managers in the industry. I was extremely nervous but had nothing to lose. Luckily, the response was unanimously favourable so its now gone to print and will be ready to buy at the beginning of September."

www.philhelmn.com

About the author

Phil Helmn is a Master Greenkeeper (one of a select few worldwide) and has risen through the greenkeeping ranks from trainee to sports turf General Manager. Since leaving college in 1987, where he gained his diploma in sports turf science with honours, he's lived and breathed golf and greenkeeping all his life.

Phil's early years growing up in his hometown of Morecambe, Lancashire was greatly influenced by his father holding the post of club pro for twenty-two years and his mother being the junior co-ordinator for over a decade, both of which earned them honorary membership on their retirement for commitment to service.

Like many others in the turf industry, he initially got the greenkeeping bug by working on his home course at weekends and during school holidays. Phil knew from those early days that greenkeeping was to be his lifelong vocation and, as a result, has always worked in the golf course world.

Phil has gained over thirty-five years valuable experience working with plentiful as well as tight budgets, large and small teams and has mastered the need to get the best out of all resources available. He has managed full golf course construction projects, grow-ins, re-builds and regular maintenance operations with teams on a wide range of soil types in the UK, Europe and America and has used these experiences to fine tune his mentoring and common-sense management style.

Phil has also spent time college lecturing when his busy timetable has allowed and became an industry assessor to help support more work based practical forms of learning. Phil enjoys speaking at regional, national and international conferences on turf leadership and has been successful in applying these into more workshop style formats enabling a more 'hands on' learning experience.

Phil is a natural born communicator and his infectious passion for supporting and sharing his experiences and knowledge in a no nonsense, easy to understand way shines through at every level.

At home, Phil is the proud father of four children, Emily fifteen and Florrie, Harry and Artie eight-year-old triplets, which you can imagine keeps him quite busy!

Peer reviews

"There are a lot of good management books out there, but none are specific to turf management. Modern day greenkeeping is changing and so does becoming a turf manager who can lead from the front. If you want to learn more on driving innovation, improving performance to a higher standard whilst creating a winning team mentality then this is the book for you."

Craig Boath, Links Superintendent, Carnoustie Links

"The Power of People is a must read for any up and coming manager, in fact, a must read for any existing manager. Written in an easy to understand way making complete sense of the complexities of people management! A great read!"

Paul Larsen, Head Greenkeeper, Royal St. Georges Golf Club

"The Power of People is written in a no-nonsense, uncomplicated way which made it easy to read and understand. I found the models and theories Phil uses insightful and amazed that, even though some are over 70 years old, are still totally relevant in our modern-day managerial life. Like it says on the cover, I am delighted to recommend The Power of People as a must have manual for all new and experienced modern-day managers."

Steve Chappell, Golf Course Superintendent, The Royal Bled Golf Club

"Working as a manager throws up many challenges that are often complex and difficult. The Power of People helps managers consider and develop solutions to create win/win outcomes. Every manager should have this book as their reference guide and support."

Lee Strutt MG, Grow in Superintendent/Estate

Manager, Les Bordes Golf International

"Phil shares what I would consider to be the most valuable aspect to managing and that is it's people. The Power of People gives an experienced and practical look at what it takes to be a great leader in the modern era of managing turf."

Craig Haldane, Golf Courses Manager, Gleneagles

"Whether you're an experienced leader or managing a team for the first time, this book has something for everyone."

Jim McKenzie MBE, Director of Golf Courses and Estates Management, The Celtic Manor Collection

To purchase The Power of People, or for further information, visit Phil's web page at www.philhelmn.com



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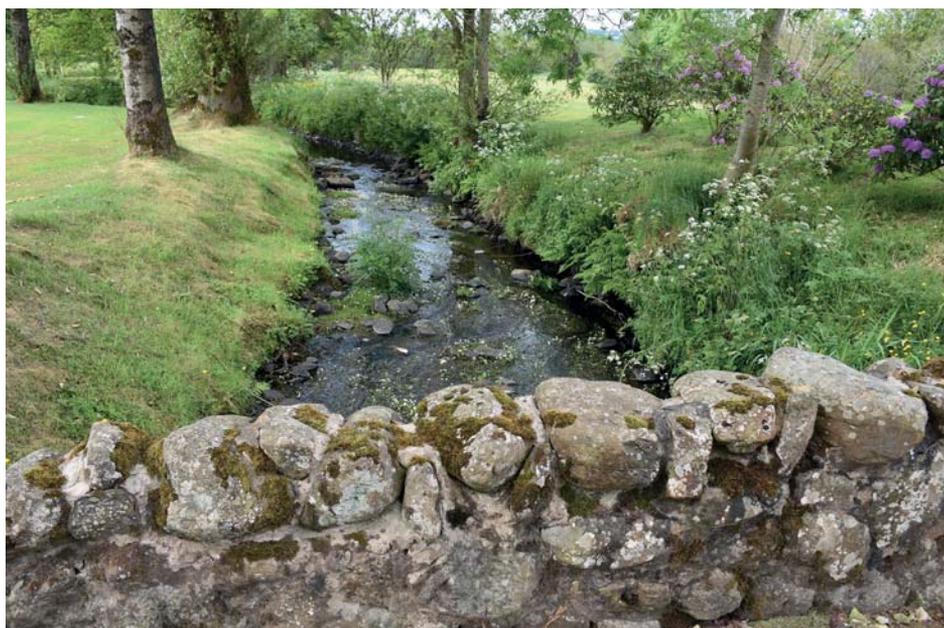
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Ballyclare Golf Club

Lockdown over ...

If you have just dusted off the clubs after no golfing action for the past few months and fancy a few rounds on an idyllic well-maintained course, then add Ballyclare Golf Club to the wish list. Chris McCullough paid the venue a visit just as it reopened to see the efforts to which the greenkeepers, under Head Greenkeeper **John Beggs**, had gone to keep the course in such good shape



Although initially only open to its members observing recommended social distancing, the 18 hole course at Ballyclare Golf Club must be a dream venue for the discerning golfer to play.

As they finished their first rounds of golf in months, the members remarked on how good the course was looking and paid tribute to the team of greenkeepers who have meticulously nursed it through the virus era lockdown.

Ballyclare Golf Club is situated in the Antrim Hills just 1.5 miles north of the historic market town of Ballyclare, which is only a twenty minute drive from Belfast.

Dating back to 1923, Ballyclare Golf Club has since established itself as one of the foremost golf courses in Northern Ireland.

Starting off as a nine hole course, the reputation of this excellent golfing facility

excelled and it became an 18 hole venue around forty years ago.

A beautifully matured course, Ballyclare is a challenging and entertaining par 71, 6373 yard, 18 hole parkland course. The course is dominated by tree lined fairways, well placed sand traps and a strategic use of natural water hazards, which can test the best of players at times.

The signature hole is the demanding par 4 third hole called Orpinsmill where players are faced with a breathtaking tee shot. Out of bounds lies in wait on the left, opposite two lakes on the right, which lead to a tree-protected green, proving just how entertaining the tumbling parkland of Ballyclare can be.

Players are often tested by the Ilsekelly River that snakes through the course setting up water hazards between the third and seventh fairways and at the eleventh hole.

Not only is there a superb course to play,







It was one of the former greenkeepers at the club, Tommy Ferguson senior, who taught me everything I know in this industry. I really couldn't have asked for a better teacher

Ballyclare also boasts an eight bay sheltered floodlit driving range, open all year round, and a shop run by club pro Colin Lyttle.

The delightful task of looking after the course falls to Head Greenkeeper John Beggs. He has actually worked at the club for the past thirty-eight years and has seen a fair few changes in that time. "I started working at Ballyclare Golf Club just off a Youth Training Programme at the age of sixteen," said John. "And here I am working at the same place some thirty-eight years later as the head greenkeeper."

"I've pretty much learned all my skills from working with others, as well as undertaking a few training courses in spraying and in the use of chainsaws. I did enrol for a course at the local Greenmount agricultural and horticultural college, but soon found out that wasn't really for me," he said.

"It was one of the former greenkeepers at the club, Tommy Ferguson senior, who taught me everything I know in this industry. I really couldn't have asked for a better teacher."

When the club increased from a nine hole course to the eighteen holes in 1982, it extended to 100 acres and needed more staff to help look after the greens and that's when John started.

"Now I am the head greenkeeper and work with a team of four other staff who like to do things the old school way. We get things done and are all very proud of how the place is looking."

John's team comprises Martin McKenzie, age 55 with 30 years service; Nigel McKenzie, age 53 with 30 years service; Robert Scott, age 54 with 20 years service and his son John Beggs junior age 26 who has ten years service.

"We all work very well together," said John. "Everyone knows exactly all the jobs that need to be carried out and really just get them done. I like to encourage each of the team to work on their own initiatives and to feel free to make suggestions on what else we could be doing to enhance the course."

"Together we strive to have the course





If I need anything over a few hundred pounds, I run it past the greens convenor. The costs for the upkeep and servicing of the machinery and equipment also comes out of the budget

looking the best it can at all times, but there are always improvements that can be made," said John.

Now that the club is free from lockdown and the golf clubs are swinging once again, John and his team work normal hours, including weekend shifts to keep the maintenance at the highest level. Whilst the budget for the overall maintenance of the course is controlled by the club committee,

John can put forward requests for the equipment or materials that he needs.

"If I need anything over a few hundred pounds, I run it past the greens convenor," said John. "The costs for the upkeep and servicing of the machinery and equipment also comes out of the budget. One of the team, Martin, carries out the basic work on the equipment but anything else is outsourced to local company Nesbitts."

There are two distinctive soil profiles that dissect the course, influenced, of course, by the river and water features.

"The top part of the course would be a drier, free draining soil but down below at the lower level the soil condition is heavier and not great," said John. "Over the years, the greens and tees have been constructed using mostly soil, whilst others have been replaced with GOSTD 70:30."

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Presentation ranks highly here as the course must look and play good. At the end of the season, we carry out the usual renovations to the course, including tree cutting and renovating the bunkers



“They don’t require any special maintenance just plenty of verti-cutting, slitting and, twice yearly, we verti drain them.”

“In this particular area, we do receive quite a lot of rain which does take heavy effect on the course at certain times of the year and flood the wetter, lower lying sections. To counteract this, we scarify the fairways and carry out plenty of spiking. Another slight issue on this course is that we have plenty of trees, which, as beautiful as they are, can shade parts of course.”

“We do use temporary greens here and the club has a driving range and practice facility run by Colin the pro. My team look after all the maintenance and cutting of these areas as well,” John added.

Maintenance regimes

With such a large area to look after, it is just as well the staff can all do any job that is required of them. As normal, the summer grass growing season is predictably one of the busiest in the greenkeeper’s calendar.

“We cut the greens at three millimetres in the summer,” said John. “And we then leave it a little bit longer at four millimetres during the winter period. We also carry out plenty of verti-cutting during the cutting season as well.”

“Regular topdressing is very much standard practice for us, just to keep the thatch under control and ensure a smoother surface for the players.”

“Also included in our maintenance schedule is verti-draining and we carry that out twice a year. There is also plenty of slitting done over the winter,” said John.

Having the course look the best it can is of the utmost importance for John and his team as they know a good aesthetic is a true reflection on their professionalism.

John added: “Presentation ranks highly here as the course must look and play good. At the end of the season, we carry out the usual renovations to the course, including tree cutting and renovating the bunkers.”

“Renovations are, of course, governed by the budget. As part of my job, I send a



All the staff are up to date with the current legislation and I am in charge of the first aid around here. We really do operate like a well-oiled machine





monthly report to the greens convenor who, in turn, relays any important information about the course to the committee and members,” he added.

The striking beauty of the course is enhanced by a number of specific features, including a wooded area with a wildflower carpet, a number of water areas and small bridges, and some seated areas for players to catch their breath and admire the view.

“These areas all help the look of the place,” added John. “There are also a number of paths and flower beds located on

the course.”

“All the staff are up to date with the current legislation and I am in charge of the first aid around here. We really do operate like a well-oiled machine,” he laughed.

Machinery policy

Running a well maintained golf course is not only dependent on the skill sets of the head greenkeeper and his or her team, as the availability and condition of the equipment they use is also a major factor.

At Ballyclare Golf Club, the team have

access to a wide number of machines and tools that make their jobs just that little bit easier.

“All our equipment is in good condition,” John said. “We like to look after the machines and make them all last for a while. We would normally purchase the larger machinery from local dealers on a five year replacement deal, depending on the machine of course,” he said.

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Asked if there is one new piece of kit that has significantly helped to improve the playing surfaces at the club, John replies; “That would be the topdresser. It’s a fantastic machine and helps us out a lot. We have most of the machines we need but, if there are any jobs that need additional equipment, I can hire them in.”

“Items like a stump grinder, for example, would only be occasionally used, therefore it makes more sense to hire one than purchase it and leave in the shed for long periods of time.”

Pests and diseases

Every golf course or sports ground has its own set of issues with pests and diseases, and the golf club at Ballyclare is no different.

“We do carry out regular pest and weed assessments and form a control plan based on those checks,” said John. “There are a lot of rabbits on the course but we tend to leave them to it unless they are causing a

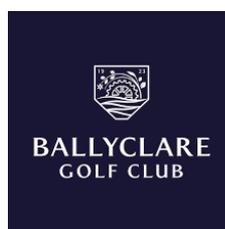
particular nuisance in an area.”

“There are some outbreaks of Fusarium at times which we would treat but, other than that, we aren’t affected too badly,” he added.

John agrees that the greenkeeping industry is a tough one to work in and that greenkeepers in general are very undervalued.

“Greenkeeping is indeed a tough industry to survive in and we could all do with a pay rise across the board,” he said. “We are not too bad here at Ballyclare as we are pretty much left to get on with the job ourselves.”

“Whilst the club committee is happy and the members keep telling us how good the course looks and is playing, then that keeps my staff and I content, for now,” John said.



Whilst the club committee is happy and the members keep telling us how good the course looks and is playing, then that keeps my staff and I content, for now

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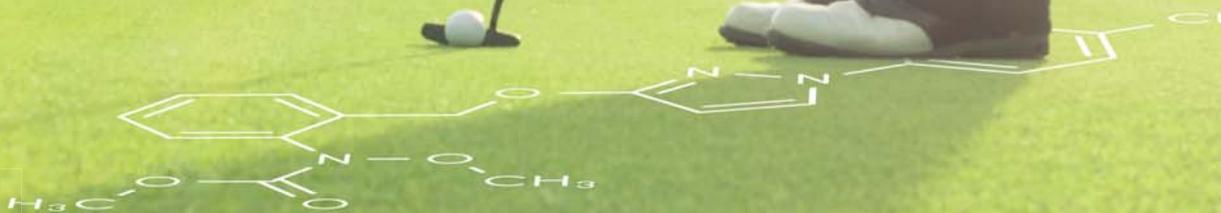
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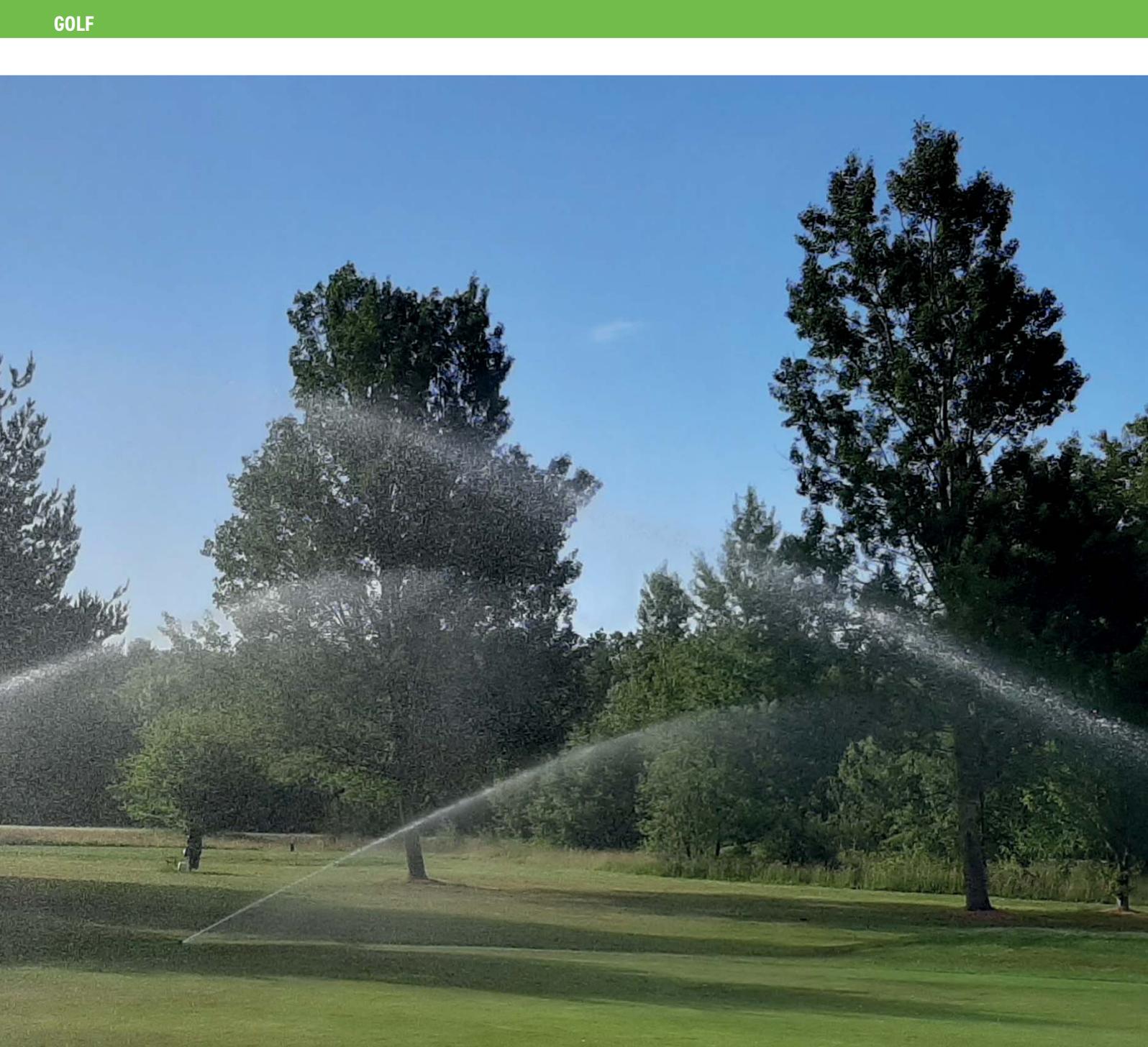
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Silverstone Golf Club

Carry on camping!

In the first week of the return of golf after Covid-19 lockdown, on what was a perfect day for a round of golf, Lee Williams headed to Northamptonshire to meet up with **Tony Hunter**, Silverstone Golf Club's Course Manager. Not being able to shake hands and having to follow the social distancing rules made conducting the interview a little different, but it was great to get back into the 'swing' of things



Tony Hunter

Tony Hunter got into the sports turf industry by chance. He was a chef at Cherwell Edge Golf Club in Banbury, which is also owned by the current owner of Silverstone Golf Club, when he was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma, an uncommon cancer that develops in the lymphatic system, a network of vessels and glands that spread throughout the body. “This meant I was off work for some time,” begins Tony, “and, when it was time to go back to work, I wasn’t able to go back into the kitchen because of the pressure of the work. Thankfully, the owner offered me the opportunity to work as a greenkeeper and I snapped up the offer. I thought it was ideal for me with the job being outside.”

Since beginning his greenkeeping career twelve years ago, Tony has risen through the ranks. “I first started cutting the rough and fixing the irrigation system. When the head greenkeeper left, I was promoted to deputy working under the new head

greenkeeper as I knew my way around the course. Whilst at Banbury, I took the opportunity to get my NVQ Level 2 in sports turf. When the owner bought the Silverstone Golf Club, he rang me and asked me to be the head greenkeeper. My initial reaction was ‘do I have a choice?’ to which he replied ‘no, not really!’ So, now, instead of walking over the road from my home to get to work, I have to drive in!”

Only having a few years’ experience under his belt, Tony was thrown in at the deep end somewhat. “It has been challenging at times, and there are always ups and downs as anyone working in this industry will tell you. But, as long you know the primary principles and are willing to learn and follow the advice of the many experts in the industry you can call upon, I have managed to provide a well-manicured course.”

The club has a somewhat different set up when it comes to the day to day running and its finances; one I have not come across in



We try our best to maintain the course during the Grand Prix, but we do end up on gate duties etc. It will be a welcome break for my team to not have to deal with working around the campers



The course has a solid clay profile



any of my other course visits. “The members rent the golf course from the owner,” explains Tony. “The agreement is that anything above ground the members pay for, so that’s feed, flags, seed etc. Anything underground, for example the irrigation, the owner pays for, plus he supplies the machinery. For supplies, I mainly report to a steering committee which has a chairman, two directors and an accountant. They deal with all the funds accumulated from the membership. If we need to replace or fix a machine, I have to go through the owner.”

“It is a bit of a weird system, but it seems to work, until something like this COVID-19 pandemic happened. Now it’s all a bit of struggle, but I am sure it will sort itself out in the end.”

Tony describes the soil profile of the course as ‘awful’. “It is all on solid clay, so it goes like concrete in summer. Then, in winter, once it gets wet, it gets very damp, so getting from tee to green is terrible, especially this year as we were not allowed to shut. The golfers just kept playing and playing, so you can imagine the damage it caused. We had a torrent running off the

seventeenth fairway and through the yard, but they were still going out and playing. The problem for us is the greens are sand based, so the water just flies through; once it gets there, it is okay. It’s a great winter course greens-wise, but its surroundings sadly let it down.”

“There are drains throughout the course, but they are not efficient enough to cope with the amount of rainfall we have experienced in the last few years. We do see water coming out of the outlets but, in a general downfall, the fairways will puddle up within ten minutes. The water does seem to evaporate quite quickly once it brightens back up though.”

Helping Tony look after the course is Lorraine Sands, Deputy Head Greenkeeper, along with Assistant Greenkeepers Alex Blanchard and Chris Carley.

At the time of writing it had been down to Tony and Lorraine to maintain the course during the pandemic whilst the two assistants were furloughed. “This was fine until the golfers came back last week, as we could get on the course and do what we wanted when it suited us. As soon as



I would like to get more topdressing on the greens, but we probably get forty tonnes on if we are lucky due to finance and time





the golfers were to be re-introduced - with a two-day warning - we were fully booked from 7.00am to 7.00pm every day within hours. It was panic stations; we could not cope. We tried, but it just wasn't possible, so one of the lads came back yesterday whilst the other is furloughed until further notice. To get the work done, we have found ourselves getting in at 4:30 in the morning so we can get in front of the golfers."

It's disappointing there will be no

spectators at this year's British Grand Prix, especially when Silverstone was set for a bumper crowd as Formula 1 celebrates its 70th anniversary. I, for one, was looking forward to the trip. For Tony, this has meant one less thing for him to worry about this year as the golf course annually opens itself up for fans who want to camp out for race weekend. "Normally, on a race weekend, the course remains open, but shut if that makes sense! As well as the two large

fields, we have to accommodate the fans. Last year, due to high demand, we had to knock out the ninth and tenth holes so the fairways could be used. The members are still able to access the clubhouse car park if they want to play, but the majority choose not to bother."

I asked Tony if the fans cause much damage to the fairways, and what his responsibilities are? "We had glamping tents up for around three weeks, which left yellow

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circles on the fairway where the grass had died off. The members asked what we were going to do about it? My reply was, nothing, they will come back naturally. We have to keep our eye out for tent pegs when cutting the fairways and fields once they have gone. The greens on those two holes were roped off, but that didn't stop people playing ball games on there! Fortunately, they didn't cause much damage. With the weather on our side last year, the fairways were like concrete, so the damage was limited."

"We try our best to maintain the course during this period, but we do end up on gate duties etc. I will park my motorhome up over the weekend, which I use when I go racing, it means I do not have the difficulty of getting in and out. It will be a welcome break for my team to not have to deal with moving chairs and tables up and down and deal with working around the campers. On the downside, I won't get to catch up with those who attend each year and recognise me, and the fact the owner will lose out on that much-needed revenue it brings in."

Tony's motto, when it comes to the

maintenance of the course, is just do as much as we can with what we have available to us. "I would like to get more topdressing on the greens, but we probably get forty tonnes on if we are lucky due to finance and time. The calendar is so full it can be hard to work around everything. Then, once you have topdressed, you kill the blades on your greens machine, so we then need the money for a regrind. It's all a delicate balance. We used the shutdown period to apply a load of dressing, and we just left it; we didn't have to worry about dragmatting it in, the wind and rain helped get it into the surface. Some people will stick to what they do year on year, whereas we have to just play it by ear."

"We cut the greens with the Jacobsen Eclipse every day in summer, and we will try and leave the height of cut as high as possible, generally around 5mm, as they tend to dry out so quickly. We verti-cut early in the season to try and remove some of the moss which we get. I will go over the greens again in the next few weeks, but not quite as aggressive. If time allows, every



We are looking to build some bug hotels with some of the pallets we have lying around but, like with everything else, it's getting the time





The Trimax Snake was purchased a couple of years ago



In the seventies, golf boomed and every five minutes there was a golf club being built - it was a licence to print money. Now, the demand has dropped and I don't believe prices have gone up

two weeks we will put the sorrel rollers over. Once a year we will overseed the greens with Limagrain's MM10 Grass Seed, which is a mix of fescues and browntop bent; unfortunately, due to the pandemic, I cannot see us doing that this year."

"Last year, we managed to get a second-hand Toro Procore 660 for the back of the tractor as our old Wiedemann is only good for deep aeration. It's a great machine and is a lot quicker. We don't really need to go too

deep being on sand. It does a good job, and has been a godsend."

Tony uses a mix of granular and liquid feeds throughout the season and is a big believer in the use of lawn sand. "In autumn and spring, I like to use lawn sand to help strengthen everything and blacken the moss off. I just like the results it gives me. I will try and time the application around some rain. I will stick a granular base feed down in April and then use a mixture of seaweed, liquid

iron, humic acids, phosphates and nitrogen every two weeks."

When Tony needs to replace machines, he has two options; he can put his case forward to the committee who will then inform the owner, or he can approach the owner direct as he has known him a long time. "The owner is responsible for the machinery and usually likes to purchase outright, whether that be ex-demo or second-hand. Last year, we bought the

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What's in the shed

- Jacobson Eclipse 322
- Toro Greenmaster 1000 x 3
- Toro Groundsmaster 3000D x 3
- Jacobsen TR3
- Jacobsen Tri-King 1900D
- Jacobsen LF3800
- Baroness GM2810
- Trimax Snake
- Massey Ferguson 350 tractor
- New Holland 45 tractor
- Wiedenmann Terra Spike
- Toro ProCore 660
- Jacobsen Cushman x 2
- Hardy tractor mounted sprayer
- Smithco Tournament X-Press turf iron



aforementioned Toro Procore 660 and a Toro Groundsmaster 300D to cut the rough, both second-hand, and two years ago we purchased a Trimax Snake.”

Tony’s hobby is racing a track car, which I can tell you is impressive as it stored in the greenkeepers’ shed. This beast has helped him develop his mechanical skills which, in turn, has helped the club save money with servicing costs and keeping the ageing fleet of machinery up and running.

The course naturally supports a variety of wildlife with large areas of dedicated long rough. “In July, these areas look lovely, the members don’t like it, but it’s a way off the fairway, so if you end up there it’s tough luck! We do have some owl boxes, and we are looking to build some bug hotels with some of the pallets we have lying around but, like with everything else, it’s getting the time. There are areas on the course I have never even walked through, where I see the deer emerging from and making their way across the golf course and occasionally running across the greens.

Tony believes the golf industry is struggling as there are too many courses

in the UK and not enough demand. “In the seventies, golf boomed and every five minutes there was a golf club being built - it was a licence to print money. Now, the demand has dropped and I don’t believe prices have gone up. If anything, they have come down as everyone tries to outbid each other. This leads to golf clubs not being able to cover their costs and, in the end, having to close down. I am not saying it is a good thing courses closing down as people will lose their jobs. Luckily, we are quite stable and have the extra income through the hotel, chalets and the camping events to help boost the golf course’s finances.”



The agreement is that anything above ground the members pay for, so that’s feed, flags, seed etc. Anything underground, for example the irrigation, the owner pays for



Tony’s track car



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®

Warley Woods

If you go down to
the Woods today



A West Midlands historic landscape is gaining national recognition as a community trust reaching out to secure vital funding, including the help of a national treasure, as Greg Rhodes discovers when he meets Trust Manager **Viv Cole** and Golf Course and Park Manager **Alan Merricks**

After sixteen years of successful community management, Warley Woods, Smethwick, has turned to national treasure Dame Julie Walters to appeal for public support to help fund a sustainable future.

The actor is known globally for her masterful performances in the films *Educating Rita* and *Billy Elliot*, and for her classic comic timing in the BBC sitcom *Dinner Ladies*.

Raised a stone's-throw away from Warley Woods, she harbours fond memories of her time enjoying its peaceful setting, the promotional video reveals.

Response was instant, reports Warley Woods Community Trust Manager Viv Cole - so too was reaction to her own media appeal on BBC Radio 4's *Open Country* and BBC Midlands Today in July.

Since Sandwell District Council passed the 100-acre Grade II Listed site to Warley Woods Community Trust in 2004, a passionate management team has raised £4.5m in Heritage grants, funding and public donations.

A startling achievement given the climate of financial austerity in the intervening years. But Covid-19 lockdown has presented

further challenges to the viability of this historic green patch of Black Country.

Celebrated landscape architect Humphry Repton made fine use of the lie of the land with its spectacular scenery and panoramic views, which he incorporated into his 1794 masterplan for the Warley family estate.

Birmingham Council demolished Warley Abbey some years ago, leaving only cellars, the ice house and the stable block (which later burnt down) - an archaeological dig thirteen years ago revealing the extent of what lay underneath.

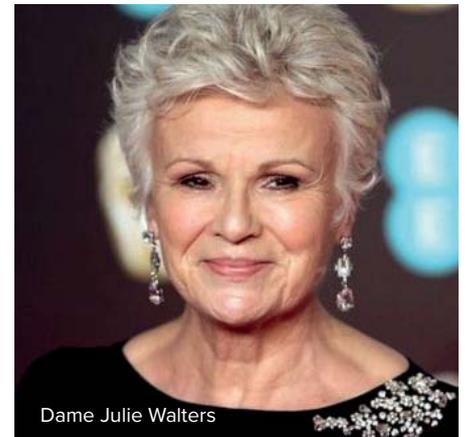
The site's grandeur faded over the centuries however and, like many a magnificently manicured English landscape, was in danger of being consigned to history's forgotten pages.

Since operating as a Trust, the Woods have blossomed into a firm leisure and amenity favourite with a strong local and regional catchment. Under the fourteen-strong board of trustees' strategy, Viv and her dedicated management team are spearheading a vigorous volunteer force numbering more than 400 to maintain and improve the Woods public appeal.

"Starved of investment for many years," Viv explains, "the site had no paths, fencing, gates, bins or play area - just two benches and a drinking fountain reduced to a lump of concrete sitting among the nettles."

"We now run a safe, thriving, warm and welcoming community space providing top-class facilities, events for everyone and an opportunity for anyone to get involved at any level."

Bolstering Warley Woods' reliance on grants and donations is an increasingly



Dame Julie Walters

important revenue stream from the 9-hole golf course standing within its boundaries.

The first home of Edgbaston Golf Club from inception in 1890 until it moved away early next century, Warley Woods reopened as Birmingham's first public golf course in 1921.

The golf club is run separately from the Trust and enjoys a small, steady private membership income. The course also attracts some 6,000 pay and play Trust golfing customers, tempted by the playing quality and competitive green fees.

"We live continually on a financial knife-edge and 2020 is a year like no other," states Viv. "Good years on the golf course have given Warley Woods the cash to fall back on in hard times."

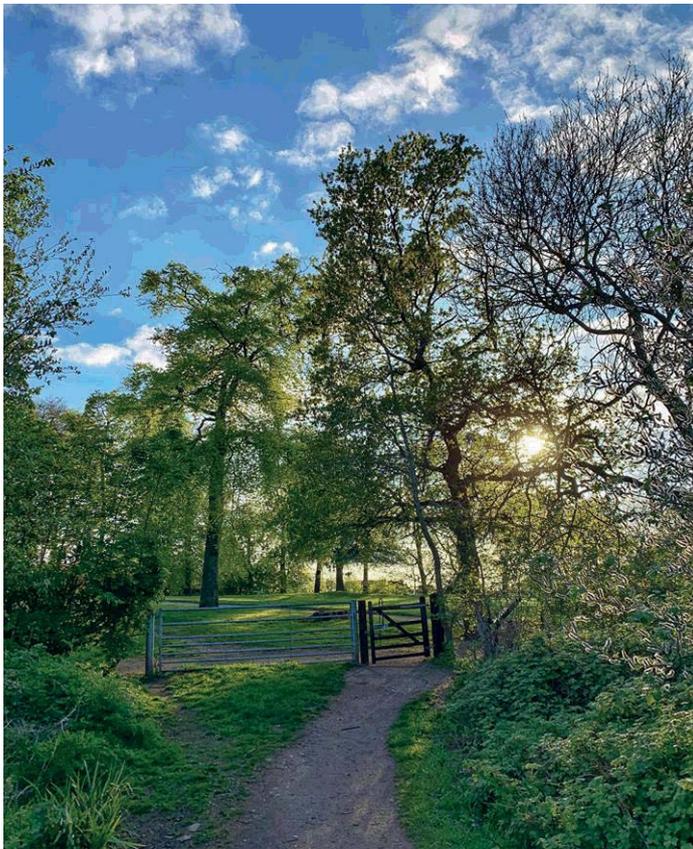
"The exposure and reaction from those who remember Warley Woods have far exceeded anything that's happened in our



The exposure and reaction from those who remember Warley Woods have far exceeded anything that's happened in our history



Woods Community Trust Manager Viv Cole



Golf Course and Park Manager Alan Merricks

history,” Viv declares, a charity fundraising specialist.

“People as far afield as Canada and America wanted to help. Others recall happy times playing in the Woods as children and were only too pleased to pledge support after hearing the broadcasts. Three brothers, who had picked up the Radio 4 programme, remembered sledging here as a family years ago.”

“There’s nothing like a financial hardship story to rouse people’s concern about a much-loved local amenity. For as little as £2 a month, supporters can help protect us against disasters.”

Viv runs a team of twelve to help her manage Warley Woods day to day from the Pavilion - a “temporary” structure erected seventy years ago and scheduled for replacement under a proposed redevelopment plan.

Warley Woods is run as a public park, whose financial sustainability largely depends on a £70,000 Sandwell Council annual grant - “our bedrock”, public donations and Landfill Tax grants for capital improvement projects. “We have to earn our own keep. Nothing’s ever assured.” A loyal member base now numbering 1,300 helps too.

A new lifeline entered the equation earlier this year - a £100,000 National Lottery Heritage grant, which covers the salary of environmentalist Doug Barber for the next two and a half years.

In bidding for the grant, the Trust commissioned a six-month site survey from Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust.

“His brief is to understand the wildlife

here and to engage with staff, volunteers and visitors, Viv explains. “We’re here to get on and move forward, and Doug’s aim is to leave Warley Woods in a sustainable state - educating and training staff and volunteers so that, when he leaves, they can continue the strategy he has put in place.”

Within that gameplan is planned a move towards re-establishing former features and creating new habitats. A wildflower meadow is a key priority, as is creating a body of water to replace the Repton designed pond that graced Warley Woods when Warley Abbey, built in 1820, stood as its centrepiece.

“Creating the meadow and a new pond will improve micro-level wildlife diversity,” adds Viv, who is unashamedly excited about the prospects and opportunities Doug’s tenure holds for a beloved environment she lives and breathes.

“The project will include surveying birdlife, butterflies, moths and bats and other fauna we attract here,” Viv adds. Due to kick off in April, the programme stalled when lockdown hit but, as measures ease, it will spark into life, she predicts.

Managing volunteers is an evolving process. Charged with tasks as diverse as litter-picking, running events and monitoring site flora and fauna, they can build new layers of involvement over time, she adds.

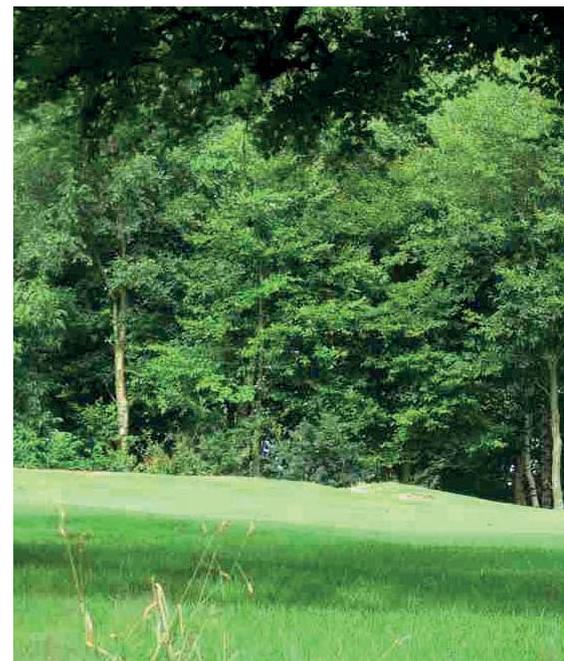
“Often, a volunteer may come to us with a wish to help with a single activity but, as they learn more about Warley Woods, they develop skills and broaden their interest base. We do try to let them engage with the activities they love as much as we can, because that encourages them to remain committed to us.”

Two worlds

Grounds management of the site presents an unusual picture. “Unlike most local councils, who usually run split teams for parks and golf courses, we manage Warley Woods with a single team,” says Viv.

Heading it is Golf Course and Park Manager Alan Merricks, whose career before he arrived here in 2015 had been steeped in golf. Viv sat on the recruitment panel that appointed Alan.

“He has a real passion for the site and brought with him a meticulous approach to grounds management learnt at private golf clubs and is applying it across the course





and the park, whilst also adapting to the requirements and practices of a public park environment.

As Viv states: “We don’t know what we don’t know and that applies to us all. The greenkeepers are learning the other side of land management. Alan was unaware of the bird nesting season at first, but his experience since has broadened his knowledge base.”

In turn, the Trust appointed Viv Charity Manager in 2006, drawing on her experience in marketing, community engagement and environmental management.

After introducing a host of improvements, Warley Woods started vying for honours under the then-new Green Flag national initiative.

“We learnt what was required to be eligible for entry,” Viv explains, “growing our skills base.” Accolades for innovation brought a requirement for a new skills set, she recalls. “In winning a Green Flag Award, volunteers had to learn about the whole range of parks management, marketing and environmental knowledge - even extending

to being able to fold and hoist a flag, like the green one we are proud to display so that visitors know the quality of the environment they enjoy.”

“Every other year we are mystery shopped by a Green Flag judge and that keeps us on our toes to continue to excel,” she adds.

People’s Choice national ratings for park popularity also testify to the strength of public backing Warley Woods commands. “We can mobilise a big vote when we need to, thanks to a catchment that includes many long-term residents as well as short-term renters - our 5,000 Facebook following helps too.”

Community parks differ markedly from traditional ones, Viv stresses, and to keep her hand in with her peers, who run them elsewhere in the region, she meets the Midlands Parks Forum online to share knowledge and “aid my personal development”.

Delivering that mix of specialties for its sport and leisure facilities is one of the factors that sets Warley Woods apart from other community parks, Viv believes.



Viv and three trustees interviewed me for the job. I always thought I’d make a decent head greenkeeper and saw how I could bring greater efficiency to Warley Woods’ course management

Such interdisciplinary know-how helps the park plan and execute the long-term improvement programme that is securing its future. In a parallel with private golf club committees, the board of trustees, all local residents, includes members from a spread of professions. “One is a town planner, another a retired social worker, and a third an engineer,” notes Viv.

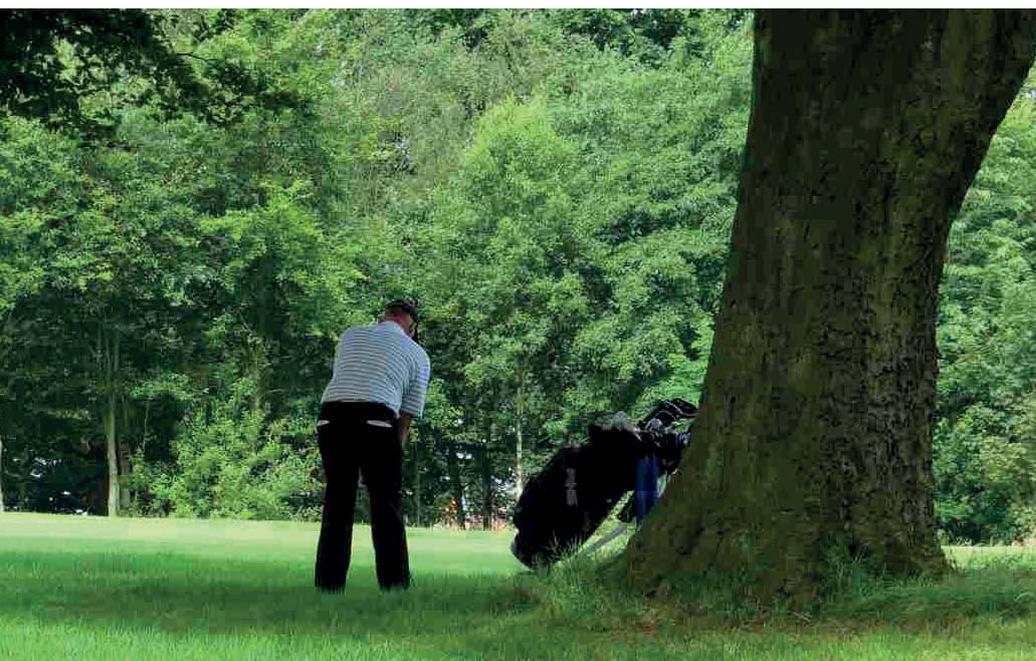
A strong communications network fosters unity of purpose. Viv is in constant contact with her staff - the two full-time cleaners, a part-time administrator, the five Pavilion shop staff and three full-time grounds professionals.

Lockdown lament

“Parks are on the frontline of the pandemic and the public is realising how valuable they are as community spaces. But easing lockdown landed Warley Woods with an unwanted aftermath. Volunteers had to remove mountains of rubbish and also had to deal with some antisocial behaviour,” Viv reports. Cannon Hill Park in Moseley was forced to call the fire brigade to help clear litter.



But easing lockdown landed Warley Woods with an unwanted aftermath. Volunteers had to remove mountains of rubbish and also had to deal with some antisocial behaviour





We've introduced the measures necessary to safeguard staff, volunteers and the public as far as we can. Toilets are sanitised daily and we caution visitors to keep themselves safe



Covid-19 has touched lives at Warley Woods, as it has everywhere. "Golf club president and trustee John McBride died of the disease on the day Boris sent us into lockdown. Another trustee caught the virus in the run-up to lockdown, but is fine now."

Throughout the park, vigilance is vital. "We've introduced the measures necessary to safeguard staff, volunteers and the public as far as we can. Toilets are sanitised daily and we caution visitors to keep themselves safe. Everything is clean when we leave at the end of the day, ready for tomorrow."

Bemused by the Trust's need to keep the children's play area closed under the Government's lockdown, Viv is delighted it's accessible once more. "This is a low risk area for kids and I couldn't understand the ruling," she states.

Move in a million

When Alan Merricks joined the Warley Woods team in 2015, he knew he had his work cut out on the golf course.

After stints at The Chase and then North Worcestershire, both private, he sensed his time had come to manage. "I jumped ship

from North Worcestershire after ten months - before it closed - saw this post advertised and seized the opportunity."

"Viv and three trustees interviewed me for the job. I always thought I'd make a decent head greenkeeper and saw how I could bring greater efficiency to Warley Woods' course management."

Now thirty-two, Alan is running a tight team with diverse duties across the 100-acre Trust site, constantly learning and applying fresh skills. Hard work and dedication have borne fruit out on course. "We no longer have to use temporary greens over winter and the course is far tidier now," he says.

Topography plays a big role in draining the nine hole, 30-acre course. "We are 200m above sea level here - one of the highest points in the region: higher even than the Hawthorns [he's a diehard West Brom fan celebrating The Baggies' return to Premier League action] which I can see from one of the fairways."

"Our height means the course is pretty free draining. Water runs into a mini valley in the park to feed a small stream."

Maintenance costs are a major focus for

Alan and he brings his own expertise to bear to keep overheads low. "I've had experience with car maintenance as my dad is a truck driver."

"Our Toro machinery is robust and easy to work on. Mowers are not that complicated really and don't present any issues. I do take the mowers over to The Chase for their annual sharpening as the club have a grinder."

His good housekeeping is a game-changer. "We save massively by maintaining kit in-house. The annual outlay was £10,000 to £12,000. That's fallen to around £4,000. I had to invest in some decent tools at first - jacks, proper sets of spanners and so on, as there was only a socket set when I arrived."

"The course brings in about 30% of Warley Woods' income. At £10 for 9 holes or £14 for two rounds we offer good value for money, reflected in some great Google reviews," Alan adds.

"Golf is in a very vulnerable position, so having the park maintenance side offers more security for the team, but Viv and her team know how to attract funding and support."



I had to invest in some decent tools at first - jacks, proper sets of spanners and so on, as there was only a socket set when I arrived





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Golf is in a very vulnerable position, so having the park maintenance side offers more security for the team, but Viv and her team know how to attract funding and support

New boy Darryl Jones arrived in December 2019 armed with greenkeeping experience at The Chase and his NVQ Level 2, PA1, PA6 and chainsaw licences.

“He’s a skilled, dedicated young man,” Viv states, “but it’s easy to work hard when you’re passionate about what you do, and he is just that.”

Alan adds: “Yes, he’s very happy here and keen to advance, looking to complete his NVQ Level 3 soon.”

Swelling the team temporarily is Andy Powell, here for a second year after working at Warley Woods in summer 2019, when he covered for a member of staff away with long-term sickness.

“Although Andy isn’t regular summer cover, we have been able to offer him another four-month contract thanks to Lottery emergency funding,” Viv explains.

Volunteers shoulder some of the grounds work and can prove a godsend, Alan

enthuses. “Besides painting jobs, they recently planted 1,500 blackthorn and hawthorn whips along the 2nd and 3rd holes, saving us a load of time.”

“We start the season applying a little fertiliser to get things going, but our policy is not to use it,” Alan notes. “Monthly application of seaweed and liquid iron helps prevent disease and encourages a strong rootzone.”

“These treatments have certainly

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Some visitors say this part of the site looks untidy, but the key is to understand woodland management and, within such a natural setting, wood anemone, red campion and bluebells thrive



improved the greens, whilst garlic helps stop crows and magpies pecking for leatherjackets, but its effect usually only lasts for up to a week and a half,” he continues. The public encroaching on the course creates another potential irritation. “They aren’t supposed to, but we don’t tend to comment about it,” Alan says diplomatically.

“The course suffered from a lot of disease and still sees outbreaks, usually fusarium in October, because we are a parkland course and airflow can be limited, but things have improved.” Less fertiliser and more physical work on the greens is his preferred method.

Alan and the team aren’t home free yet though. “The 4th and 9th greens suffer the worst from winter waterlogging, so we’ve have asked ALS Contractors to sand band them later this year.”

The course is well-bunkered (30) for a 9-hole. The team repairs edging every three weeks, raking bunkers several times a

week.

The grounds team has to be mindful of its environmental responsibilities across the nine holes, especially given Warley Woods national standing.

“For the Green Flag assessments we have a walkaround,” Alan explains, “when two judges check the condition of the greens and discuss the park and its management strategy.”

The environmental management plan continues apace, but it’s still early days, Alan says. “There’s the wildflower meadow coming up and we also want to develop open scrapes to attract a wider diversity of insects.”

Open for business after lockdown lifted, Warley Woods’ maintains site safety, its Covid measures still in place to protect golfers. “We turn hole cups upside down, advise against touching flags and have removed bins from the course.”

To limit risk of cross-contamination

amongst the grounds team, Alan and Darryl use only two of their four Toro mowers - the rotary and rough - and one of the two Workman utility vehicles, manicuring the park grass to a fairway height of 17mm.

Tackling thirty acres of grass is no mean feat and it’s mowed regularly to boot. “The two of us manage it in about six and a half hours, plus another couple of hours to complete the Rose Garden with the rough mower.”

Tending a further thirty acres of woodland keeps the team busy too. “I call in contractors sometimes to handle tree work high up,” Alan explains. Daily play area inspections and park safety checks, replacing benches and planting trees is all in a day’s work.

Woodland management

“This is a landscape full of trees,” Viv adds, “and, under the woodland management plan, we are raising the quantity of





deadwood, leaving standing stems and fallen timber for wildlife to colonise.”

“We don’t waste time logging and bagging. Visitors can collect logs from the car park to take home if they want to - leaving a suitable donation of course.”

“Some visitors say this part of the site looks untidy, but the key is to understand woodland management and, within such a natural setting, wood anemone, red campion and bluebells thrive.”

Tawny owls and sparrowhawks nest in the woods, whilst buzzards and red kites often visit, as does the goldcrest, Britain’s smallest bird, which is drawn to the standing conifers populating the golf course fringes.

“Thanks to the course, we have one of the finest collections of parkland conifers in Birmingham, a tree specialist tells us,” Viv notes.

The population of mixed woodland also includes beech, horse chestnut, hazel copses, Blue Atlas Cedar and a cherished

corner of oak, categorised as ancient woodland.

Viv’s engagement with the public extends to tree adoption. “Out of our 4,500 population, 1,500 are numbered and can be adopted - of which 100 have been taken up to date. Specimens can also be planted as a memorial or in celebration.”

Fallen leaves stay where they drop, ready for next season, Viv explains. “As we don’t cultivate plants for sale, there’s no need for leaf mould for potting on.”

Grass clippings are left to rot down and wood chippings go straight onto the site to rot. We don’t run any composting and aim to keep all our waste here.”

The wilderness area, a mosaic lowland scrub habitat, attracts warblers, bullfinches and chiffchaffs, Viv reveals. The park is home to at least two species of bat.

The lure for wildlife will strengthen further once the pond is re-established in the wilderness, she adds. “We expect to draw in amphibians such as newts, and a range of other pondlife and water birds. Dragonflies pass through, but once we create a suitable environment for them, we hope they will linger.”

“Doug is busy developing scrapes for insects and havens for solitary bees by introducing a looser top level of earth.”

When wildlife threatens to intrude in ways that threaten park management, the team will take action, but in an environmentally appropriate way. “Our commitment to green practices means we keep a constant eye on chemicals use,” Viv explains, “and we try out new ideas whenever possible, like applying mustard to help control worms.”

Warley Woods is on a stepped programme of change as it bids to enhance the feeling of “the outdoor room” for visitors and members, whilst offering wider wildlife diversity on the outskirts of Britain’s second city.

Celebrating a century of golf provision in 2021, this historic green space is drawing in

friends and supporters locally, regionally and internationally, under the expert management of a highly committed team.

Viv speaks for them all when she states: “This special place wins your heart.” Dame Julie would certainly agree with that sentiment.



What’s in the Shed

Toro 3250 greens mower

Jacobsen TR3 for tees, collars and approaches

Toro 4240 for fairways and the park

Toro 3500 for the rough and rose gardens

Toro Workman 3300 diesel utility vehicle. Total of 6,000 hours completed. “It’s been to the moon and back”. Use it for heavy duty, moving sand for topdressing or bunker renovations.

Toro Workman MDX electric for raking bunkers, moving holes

Kyoti front loader tractor and cab

Kubota compact tractor (bought from The Chase)

Tractor-mounted sprayer (300l)

Massey Ferguson, 30 years old, yellow. Here before I took over.

Wood chipper, hauled by the Massey Ferguson

Stihl trimmers x 2

Stihl chainsaws x 2

Knapsack sprayers to degrease machinery, plus 500ml hand-helds



St. George's Park

Football is just the beginning



When you hear of St. George's Park, you immediately think of the home of England football – twenty-seven teams to be precise! It lies within 330-acres of stunning Staffordshire countryside and Assistant Head of Estates **Matt Arnold** and his team have the enviable task of developing and maintaining the estate to offer visitors the 'wow' factor. Kerry Haywood reports

On the few occasions I have previously visited St. George's Park for various events, I have taken the entrance and long driveway of livestock, rolling hills and mature trees somewhat for granted! Knowing I would be speaking to Matt about the estate changed my focus, and I was surprised by how vast it is... so much so, it took me a while to locate him!

Matt's passion and enthusiasm struck me as soon as we met, as he told me it has always been one of his career goals to be interviewed by Pitchcare. He had previously worked at the venue for three years under Alan Ferguson, looking after

the grounds and everything deemed to be 'customer-facing' for the estate and Football Centre. In 2015, Matt moved to JCB Golf & Country Club as Assistant Head Gardener and, as the impressive new course was built, the landscaping around it also grew. As things continued to develop, Matt's role evolved into Golf Course Estates Supervisor, looking after the clubhouse, lodges and the infrastructure surrounding the course.

"The General Manager, Euan Grant, put a lot of faith in me to develop the landscaping how I wanted it" Matt commented.

"Essentially, we knew where the lawns and buildings were going to be situated, but it was a real opportunity to further my passion



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The beauty here is that the possibilities are endless. The management team are so supportive and completely on board with where we want the park to develop and how we want to promote the estate. I'm proud to be a part of it



Assistant Head of Estates Matt Arnold



I deduce that the strong passion within Matt must have started from a young age. “My dad was a head gardener all of his life and my mum was also green fingered at home. As a result, I was dragged around as a child every weekend, looking at different gardens and estates - which, obviously, at the time I hated! When I left school, I worked in the construction industry for a while before realising that all those hours spent looking at flowers was something that now really interested me. I enrolled at Rodbaston College and, as part of that, I secured a work placement at a private school. Over the next three years, I achieved my First Diploma and National Diploma in Horticulture.”

“From there, I joined Sudbury prison as a Horticulture Instructor and my boss (Steve Benson) was the best I have ever had. I learned a lot from him about how to manage a team; he led from the front and encouraged the team around him. He was very hands-on and would never shy away from getting stuck in, but at the same time, you knew he was an authoritative

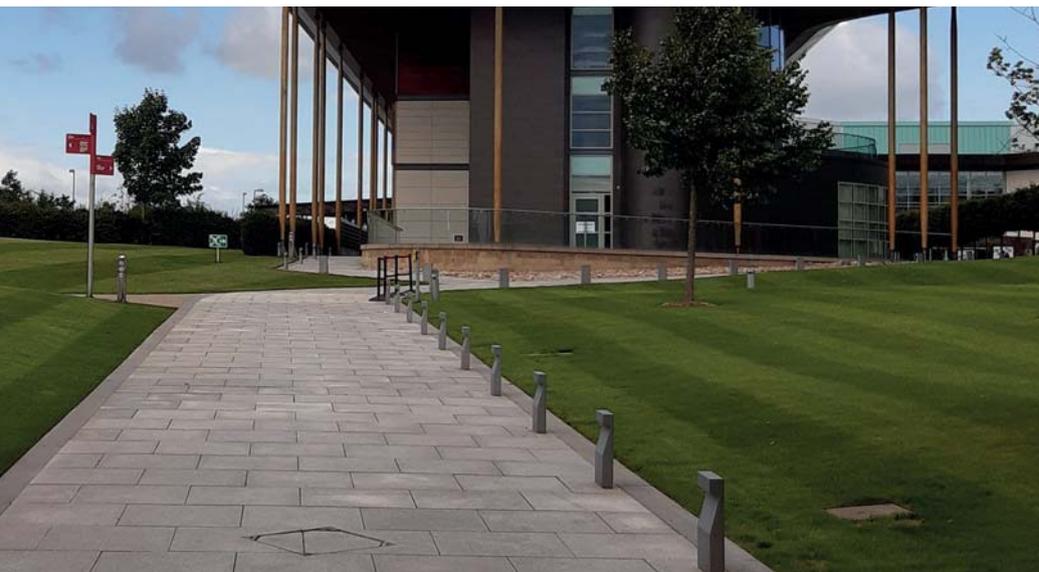


Any trees I plant now will be here for future generations to come and will be our legacy - which is an exciting concept

for planting schemes. I was given free rein, aside from one remit (and you could say a heads-up), that the Chairman’s wife liked white. So, we worked with a pastel colour palette and it turned out spectacular.”

“Having that experience put me in good stead when returning to St. George’s Park at the beginning of this year. It struck me that, everywhere was lovely and green, but there was very little colour, structure or areas of interest ... so that is my current project. It’s going to take time, but I want to give the site a ‘wow’ factor.”





I am doing everything I can to improve this by topdressing with 70/30 rootzone mix and working it into the profile to increase the nutritional content and improve growing conditions

figure. Most importantly though, he gave me my eye for detail. There is an annual competition; the Royal Horticultural Society's Windlesham Trophy, which awards the best-kept prison garden in the country. The first year I was there, we won first prize - which also meant I received an individual commendation for the work I put in. We considered every detail even down to painting manhole covers green, so they blended in to the surrounding turf. I have

joked with the lads here that we will be doing that before next year's Euros, but I don't think they don't believe me!"

"I try and get across to the team that; it's one thing to go out and cut grass, but it's the finer points and the attention to detail that will make the difference and set us apart from everyone else. More than ever, we have greater competition for the training grounds. When we opened in 2012, the bigger teams didn't have the training

facilities they have now so to attract the biggest clubs in the world, we need to offer a complete package."

"I know what we do doesn't have an impact on how the teams perform, but the environment and landscape around them make a difference. There needs to be a seamless flow from what is happening on the pitches to the surrounding areas; you wouldn't have a nice picture and put it in a cheap frame. We're open for training 365



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 Grillo Climber x 2
 Ransomes Meteor flail mower
 XROT remote controlled high grass mower
 Stihl FS 460 C-EM petrol brushcutter x 3
 Stihl FSA 90R battery brushcutter x 3
 Stihl HLA 85 battery brushcutter x 2
 Stihl MS 261 CM chainsaw
 Stihl MS 500i chainsaw
 Stihl MS 181 C-BE chainsaw x 2
 Stihl HSA 86 battery brushcutter x 2
 Stihl HS 82 petrol brushcutter x 2
 Stihl HTA 85 long-reach chainsaw
 Stihl BGA 100 battery blower
 Stihl RL 540 scarifier
 Husqvarna Tiller TR 430
 Cushman 1600XD-R utility vehicle
 Timberwolf chipper



From left to right: Harry, Lee and Jack

days a year and we need to be on our game all year round.”

Currently, helping Matt are an additional three estates workers: Harry Roe (31), Lee Mitchell (28) and Jack Corcoran (31) who are all CS30 and CS31 qualified, along with PA1 and PA6. “We would also usually have a seasonal team member but, given the

pandemic, that's not happened this year. There are an additional ten team members on the grounds team and there are certainly times when we cross over and help each other out; it's important we consider ourselves to be one team, achieving one goal. We operate out of the same break rooms, however we now have our own shed and own dedicated equipment.”

“I am keen to invest in the right piece of equipment to do the right job. Our industry and technology are evolving all the time and you should never be afraid to try new things. In my opinion, one thing I learned from my time at JCB was that the golf industry leads the way in biodiversity and ecology and football is catching up. Their ethos behind sustainability is certainly something we need to consider and move towards.”

The football grounds team have regular contact with agronomists, and that's something Matt is starting to do on the estate side. “I regularly speak to Chris Knowles at Agrovista Amenity Ltd, who has been really helpful in advising on a



I try and get across to the team that; it's one thing to go out and cut grass, but it's the finer points and the attention to detail that will make the difference and set us apart from everyone else



Left: Arthur Wharton statue unveiled in 2014. The 16-foot permanent memorial recognises the pioneering achievements of Wharton - the world's first black professional footballer



Ecology has never been my strong point, however it's something I am passionate about and learning more and more as I go along

nutritional programme for lawns around the hotel. It's something that's never been done before, but I'm keen to see the results and how it impacts each area. We should be aiming to have the lawns looking as good as the pitches and having this time before next year's Euros will give us the opportunity to achieve that."

"In terms of getting things done, we have an agreement with the hotel that we don't operate power tools before 10:30am, which means we have made the move to battery equipment in order to reduce noise. It doesn't allow us to do everything we need to, but it gives us a head start. We are fortunate that we have 330 acres to maintain, so there is always something we can be doing away from the hotel and main areas. When the England teams are on site there are many restricted areas, but we are big enough to accommodate the work that needs to be carried out."

"We use Stihl products, as I believe they are the market leader and we can rely on them. I'm really excited for the Stihl Smart Connector to be introduced in the UK, which

would allow us to monitor usage, vibration levels and where the machines are etc. We also have a Husqvarna robot mower on site, but I don't think we would ever move in the direction of full autonomy for the lawns."

"We have a machinery agreement with Jacobsen Direct, who also have a link with Briggs Equipment, who we use for some of our servicing, but we try to carry out what we can in-house."

Each team member is certified in the use of chainsaws to maintain the vast number of trees on site. "The nature of what we do here can sometimes mean the team go months between focusing on trees, so they all have refresher courses and are encouraged to keep up to date on legislation. This year, we did quite a lot of thinning work at the front end of the park and we are currently having a full tree survey completed. The oldest tree on site is estimated to be around 500-700 years old we also have many woodland areas which border our jogging trails - these trails need maintaining regularly so they are kept clear for anyone who wants to use them. We are



The oldest tree on site; 700 years old





It struck me that, everywhere was lovely and green, but there was very little colour, structure or areas of interest

History

St. George's park was originally part of the land named Needwood Forest, owned by the Byrkley family of Byrkley Castle in Gloucestershire.

Before it was purchased by the FA, it was the site of Byrkley Lodge - the family home of the Bass family.

Timeline

1754 Lord Townsend acquired lease for property known as Byrkley Lodge which was rebuilt as weekend hunting lodge

1786 Arthur Chichester the Marquis of Donegal buys lodge from Lord Townsend

1887 to 1891 Byrkley Lodge was completely rebuilt and founded as a racing horse stud for Hamar Bass

1896 The Byrkley stud produced and trained "Love Wisely" which won Ascot Gold Cup

1898 Hamar Bass dies and passes estate to Sir William Bass

1952 William Bass dies and Byrkley estate sold, shortly after the main house was demolished

2001 FA bought the 330-acre (140 ha) site



Two beehives recently installed

in the heart of the National Forest and actively seeking to plant new trees and help re-create the link throughout the whole country."

"In addition, when the Euros were scheduled this year, UEFA made a commitment that every host country would plant 40,000 trees. They recognised that it would be a continent-wide tournament, creating more traffic, movements and potentially impact the environment by having a bigger carbon footprint. We had started talks with UEFA to determine what this would mean for us and if there was anything we could do to help, I'm sure these talks will continue on the run up to next year's event. Any trees I plant now will be here for future generations to come and will be our legacy - which is an exciting concept."

"Ecology has never been my strong point, however it's something I am passionate about and learning more and more as I go along. We have introduced a number of bug hotels created from old trees and have a fair few bat boxes and bird boxes since the

site was initially built. We're lucky to have such a diverse environment which, amongst many varieties of wildlife, is home for geese, wagtails, barn owls and a pair of kestrels. I have seen more hares than ever this year and I would say that could be down to less people and visitors to the site."

"We have also recently looked at installing bee hives on the edge of the site, which are surrounded by wildflowers and bramble. Initially these will be managed by an external company, but in the future it would be great to harvest the honey to use in the restaurant and maybe even sell it locally."

"In places, we sit on what feels like a 100% clay profile, which holds on to water and there's not much life in it, but we're quite lucky really that we don't suffer too many issues as a result. Having said that, the driveway does flood quite a lot, which can cause a few problems in terms of first impressions. When the site was landscaped in 2011, a lot of earthworks was undertaken and a small amount of topsoil was added, but it's not great. I am doing everything I can to improve this by topdressing with 70/30



Views from the fishing lake up to the main house





rootzone mix and working it into the profile to increase the nutritional content and improve growing conditions.”

“We don’t have an irrigation system in place to use around the estate. This year, I have purchased numerous sprinklers and hoses and there are three stand-pipes around the site, which we tap into. It just about got us through the dry spell earlier this year, but a lot of areas did suffer. Chris has also advised on the use of wetting agents and introducing more practices from the pitches into our lawns. We can certainly learn a lot from golf, football and private schools - who are far ahead of where we currently are - but it takes time and we’re getting there.”

“We accept that at some point during the year, we will suffer from red thread and have started to move towards liquid fertilisers rather than granular - mainly down to the flexibility restrictions with irrigation. We got to a point of needing to rely on the weather forecast in order to water granular fertiliser in, which isn’t ideal.”

“When I returned to the Park in January,

I had a target of things I wanted to achieve by the time I was forty. I wanted to be in a position where I positively influenced a team and put my stamp on a department, by controlling budgets and projects. This year was the first time I have ever written my own budget, which was quite a daunting task - much to my wife’s dismay as I spent a lot of hours on it. It was a great experience though and I enjoyed the process.”

“Recent projects include the completion of a new gatehouse, which will offer both increased security and a presence that visitors have ‘arrived’ at St. George’s Park. There is a holding bay which needed to be addressed so that people couldn’t bypass the barrier. It was my challenge to make this area visually appealing; essentially, this meant I had to make a mound of soil look nice!”

“I initially spoke to Helen Gillespie-Brown at Wildflower Turf Ltd. Together, we investigated the option of a wildflower area covering the bank; firstly, to reduce the possibility of erosion, but secondly and most importantly increase biodiversity

//

I was dragged around as a child every weekend, looking at different gardens and estates - which, obviously, at the time I hated

and provide a low maintenance solution. The area covers 150 square metres and includes 20% grass / 80% flowers (thirty-two varieties). It is a soil-free turf system that is made up of wildflowers which thrive in a wide range of soil types. It is nursery grown to produce a mat of wildflower plants that retains 100% of its root system. The biggest compliment was that the project manager came on site and didn’t even realise it was there! For me it was perfect, as I wanted it to blend into the surrounding parkland.”

“The beauty here is that the possibilities are endless. The management team are so supportive and completely on board with where we want the park to develop and how we want to promote the estate. I’m proud to be a part of it.”



New gatehouse and wildflower area

Glentoran Football Club

Presenting the perfect pitch

Is there such a thing as the perfect football pitch? Anyone who has played at The Oval Stadium, home to Glentoran FC, would say this pitch is as good as they get. Chris McCullough took a trip to Belfast to meet groundsman **William Kirkwood** to see for himself



Although badly damaged by aerial bombing during the Belfast Blitz of World War II in 1941, the proud home of Glentoran Football Club, known as The Oval, stands today with what could be the perfect football pitch.

Both the club and grounds are stoked deep in history and have enjoyed their football marriage since 1892, but they have endured several tiffs during their time together.

Since the war, a new grandstand was built in 1953 and the stadium was later refurbished with a stand upgraded in 2000. The total 'safe' capacity of The Oval is just over 6,000 and it has hosted several big

name finals of the Irish Cup, the County Antrim Shield and the Setanta Cup.

The Oval pitch measures just over 1.5 acres, part of the overall seven acres site taking in two grandstands, terracing, a steep grass bank and a large car park.

Over the years, both players and managers have hailed the pitch as one of the best playing surfaces in the country, which is a real testament to the groundsmen who have meticulously tended it.

Current groundsman and true Glentoran FC fan William Kirkwood has had the pleasure of looking after the pitch for the past five years, as well as being a gardener at the local Queen's University.

William said: "When I left school I enrolled

on a training course in construction, but soon realised it was not for me. I then worked as a trainee groundsman based at Campbell College in Belfast, maintaining the school grounds, which included rugby, football and cricket pitches."

"Attached to the job was a day release course at a local college and I was successful in gaining City and Guilds certificates in horticulture, as well as gaining experience working with lawnmowers and learning the mechanics of how engines work."

"After three years working on the school grounds, I applied for a job as gardener at Queen's University in Belfast. I wasn't initially successful, but the candidate who got the





When he was fifteen years old, he asked the secretary of Glentoran if he could help out around the Oval for his work experience. They told him he could help Sammy Glover, the club groundsman at the time



job left, so I was appointed gardener there in March 1993 and, some twenty-seven years later, I am still employed full-time at Queen's. My job at Glentoran is a part-time position of ten hours per week," he confirmed.

Up until October 2019 no-one had really inspired William in groundcare but then one day on the Oval pitch he met Jonathan Calderwood, head groundsman at French football giants, Paris St Germain.

"Jonathan is a native of Northern Ireland," said William, "and a massive Glentoran fan. When he was fifteen years old, he asked the secretary of Glentoran if he could help out around the Oval for his work experience. They told him he could help Sammy Glover, the club groundsman at the time."

"That was Jonathan hooked. He went to study at Myerscough College for three years before going to work as deputy head groundsman at the original Wembley Stadium."

"From there he went on to Wolverhampton Wanderers, Aston Villa, and

onto his current position in the French capital. I don't have ambitions to reach the level Jonathan has reached, but I have high ambitions to make my Oval pitch the best on the island of Ireland."

"Listening to Jonathan that afternoon, and seeing how much enthusiasm he had for the job, has given me extra determination to keep on improving the Oval pitch and taking it to a higher level," said William.

William works on his own at The Oval but he does have some assistance if required from the dedicated fan base.

"I am a one man show at the Oval, but a few volunteers will come along and help with grass cutting and watering in dry spells. As my remit doesn't extend much beyond the pitch, for the most part, I can manage that and all the tasks required on my own."

"Problems can occur when we have heavy rainfall close to match day, and waterlogging can put games in jeopardy, but in these scenarios the club can put out a call through their social media for volunteers to come and help clear surface water."

"The Monday club, a group of dedicated Glentoran fans, come down each Monday for a few hours to tidy up around the stadium, carrying out duties such as litter lifting, painting and minor DIY repairs."

"My main source of help comes from contractor Nigel Willis of NE Grounds Maintenance who carries out my topdressing and overseeding renovation works, and also liquid feeds and vertidrainage."

There is a piped drainage system under the pitch in the herringbone style which is likely to be quite an old network, possibly installed in the 1970s.

William said: "It does still function fairly satisfactorily, although we think some sections of the pipes have either collapsed or become blocked or broken as two corners of the pitch are very slow to drain after heavy rain."

"The pitch sits approximately six feet below sea level and, with a naturally high-water table, it's easy to understand why flooding is a major issue for me."



The main grandstand will cast shade over part of the pitch early in the morning but, as the sun moves towards the south and west, the entire pitch will be in full sun





“Shade and airflow are not problems at the Oval. It is an exposed site, so there is always a breeze blowing. The main grandstand will cast shade over part of the pitch early in the morning but, as the sun moves towards the south and west, the entire pitch will be in full sun.”

William plans his pitch maintenance very carefully as, with only ten hours per week possible, the time goes quickly.

“I must plan my maintenance carefully. For example, on a Saturday match day I can be

at the stadium from 9.00am to prepare the pitch, duties that quite often take me right up until kick-off to complete, so that is six hours used up out of my ten hours in total, giving me only four hours to do what tasks need doing during the week,” he said.

The pitch is mowed twice weekly in the growing season, increased to three times per week during the summer months if necessary. The mower is a Toro 3100d Sidewinder model with a 72inch cutting width.



I also have a Hayter Harrier 56cm mower which I use for mowing the grass behind both goals. I like the smaller width striped finish that this mower gives me

William said: “I mow the grass at a height of 25mm, raising the cutters to 30mm in the winter months to retain maximum leaf surface. The pitch is mowed in two directions each time, with each pass taking around one hour giving the pitch a nice chequered appearance.”

“I also have a Hayter Harrier 56cm mower which I use for mowing the grass behind both goals. I like the smaller width striped finish that this mower gives me.”

“Occasionally I will mow the entire pitch

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I tend to keep a few selective weed guns for spot treating any new weeds that pop up. I will normally apply another knapsack treatment towards the end of the playing season



with the Hayter as I find the rotary blade is good for lifting debris. I do not tend to mow the pitch too often with the Hayter though as it is a job that takes five hours of my time!" he said.

Weed control

William carries out weed control himself using both selective and total weed killer applications. The first treatment is applied in early April to target early growth of dandelion and daisy plants.

"Daises are not present on the pitch, but do grow in the grass behind both goals, as does clover. Greater plantain is the biggest problem weed on the pitch, although their numbers are reducing year on year."

"The chemical is applied through the CP20 knapsack, mostly using the spot treatment technique. It may be more time consuming using this method but it is proving to be effective in reducing weed numbers, and the chemical will last me longer, saving the club money at the same time."

"After the first application of the season, I

tend to keep a few selective weed guns for spot treating any new weeds that pop up. I will normally apply another knapsack treatment towards the end of the playing season, just before my renovation works commence, because I know that, when the new seed begins to germinate, I can't be putting chemicals near it."

"I will put another spray on sometime in July and continue to spot treat weeds right through to the end of the growing season. Weeds were a major problem on the pitch when I first took this job and I made it one of my highest priorities to tackle."

"Thankfully, with nearly five years of battling weeds, I have made significant progress in reducing quantities of weeds. As well as pitch weeds, I am responsible for weeds growing on hard surfaces, such as the terracing and car parks and, similar to the pitch weed story, weed infestations on the terracing was pretty serious five years ago. Thankfully, a sustained effort by me has greatly reduced weeds growing on the terracing," said William.

Nutrition

Granular fertiliser is applied to the pitch four times per year using a combination of spring and summer, autumn/winter and slow release fertilisers.

"For spring and summer application I use a 27:6:6 mix from Turfcare in County Kildare, a particularly good one for an early spring growth boost, as well as Pearl 16:16:16. 15:0:30 is my usual autumn/winter use fertiliser. Another mix I like to use is 12:11:18 Yara Mila complex as it gives me up to eight weeks longevity and is supplied to me through Orchard County Enterprises based in County Armagh. I apply the fertiliser using the ICL AccuPro 2000 rotary spreader."

"Last year, for the first time, I introduced regular liquid feeds, mostly nitrogen and iron-based, to give the grass a boost of colour. Some of the products I used were Pearl Mag N and Liquid Iron 7 supplied by Turfcare. Mixed into the same tank as the feed was Primo Maxx, with the aim of reducing top growth and encouraging lateral stem development."



Divot repairs are another weekly task and I start this as quickly as possible following a game. It's another time-consuming job but a very important one to help maintain good surface levels





BBC cameras attend all first team home league and cup games so I know my pitch will be seen by a large TV audience, as well as the fans inside the stadium

Maintenance and renovations

“Divot repairs are another weekly task and I start this as quickly as possible following a game. It’s another time-consuming job but a very important one to help maintain good surface levels.”

“Linemarking tends to be done prior to games being played. However, if the team have two away fixtures in a row, I will usually overmark using a weaker mixture, just to

ensure that the lines do not fade.”

William is very proud of his efforts to have the grounds always looking their best as that is what the players and fans see all the time.

He said: “For me, presentation ranks very highly in my priorities. It doesn’t matter to me who is playing, be it the first team, reserve (U20) team, ladies team or a charity match, I want my pitch looking its best for every game, and so every fixture gets my

full attention.”

“BBC cameras attend all first team home league and cup games so I know my pitch will be seen by a large TV audience, as well as the fans inside the stadium.”

“As well as the major impact jobs, such as putting a nice stripe on the pitch and marking bright white lines, I do like to pay attention to the minor details as well, such as clipping the grass at the base of the goalposts.”

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Fortunately, we do get advance notice of when live fixtures are happening, so that gives me time to plan for a high dose of nitrogen liquid fertilisers in advance of the game to give the grass a boost of colour

“On some occasions, BBC and Sky Sports broadcast live games from the Oval so I do put myself under a lot of pressure to ensure the pitch is looking the best that I can make it.”

“Fortunately, we do get advance notice of when live fixtures are happening, so that gives me time to plan for a high dose of nitrogen liquid fertilisers in advance of the game to give the grass a boost of colour.”

The Irish league season usually finishes in the last weekend of April and, by that time, the pitch really needs some attention from William.

“I try to commence end of season renovations as soon as possible after the last match is played so, in the early part of May, I will take the nets down, take away the advertising boards and leave the pitch ready for the renovation works to begin.”

“As this is contracted out, I work alongside Nigel to agree on a suitable date to commence the job, which will be carried out over a two-day period.”

“Firstly, the pitch will be vertidraind to a depth of six to eight inches, followed by the spreading and brushing of 100 tonnes of sand. My sand is zone four grade and is supplied by Norman Emerson Ltd based in Lurgan.”

“Day two is seeding day. The predominant seed mix I use is Johnsons Premier Pitch which I have used for each of my previous renovation works. Last season for the first time, I added the Limagrain MM60 and MM25 to the seed mix.”

“I felt that the central band of the pitch from goal to goal was showing excess wear and tear and I wanted to try and address this problem. I looked at the MM25 seed mixture and, as well as the high proportions of ryegrass, it contained a twenty percent content of strong red creeping fescue. I felt this species, because of its creeping growth habit, would encourage a denser sward, so we only used the MM25 mix up and down that central band of the pitch.”

“It is difficult to judge if it has been a successful experiment, but I feel that there has been less wear in the affected areas, and grass coverage in these areas is better



than in previous years.”

“Once the renovation works are complete, the pitch is handed back to me to manage through the rest of the summer months and into pre-season. The main priority, obviously, is to ensure the successful germination and establishment of the new grass seed.”

“It seems to be now, in recent years, that May can be a very dry month and I’m having to irrigate the pitch more often. It is such a critical month as I do not want to risk losing hundreds of pounds worth of grass seed, therefore irrigation is essential.”

“I have access to mains water, hose and sprinklers, so I can get water on to the pitch. I also have the benefit of being able to recycle water that flows through the under-drainage pipes, thereby reducing the need to use valuable mains water, should a lack of rainfall mean a hosepipe ban,” said William.

Renovation works can be affected by budgets; however, whatever William requests is usually approved by the board of directors.

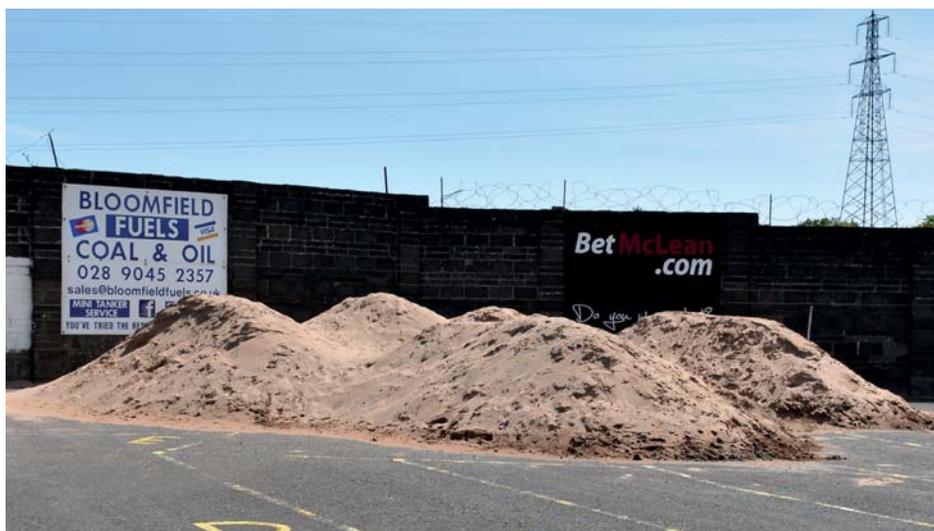
“I do not necessarily order the same quantities of materials each year as it is usually based on the condition of the pitch come the end of the season,” William said. “This year, with the season coming to an early suspension due to the coronavirus pandemic, the pitch still had good grass coverage, so I have ordered less seed than normal.”

“I always stick with the 100 tonnes of sand as I believe that the addition of the sand will improve the soil profile and its drainage capabilities. In previous years, supporters clubs have donated funds to allow the purchase of additional materials, be it seed, sand or fertiliser.”

Groundhopper

William has become involved with quite a unique project at The Oval known as the Groundhopper tours conducted on match days. The tour is the brainchild of club commercial manager, Simon Wallace, and Glentoran historian Sam Robinson, who lead





I always stick with the 100 tonnes of sand as I believe that the addition of the sand will improve the soil profile and its drainage capabilities

the tours.

The Oval is considered a real iconic stadium in Groundhopper circles and the tours have attracted hundreds of visitors from across the UK, The Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, Portugal, USA, Canada, Finland, Japan and Italy.

"The tour is an access all areas match day tour and tells the story of Glentoran FC and The Oval in a two-hour trip around the stadium," said William. "I do not think there are too many clubs anywhere in the world that allows visitors into the team dressing

rooms, boardroom, and even to walk onto the pitch a few hours before kick-off!"

"Sam asked me if I would mind talking to his tour party, which I was delighted to be asked to do. It means a five or ten minute break in my match day pitch preparation to tell visitors about my work and what it takes to keep the pitch in good condition."

"I also write articles for the match day programme, The Glentoran Gazette, which is the top match day programme in the Irish League and has won Programme of the Year for the last eighteen years in a row."

"The club that produces the Gazette, the 1923 Supporters Committee, has been very supportive of me so I thought I would give something back by writing articles, providing the fans with regular updates on pitch works and progress."

"It also gives me the opportunity to raise the profile of the pitch and the work that a groundsman does, and that it's not simply about cutting the grass," William said.

Machinery

Most of the machinery at The Oval was purchased before William arrived, but the

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GMX Bowcom linemaker was purchased new on his recommendation.

"I hired in the Redexim Vertiquake 2516 during this current season to help with decompaction and to improve drainage," William said. "This was the first time I had hired in this type of equipment and I found the process very useful, particularly with moving surface water down through the soil profile faster."

"Occasionally, I will hire in for a weekend a small pedestrian aerator for use in the goal areas - and generally anywhere on the pitch that needs it - just to perforate the soil to allow water, nutrients and air to penetrate the grass roots, and, of course, to relieve compaction."

"I would love to have the Dennis Pro 34R at my disposal. Not only does it lift debris efficiently, it leaves a great stripe and, with two rotary blades giving it 860mm cutting width, I reckon I could cut the Oval pitch in around two hours. It really would be a great addition to have alongside the Toro."

Pests and diseases

Pests and diseases are a problem at The Oval, like most other sports grounds, but William is on top of anything that crops up.

He said: "Casting worms are a problem, although only in certain parts of the pitch. It's not a problem that I intend to treat as I think the benefits of having earthworms present far outweighs the negatives of not having them, particularly in terms of nutrient availability, improved drainage, and

removing dead plant material."

"Yes, the casts provide weed beds when they are flattened by the lawnmower rollers, but using the drag mat before mowing breaks up the casts."

"We have a family of foxes living within the stadium grounds. A few seasons back a small hole appeared in the turf, but I didn't think too much about it at the time and filled the hole with sand and forgot about it, as no similar damage occurred in the remainder of that season."

"We commenced renovation works and, a few days after the work had been completed, a small hole appeared in one of the goal areas. This slightly concerned me and, over the next several weeks, the hole that I filled in was hastily excavated the following night."

"It was quickly established that a fox was the culprit, causing serious damage to the pitch with holes appearing in several places. I brought in a cage type trap and baited it

with dog food then played the waiting game."

"After checking the trap for several mornings, nothing was there until one morning, from a distance, I could see something in the cage. He was still alive having eaten all the dog food. I put the fox and cage into the back of my car and released the animal, unharmed, into the fields above east Belfast."

"The digging did stop for a while but did start again, although not on the scale like before. One morning a magpie had gone into the cage and got trapped, and a fox was outside the cage desperately trying to get at the magpie. The fox ran off when I approached and I was able to release the terrified bird unharmed."

"Pigeons are also a real nuisance especially after we have reseeded the pitch. They arrive in numbers, forty plus at times, and they will get through big quantities of valuable grass seed, which absolutely



What's in the shed?

Toro Reelmaster 3100d
Hayter Harrier 56
Bowcom GMX Linemaker
Kawaski Mule utility vehicle



I think the only way to raise our profile is to do it ourselves. By that I mean pushing for opportunities to promote what we do, and if someone wants to do an interview, jump at the chance

drives me mad!”

“The Oval stadium sits on a large site and maintaining it is not easy. We leave some areas of the stadium uncut and, within these areas, various wildflowers grow, such as Red Clover, Cornflower, Forget-me-not and Marsh Marigold. Other plants, such as willow herb and thistle, are all left untouched to flourish, and they attract wildlife such as bees and butterflies.”

William certainly believes the job of a groundsman is undervalued and suggests the task of increasing the profile is for grounds care professionals to stand up for themselves.

“I would say we are undervalued,” he said. “If the football pitch is in poor condition, then the quality of the game is adversely affected so we must strive to produce the best playing surface that we can.”

“The skills of the grounds staff are vital in producing that surface, but without the

resources, without the money being made available, there are limitations as to what we can achieve.”

“People will criticise pitches, which they are entitled to do, but they shouldn’t criticise pitches on one hand, but not give the grounds staff sufficient funding on the other hand to purchase the materials needed to improve the quality of pitches.”

“I think the only way to raise our profile is to do it ourselves. By that I mean pushing for opportunities to promote what we do, and if someone wants to do an interview, jump at the chance.”

“I felt that grounds staff weren’t getting enough credit for the job that they were doing, often on shoestring budgets, and that we were always at the bottom of the pecking order when it came to budgets and funding.”

“Most fans pay attention to the game being played on the pitch, and not

necessarily noticing how well that pitch looks or wondering how long the grounds staff spent preparing for the game, or even knowing the name of the person who prepared the pitch.”

“At Glentoran FC, I decided to raise my own profile and my pitch. I have already mentioned that I write articles for the Glen’s match day programme and that is one way of raising my profile amongst the Glentoran faithful, so I would say that most Glens fans will know my name by now.”

“Also recently, I have done interviews with BBC NI, the Belfast Telegraph and now more exclusively with Chris from Pitchcare to explain how we are coping with maintaining our pitches whilst in lockdown, all with the aim of raising the profile of grounds staff,” he concluded.



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Cranfield United FC

A window of opportunity!

A rather excitable Lee Williams headed to the village of Cranfield, a few miles east of Milton Keynes, for his first face-to-face site visit since lockdown restrictions were relaxed. He was here to meet **Wesley Matthews** - at a safe distance, obviously - the award winning groundsman at Cranfield United Football Club





It's all part of the fun of being a volunteer groundsman for me, trying to overcome those little problems where you don't have the money to do anything. You have to diversify or find another way to get the best out of what you have got available to you

Cranfield United Football Club was formed in 1903 and has spent most of its history playing in the local leagues. They are currently members of the Bedfordshire County Football League Premier Division. They play their home games at Crawley Road, at the end of the Cranfield Airport main runway and just a stone's throw from Cranfield University.

Lee takes up the story. This was my first face to face visit since February, with the restrictions being eased at the end of May, it was great to get out. Following the government's guidelines, Wes and I kept at a two-metre distance and conducted the interview outside the clubhouse, luckily it was a nice day.

Wesley's full-time occupation is running his own double-glazing business - Kempston Windows Ltd. He uses his spare time in between calls, and in the evenings, to tend to the football pitch which, he says, helps to

clear his mind. "I'm not so much on the tools now; I spend a lot of my time doing surveys and quotes. I have found myself doing a lot more evening work as people are at work during the day, which has given me a bit of time in the day to work on the pitch. I use that time to break up my week, and it's nice to come down to the pitch and walk with the brush, mark out etc. When you run your own business, it can be quite stressful, especially when there is a lot is going on and you are the centre of everything. As strange as it may sound to some people, I find coming up here for four to five hours during the week, divoting or doing 14,000 steps helps clear my mind and sets me up for the rest of my appointments."

Wesley first found himself on a mower at Elstow Abbey Football Club in Bedfordshire where he was manager/ player in 2015. He tells me the players were moaning about the quality of the pitch as it was a bit long and it was not looking the





I find coming up here for four to five hours during the week, divoting or doing 14,000 steps helps clear my mind and sets me up for the rest of my appointments

best. "I found myself getting involved, and it turned out the guy who was doing the cutting was struggling through ill health. It needed someone to turn the pitch around. So I said to the players 'give me the mower, and I will have a go'. I was shown how to use it, and I managed to put a few stripes in. As I got used to it, my interest grew and I decided to give up coaching."

"I would start to see things happening on the pitch. For example, when the boys would say the pitch needs divoting I would just put a roller over it. Then I would realise the problem with water settling on the pitch was getting worse, and I would wonder why."

This led Wes to want to know more about

how he could improve the pitch and the correct methods for maintenance. "I started to get inspired by what other people were doing, and I would go onto the Pitchcare website. I would read about the best practices, look at the diaries, take ideas from various articles and would go on the forum and post my questions on there. This led me to looking for more answers on Google which, in turn, led me to other sites, and I started to use my Twitter account in 2016 to follow other groundsmen. This made me realise how big the sports turf industry is and what was required to maintain a pitch to a good standard."

With Wes's interest growing, he knew he wouldn't be able to get the funds required to purchase some of the machinery he required. So, he took it upon himself to build it himself. "I started to think about how I could improve things. I am a chippy by trade, and I have always been good with my hands. Whilst at Elstow, I assembled a spiker using a bit of pipe with batons on with nails attached. I would use this when overseeding





I have found myself doing a lot more evening work as people are at work during the day, which has given me a bit of time in the day to work on the pitch

and to relieve some compaction in the first few inches of the pitch. To be honest, it worked pretty well. While I have been at Cranfield, I have built my own drag brush which I use to take the dew off the pitch and stand up the grass before cutting. A V-brush with a rake and a much-improved spiker, both can be dragged using the triple. It helps that I can utilise materials from my business that are left over from jobs to help

build the machines.”

Wes, has posted pictures of his pieces of equipment on social media and industry forums to help give other volunteer groundsmen ideas. He has received some great feedback from other groundsmen who have contacted him privately over Twitter for advice on how to put the various pieces of kit together.

Wes moved to Wootton in 2019, which is

just three miles up the road from Cranfield United FC, and found himself looking after the pitch after Ivor Kennit, the previous groundsman, fell ill. “I heard he was struggling; I told the club I have not got much to do at Elstow, it is just ticking over. So, I said I will go and give them a hand for a little while. I came up here and thought this is the perfect place for me to really open up and do different things I couldn’t



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Getting Personal

Wesley Matthews - his glass is always half full, but never lend him your car

Who are you? Wesley Matthews - volunteer groundsman at Cranfield United Football Club.

Family status. Married with three boys.

What's been the highlight of your grounds career so far?

By far, it was winning National Groundsman of the Year 2018, which was awarded to me at St. James Park. This was when I was groundsman at Elstow Abbey FC.

If your younger self saw you now, what would he think? I

wouldn't believe it was me! I would be impressed with how much I have achieved, both with running my own business and with what I have achieved as a groundsman.

What job would you love, other than your own? A pro golfer.

What was the most embarrassing moment in your life? Turning up to the pub after a game of football. I parked the car and, whilst I started making my way to the entrance, the packed garden were shouting at me as my car was rolling away - I had left my handbrake off!

What is your favourite film? The Shawshank Redemption.

What scares you? Failure, in any aspect of my life.

What would your autobiography be called... and who would play you in the film? 'The guy that never gives up' with Tom Hanks!

What is your favourite sport? Golf, horseracing and football.

Which historical time and place would you most like to visit? England winning the 1966 World Cup.

Do you have a lifetime ambition? To be mortgage free and reach retirement in good health.

Which three people, living or dead, would you invite to a dinner party? My Mum (who died when I was 29, before I



owned a business or had any children). I would love to talk to her and for her to see my three boys. My old headmaster from upper school who told me I had no future and my granddad (gramps), who died shortly before my mum). He was always building and inventing things, so I'd like his feedback on my own creations and inventions!

What's the best advice you have ever been given? Always treat people how you want to be treated yourself.

What's your favourite smell? Freshly cut grass.

Which three albums would you take to a desert island? Coldplay - any of them, Michael Jackson - Thriller and Ed Sheeran - Divide.

What's your favourite piece of kit? The Ransomes Highway 2130 mower. Without it my job would be impossible. I've adapted it to pull along my homemade pieces of kit! It's never let me down yet and cuts me a lovely stripe.

What three words would you use to describe yourself? Determined, positive and passionate, my glass is always half full!

What is the single most useful thing you could tell a 16-year-old groundsperson/greenkeeper? Never give up, remain focused, listen hard, always be prepared to learn new things and don't be afraid to ask questions.

What talent would you like to have? To be able to play golf off scratch.



do at Elstow. Ivor is now 82 years old and is now unable to lend a hand, so I often ring him to tell him what's going on and send him some pictures over."

With the dedication Wesley shows for the pitches, and with the willingness to learn whilst at both clubs, he has been nominated and won Groundsman of the Year for the Bedfordshire County Football League on a few occasions. "I will always remember 2018 when I won the County Groundsman award and then found myself in the regional finals. I was buzzing when two professional groundsmen came to see me to judge the pitch - Andy Gray from Southampton and Bruce

Elliot from Crystal Palace. The icing on the cake was when I won the regionals and found myself at St George's Park with the chance to win the FA National Groundsman Award, which I'm proud to say I won."

Since turning his attention to Cranfield's pitch, he has already been able to help improve the maintenance regime and renovation works. This was helped by having access to a budget of £2,000 a season. "I'm able to invest some of the money into fertiliser, so I enlisted the help of Martyn Parish from Agrovista Amenity. He takes an annual soil sample and puts a small but affordable programme together for me."





“The pitch is built on heavy clay. We do have some primary drainage, but it is about thirty years old now, so may need modernising soon. So, we are prone to puddling when we get a heavy downpour. To help alleviate some of the damage that can be caused on match day when this happens, I have been able to get the players to do some of their warm-ups on the

outside of the pitch - and none at all in the goalmouths, which has helped us maintain grass cover in the winter.”

The ground is surrounded by high conifers which have their advantages and disadvantages throughout the year. “They help protect the players on a matchday from the high winds we can experience and can be a good sound barrier from

the local airport. The problems they cause me are that, in summer, they sap the moisture from the side of the pitch whilst, in winter, they do drop a lot of debris when the winds get up, giving me the unenviable task of clearing them up. They also shade half of the pitch from the sun most of the year. I would like to cut them down by half but that is another expense.”

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History

The club was formed in 1903. After the first world war, they played in the Bedford and District League and then moved to the North Bucks & District Football League in 1930. They joined Division 2b of the South Midlands League in 1949 and won it at the first attempt, winning promotion to Division One. They were promoted to the Premier division in the 1952-53 seasons when they finished as runners-up. The club remained in the Premier division until the 1955-56 season when they were relegated to Division One and, three seasons later, were relegated again to the Bedford and District League.

The club returned to the South Midlands League, in the 1976-77 season, starting in Division one. The club remained in Division one until the end of the 1995-96 season, except for three seasons from 1985-86 when they were in the Premier division. The club left the South Midlands League again in 1996. In 2001, the club joined the Spartan South Midlands Football League in Division Two, and four seasons later they were promoted to the Premier Division.

In 2009-10, they played in the FA Cup for the first-ever time, losing to Crawley Green 3-1 in the extra preliminary qualifying round.

Cranfield United resigned from the Spartan South Midlands League at the end of the 2012-13 season and took their reserve team's place in Division Two of the Bedfordshire County League. At the end of the 2014-2015 season, Cranfield United's first team won the Bedfordshire County Football League Division One as Champions and were promoted to the Premiership Division for the 2015-2016 Season. The Reserve side also won the Bedfordshire League Division Three as Champions during the same season.

Wes talks me through his maintenance regime throughout the season. "I cut the pitch with the Ransomes 2130 triple mower at a height of around 25-35mm. I do this once or twice a week along with pitch divoting. I use my homemade drag brush every other day or when required to help stand up the grass. I carry out surface aeration once a month if conditions allow, using the multi-slitter I have recently purchased and my spiker. I will bring in a contractor to verti-drain the pitch as deep as they can go twice a year."

The renovation was minimal due to the budget available last year, so they levelled off the goalmouths and linesman runs and overseeded. This season, Wes was hoping to carry out a more substantial renovation but, with the current situation with the pandemic, everyone is uncertain when non-league

football will be able to resume.

The pandemic will not stop Wes trying out and developing his new project. "I'm building my own seed protector/soaker for goal renovations which I have designed. It will hopefully protect the seeds from the birds, in particular the pigeons which live in the conifers. We only have a single outside tap for irrigation, so we are limited on water pressure, so I have designed it with this in mind. I have used leftover materials I had from work."

"It's all part of the fun of being a volunteer groundsman for me, trying to

overcome those little problems where you don't have the money to do anything. You have to diversify or find another way to get the best out of what you have got available to you. Then, when you start to see the fruits of it, you turn back and go, it was hard work, but it works and does the job."



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St Blazey AFC

Blazing a trail

The small town of St Blazey lies on the south coast of Cornwall, just a mile or so inland from the popular Par Sands. This is grockle country – ‘par’ excellence. The town’s football club competes in the South West Peninsula League Premier Division West and is considered to be among the most successful clubs in Cornwall. Lee Williams met with **Paul Bowden**, the club’s volunteer groundsman, amongst other things!

St Blazey AFC was formed in 1896 as a junior side, attaining senior status in 1910. Their home ground is Blaise Park, a 3,500-capacity stadium which opened in 1906. The ground was built on reclaimed land from the nearby estuary in the town. During the First World War, the pitch was dug up and the underlying sand used to fill sandbags.

Paul Bowden is not only the club’s groundsman but also Vice Chairman. He dedicates as many hours as he can to the pitch around his full-time job as the manager at the local Co-op. He has been attending first-team football matches at St Blazey since 1996 but is also a keen supporter of Plymouth Argyle FC where he is a season ticket holder.

Three years ago, the areas around Blaise Park required a little TLC, so he decided to give the club a hand. “I started off by helping out with general tasks like weeding, strimming and cutting the grass banks. The club, unfortunately, found itself having to make the groundsman redundant due to a lack of income, so I found myself starting to do bits on the pitch and, you know what it is like, once you have made one part of the pitch look good, it leads you to want all of the pitch to look great. It has moved on from there really and I’m now the groundsman on a volunteer basis.”

When I visited Paul, he was on annual leave for a week and he was using all that time to get the pitch ready for friendlies which were scheduled to kick off

in a few weeks. Assisting him was his dad Stuart Bowden.

How do you split your time between work and volunteering at the club? “It is basically a matter of fitting it in whenever possible. This time of year, with the light evenings, it’s ideal as I can get down for around 6.30pm and still have a few hours light to work with. I generally have a Thursday or a Saturday off, so it can be a Thursday morning down here and then a Saturday morning preparing the pitch for a game. I intend to spend the rest of this week getting the grass cut down and marked up ready for the friendlies at the beginning of August. I have another week off in a couple of weeks’ time. I am fortunate to get a decent number of holidays working for the Co-op, so I can use a bit of that time



We do have drains in the pitch which work well. But with some of the levels of rain we have experienced in the last year we did lose two fixtures. There's nothing we can do about it; we just have to let nature take its course



I am fortunate to get a decent number of holidays working for the Co-op, so I can use a bit of that time to prepare the pitch

to prepare the pitch.”

The club has a committee, so no one individual has complete control of the club’s finances. “If we have something big that needs doing, such as machinery repairs, we will ask the committee if can we afford it? General day to day stuff, like fuel for machines and linemarking paint we can just go ahead and purchase. We rely on sponsors and the clubhouse to help bring in the much-needed cash flow.”

I was interested to learn how the COVID-19 crisis has affected the club. “The

clubhouse has been completely shut since the end of March. We were lucky enough to receive £1500 grant money from the pitch fund initiative, which has allowed us to carry out some renovations. We also took the opportunity to spruce up the clubhouse with a lick of paint, and had a big tidy up, something we just never got around to doing. The bar is back open now and, with football restarting soon, I’m confident we will get back on the right track.”

Paul is grateful for the help he receives from the other members and supporters of the club. “I want to give a special mention to Chris Lydon, who helps me out with the stringing out of the lines at the end of the week while I’m up and down doing the marking. Amos Putt will go around doing a bit of strimming and hand mowing here and there. Finally, there is Derek Isbell, who does the general maintenance around the ground.”

The pitch is constructed on what used to be the seabed back in the 1800s. Paul





One of the advisories we had, which came as no surprise, was that our machinery is old, and it would be wise to invest in some new equipment

tells me the church wall by the traffic lights, which is about 500m from the pitch, used to be the harbour wall. "The sea would come in and go straight up the river so, if you dig down, there is a lot of sand underneath which helps with our drainage. When the pitch is flooded, it is not because of the rain that has come down, it is because the water has come up through the water table. But, literally overnight, the water will disappear and the next day it is bone dry. We do have drains in the pitch which run pretty much three-quarters of the pitch, with the outlet at the back of the goal. They do work well, but with some of the levels of rain we have experienced in the last year we did lose two fixtures, but there's nothing we can do about it; we just have to let nature take its course."

On average, the pitch hosts sixty plus games a season, accommodating first team fixtures, cup games, the second team and the local schools' finals. The club are also looking to set up a youth team which will add more pressure on the pitch and Paul. "It is very rare in the football season that we don't have a game on every Saturday, plus training through the week."

Paul would like to be able to carry out various other maintenance tasks on the pitch to help improve the surface, but he is limited in what he can achieve. "Our Jacobsen Tri King ride-on cylinder mower

is our main piece of equipment, which has just come back from being fixed again this summer and the blades sharpened. We will cut at a height 25mm in the summer and lift the height of cut to 28mm in the winter. I would like to scarify the pitch at the start and during the season, and it is something we are looking to hire in. We are also looking to get some new machinery in as the machines we have are quite old, and we do not have anything that can do the scarifying. We don't even have a brush for the pitch at the moment; this is where we need to be investing some money going forward."

At the beginning of summer, they managed to take out a mini renovation on the pitch. "We had a contractor come in to verti-drain, overseed with the disc seeder, using MM seed, and fertilised with Evolution. With the recent weather, the pitch has really taken off and we have struggled to keep it under control!"

The club recently had a visit from Simon Johnson, Regional Pitch Advisor (Southwest) for the Grounds Management Association. "He came and took soil samples, then provided us with an advisory report on the pitch and one on machinery as well. One of the advisories we had, which came as no surprise, was that our machinery is old, and it would be wise to invest in some new equipment. There is a grant available where

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Getting Personal

Paul Bowden - he doesn't like people who conduct interviews! Hmmm ...

Who are you? Paul Bowden. Vice Chairman and Groundsman at St. Blazey AFC.

Family status. Partner Toni and two daughters; Ellie and Aimee.

Who's your hero and why? My dad.

What's been the highlight of your grounds career so far? Coming runner-up in the Cornwall FA Groundsman of the Year 2018/19 season.

If your younger self saw you now, what would he think? What happened to your hair?

Which famous people wind you up? People who conduct interviews after football matches. They ask the most pointless questions.

What job would you love, other than your own? Full-time groundsman working outdoors.

What is your favourite film? Any Die-Hard film or the Inbetweeners movies.

What scares you? Snakes. No need for them.

What would your autobiography be called... and who would play you in the film? Working hard. No idea who would play that role.

What are your favourite sports? Football, snooker and pool.

What would you cast into Room 101? VAR!! What a way to ruin football.

Which historical time and place would you most like to visit? The 50s and 60s to see the massive crowds at non-league football matches.

Do you have a lifetime ambition? Live a long and healthy life.



Which three people, living or dead, would you invite to a dinner party? Bobby Robson, Brian Clough and Neil Warnock. All great characters.

What's the best advice you have ever been given? Never give up.

What's your favourite smell? A warm pasty.

Which three albums would you take to a desert island? I'm not a big fan of any particular album! Let's hope Google Play music works on the island.

What's the daftest work-related question you have ever been asked? Do you work here? I'm stood there in full uniform.

What's your favourite piece of kit? The cylinder mower.

What three words would you use to describe yourself? Keen, motivated and enthusiastic.

What is the single most useful thing you could tell a 16-year-old groundsman/greenkeeper? Whatever equipment you have, aim for the perfect surface. Do the best you can.

What talent would you like to have? More knowledge of groundsmanship and general building.

What law/legislation would you like to see introduced? The police need to be able to deal with antisocial behaviour strongly.



we can apply for seventy percent of the total cost of the machine, but we must find the other thirty percent. Obviously, at the moment with everything that has gone on, there is not much money in the pot."

Paul is also grateful for the support and advice he gets from David Bevan, Technical Sales Representative for Agrovista Amenity. "I like to pick Dave's brain every time he visits us. He helps improve my knowledge which, in turn, can only benefit the pitch. It would be great if we had the budget to have a fertiliser programme put together. Still, for now, we apply two slow-release

applications of fertiliser a season which seems to keep us going."

In the past, the club has been able to invest in new/second-hand machinery. With every passing season, it is becoming more costly to repair and service their existing equipment. "The main mower we have was bought new sixteen years ago, and some of the other little ride-on mowers we have are second-hand. We have them done up, service them every season and just try to get the best out of them. If we need a small rotary, we will look at Facebook and eBay. Just recently, we picked up two





It is basically a matter of fitting it in whenever possible. This time of year, it's ideal as I can get down for around 6.30pm and still have a few hours light to work with

for £25 each. If we can get two years out of them that's great, especially when we are using them on big areas of grass, so when they do eventually burn out, it has not been a big loss."

In the long term, Paul would like to invest in a tractor with attachments so he can carry out his own maintenance programmes and renovation works. "This would save us money as we currently rely on outside contractors to carry out the work. The other advantage would be the money we would save on repairs. We had to spend £1800 on the main mower this year. This meant we had to do a bit of crowdfunding, plus the players and supporters generously added to the pot. We managed to raise £800 to go towards the repairs, which was fantastic."

In the summer, with the pandemic shutting the clubhouse down and no football taking place for the foreseeable future, Paul took

the opportunity to address a drainage problem they had in one of the goalmouths. "We took some samples and found the top twelve inches were really hard, and underneath was pure sand. So, the top layer was just stopping any water running through, and we also found the drains had collapsed. We decided to hire a digger and dug right down to the water table, and then installed new drains and backfilled with new sand and topsoil. Since the goalmouth has re-established, we have had some heavy rain and, touch wood, so far we have no issues with standing water."

Geese from the pond near the club are regular early morning visitors to the pitch. "We often find three or four of them nipping away at the grass, so we have to shoo them off, and they are quite big. But, apart from that, we do not really suffer from pests such as rabbits or foxes."



Loughborough University

Nursing the pitch back to life

Loughborough University is a public research university in the market town of Loughborough, Leicestershire, in the East Midlands of England. It covers an area of 438 acres (1.77 km²) and, after getting lost on the expansive site for around twenty minutes, Lee Williams eventually met up with **Kris Nurse**, 34-year-old Team Leader, outside the impressive University stadium

Before becoming a groundsman, Kris had dreams of being a professional footballer; signing his first contract at the age of sixteen for Notts County where he played for three years before the club went into administration. He said: "I tried to find another club but, at that particular time, there was nothing available. I really wanted to stay involved in football, as it's something I have done from a very young age; I couldn't see myself working in an office, or doing anything else for that matter. So, my uncle got me a job at Rolls Royce Leisure facility, based in Derby. As a starting point, to see how I got on, I worked on fine turf, football, and rugby. I really enjoyed it and was then

given the opportunity to gain my NVQ Level 2 and 3 in Sports Turf. After just over a year, a job opportunity came up at the University, which is two minutes down the road from where I live in Quorn, so it was ideal. I applied and got the job."

"When I first joined (as an assistant groundsman), we were not split into two teams at that point; it was one big team of eight and we were tasked with looking after all sports. Then, six years ago, it was decided to split the group into two teams - one looking after athletics and rugby and the other looking after what was to be a footballing hub. I felt I was doing a good job, and I had learned the trade, so I went for the team leader position of the footballing hub. I





There is always something around the corner to challenge you. This type of surface was new to me, but I have taken to it well and enjoy working with it





got the position and the rest is history really... since then, I have just been trying to make this division as good as I can.”

Kris admits he is still learning every day and he is not perfect. “There is always something around the corner to challenge you. For example, twelve months ago, we had the new SIS hybrid pitch installed in the University’s stadium. This type of surface was new to me, but I have taken to it well and enjoy working with it.”

The grounds team are well supported by the University when it comes to the budget. Kris will discuss the requirements for the football pitches with William Relf,

who is the Sports Grounds Manager and oversees everything.

Helping Kris maintain the pitches is: Allan Hampson - Skilled Groundsman (six years’ service); Paul Barker - Skilled Groundsman (seventeen years’ service); Harry Barnard - Apprentice Groundsman (two years’ service) and Andrew Ilsley - Chargehand Groundsman of Artificial Surfaces and Athletics.

The site is expansive and covers nearly every sport you could think of, but Kris’s sole responsibility (alongside his team) is to keep the hybrid pitch, six fully-constructed sand-based pitches and two 3G pitches in tip-top

condition. The stadium pitch is home to Loughborough Foxes and, for fifteen games a year, also the Derby County under 23s. Additional tournaments, student fixtures, and the occasional rugby and lacrosse games, make for a pretty busy schedule.

All of the football pitches have fully automatic irrigation systems. “We went for Rain Bird on the new stadium pitch, as we wanted to try something different and the construction company already had a good relationship with them. Predominantly, the rest of the site is Toro and, in my opinion, they are both excellent products; we have no problems with either set-up. All pitches are controlled via a Heron control panel and are fed from an underground tank, which is attached to the mains water supply.”

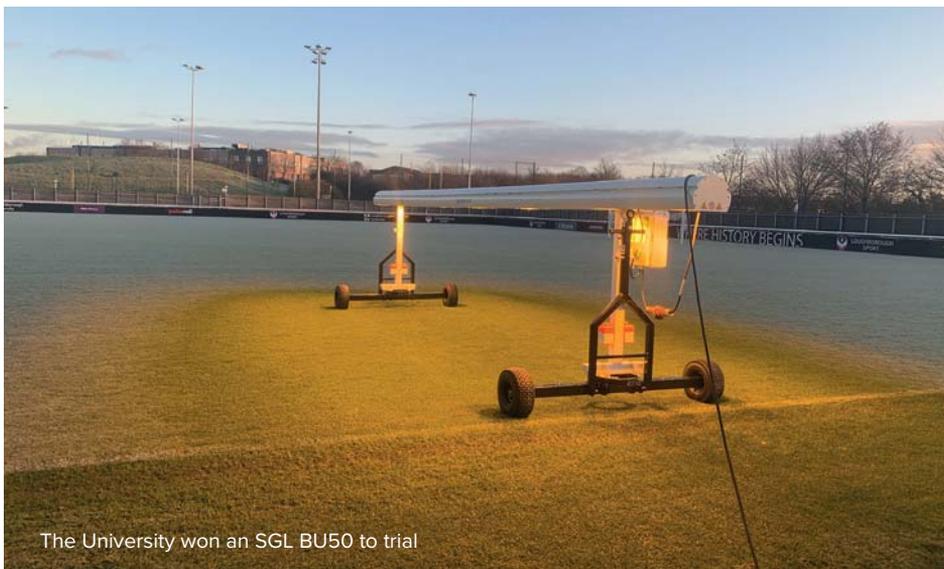
Given the number of games they have to accommodate on the new hybrid pitch, and with some of them being important matches for the University, they do have an old set of frost covers they can use if the temperatures drop in winter. If needed, they will also use them on the training pitches - if it was seen as a priority.

At Saltex 2019, Kris entered SGL Systems’



“

Over the whole industry, the money situation puts a lot of people off. I hear from people at league clubs who have to struggle with very limited budgets and fight against people at the top - which is no fun



The University won an SGL BU50 to trial



When we are looking to invest in a new machine, where possible, we will have on-site demos to help us choose the best machine for the job

competition to win a three-month trial of the BU50 - the first grow light in the basic line range from SGL. Luckily, Loughborough University was chosen out of almost one hundred competitors and is the first-ever school to use SGL grow lights. "We have always talked about having something to help aid this particular pitch, and we were going to Saltex to see if there were any small rigs we could look at buying. We obviously do not have the kind of budget that will

stretch to buy the bigger rigs that you see in the Premier League. We went over to the SGL stand and saw the competition was on so I put our name down. I couldn't believe it when we got the call to say we had won and we started the trial last December."

With the rig needing to be assembled on-site - which allows SGL to cut the costs on delivery) - I asked Kris was it easy to put together? "It arrived on a couple of pallets and, with help from Tom Grafen -

SGL's Technical Sales Manager - we all chipped in and put it together. It was very easy to build; just a matter of knocking a few bolts in ... simple."

Kris has already seen some good results from the trial and is keen to invest. "With it being a small unit, we chose to use it in front of the main stand (where we have always had trouble with shade) and also in the goalmouths. We have certainly seen some improvement, but I must admit, it was hard

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Getting Personal

Kris Nurse - he's a pain in the grass but is always happy!

Who are you? Kris Nurse, Team Leader at Loughborough University.

Family status? Married with one daughter.

Who's your hero and why? My dad; he taught me the right way to be in life.

What's been the highlight of your grounds career so far? Groundsman of the Year winner and 3rd nationally at Loughborough Dynamo FC.

If your younger self saw you now, what would he think? He would be saying 'you've put a bit on mate.'

Which famous people wind you up? Piers Morgan.

What job would you love, other than your own? I'd love to have been a professional footballer.

What is your favourite film? Love all the James Bond films.

What scares you? Spiders.

What's the best advice you have ever been given? In this industry you're always going to make mistakes - learn from them and be confident in what you produce.

What is your favourite sport? Football.

Which three people, living or dead, would you invite to a dinner party? Lee Evans, my granddad Norman and Norman Wisdom.



What would your autobiography be called... and who would play you in the film? A Pain in the Grass, but I don't know who would play me to be fair?

Which three albums would you take to a desert island? Oasis - Definitely Maybe, Kasabian and The Smiths.

What's the daftest work-related question you have ever been asked? Do you use different seeds to get stripes in the pitch?

What's your favourite piece of kit? The Koro Field Top Maker.

What three words would you use to describe yourself? Confident, joker and happy.

What is the single most useful thing you could tell a 16-year-old groundsman/greenkeeper? If you enjoy the job there is so much more to it now to learn about and improve on - the sky's the limit!

What talent would you like to have? To sing.

What law/legislation would you like to see introduced? Anything that stops unauthorised use of our pitches and reduces the damage that sometimes results.

to tell last December because it was quite mild. In January and February, we had a cold blitz and, as advised by SGL, we moved it around in certain areas. I definitely noticed vast improvements and recovery was a lot better. Before lockdown, we had spoken to Tom, and we were going to get two second-hand larger rigs, but obviously with everything that has happened, they are now on the back burner."

The decision to invest in a new pitch for the stadium was long overdue; the older fibresand based pitch just could not cope with the amount of games. "When the stadium was built, we had a fibresand pitch put in which would be more durable and could host more games. In the last year of the fibresand pitch, we had ninety-two games on it, drainage also needed addressing as it was capped and the pitch was suffering with a black layer. The main issues

were that the pitch was not a fully constructed fibresand surface; we had basically incorporated fibresand into the existing sand-based pitch and we were Koroing year on year, without replacing the fibre content. It was struggling to drain, and it was unbelievably hard, even with all the aeration we were undertaking."

"One incident we had was when we hosted a Champions League under 23s game between Leicester City and Copenhagen. Two hours before the game, we had a bucket load of rain come down and the water on the pitch just did not budge, so we had to call it off. Unfortunately, we needed these things to happen on those big occasions to force the powers that be to realise the problems we were facing."

Once the go-ahead was given to replace the existing stadium pitch, it was a matter of deciding what would be the best hybrid pitch for



Kris and his team also look after the hybrid pitch



The Koro Field Top Maker is Kris' favourite piece of kit



I really wanted to stay involved in football, as it's something I have done from a very young age; I couldn't see myself working in an office, or doing anything else for that matter

their needs. "We went to other clubs and talked to various other groundsmen. I am quite close with Paul Thompson at Derby County FC, and they use three pitches at the training ground for the first team that are SISGrass. We liked what he had to say, so we decided to go down that route. We also have a partnership with SIS, as all our artificial carpets are done by them, so it was

only natural I suppose. The new pitch has been fully booked in the last twelve months up until lockdown and has brought in the likes of Derby County, which is great."

Kris talks me through the essential maintenance of the hybrid pitch. "In summer, we cut every day (if not every other day) at 25mm with the Cub Cadet Infinicut. In winter, we lift the height of cut to 27mm but

if it is healthy and well, we will keep it at 25mm. Every two weeks, I will use the Clegg hammer to determine how often we use the Toro ProCore on the pitch. To clean out the surface after a game, we will use the flexi-comb brush attachments on the Infinicuts, which are excellent. We will lower the height to get them into the ground and really clean them out."

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Koro Recycler Dresser

Koro Field Top Maker

Charterhouse rink spreaders x 3

Martin Lishman 125l pedestrian sprayer

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Blec Multi-Seeder

Shelton gravel bander

John Deere tractors x 4

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KRM 700l fertiliser spreader

Allett stand-on fertiliser spreader



Every six months, Kris will have soil samples taken from the stadium pitch to help him determine the levels of fertiliser he needs to apply. "At the minute, we are doing a four-week start-up plan (provided by AGS) which, if I'm honest seems like a lot of product, but this is all new to me and I'm still learning about the fertiliser inputs for a very hungry pitch. It can be done every six days with liquids and fertilisers, but obviously, this is a balanced nutritional programme. I'm picking things up pretty fast and if I think something has worked and see some good results, I will report that back."

The University likes to buy all machinery outright. "We are always looking to improve our machinery to help us improve the quality of the pitches. When we are looking to invest in a new machine, where possible, we will have on-site demos to help us choose the best machine for the job."

"The University are keen on health and safety and the environment. We

have already invested in the Infinicut battery-powered hand mowers to help reduce hand held arm vibration and noise alike. Further down the line, I can see us moving towards more battery-powered machinery as the technology becomes more widely available. Using battery power over diesel and petrol is better for our health and those around us."

Kris brought up the subject of attracting younger people into the industry, so I was interested on hearing his thoughts on the matter. "The salaries don't help; I have just lost two of my lads to the Premier League; they were offered more money than they were getting here. Over the whole industry, the money situation puts a lot of people off. I hear from people at league clubs who have to struggle with very limited budgets and fight against people at the top - which is no fun. As an industry, we must try to prove to people that the right thing has got to be done and it takes certain things to happen to get the results. The worrying part is the amount of people who do not want to be in groundsmanship anymore."



We have always talked about having something to help aid this particular pitch. I couldn't believe it when we got the call to say we had won and we started the trial last December



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Worcestershire CCC

2020 not out!



After serious flooding at Blackfinch New Road, Worcestershire CCC's head groundsman **Tim Packwood** faced new challenges as he prepared for the new season with a shrinking team and a set of Covid protocols. Jane Carley met up with him as play finally got underway again

They say that a week is a long time in politics, but three months is a lot longer to be looking at an eerily quiet cricket pitch, unsure of when play will begin again.

This is the dilemma that has faced cricket groundsmen up and down the country who, as sport has gradually got up and running again, find themselves in a whole new world of social distancing, 'bubbles' and temperature checks.

When we last spoke to Tim Packwood at Worcestershire County Cricket Club back in March, Britain was on the brink of lockdown, but a bigger concern was how to prepare for the new season - if it happened - with a ground which had only just emerged from its worst flood for twelve years.

Sited on the flood plain next to the River Severn, the club is used to flooding at its Blackfinch New Road ground, but autumn 2019's renovations had been obliterated by an earlier-than-expected deluge, and the pressure was on to get the pitch into shape for whatever sport was to come.

"Whilst we have small machinery for individual wickets, we use contractors for the square. Carrick Sports were lined up to come in the Monday after lockdown, but were forced to cease operations by the Covid regulations," explains Tim.

It was time for Plan B - tractor mounted scarifiers were loaned by Warwickshire County Cricket Club and Worcester Royal Grammar School and a disc seeder from Kings School in Worcester and the work carried out by Tim and his team.

"The next challenge was how to transport them to us, but we were helped out by Richard Ding of R&D Plant who look after our own machinery. The company also provides our winter storage, so we had machines that we needed to get back from its premises too."

Impressively, the renovations - scarification, seeding, fertiliser and topdressing - were completed by 31st March.

"We generally only use a light topdressing to get into the scarification lines and cover seed, but the levels had been lost in some places due to being underwater for so long, so this also needed addressing. With little idea how much, if any, cricket would be



It was actually enjoyable to be more hands-on, and I ended up doing the majority of pitch preparations myself. But, without the matches, I was still working shorter days



The ground underwater earlier in the year. There was so much silt washed onto some areas, the groundsmen were forced to break it up and use it as topdressing!



As the waters began to subside in March, just when pre-season work should have been in full swing

played, and also of how finances would be affected, the goal was to prepare to ECB standards," explains Tim.

The outfield was finished on 5th April, with the scarifier doing extra duty removing silt washed into the ground from nearby farmland. "There was so much silt in places, we broke it up and used it as topdressing."

Just nine weeks later, with plans for a return to professional cricket looming, preparations on the square began.

"It was very early, but we just didn't have the time window offered by completing renovations in the autumn," he comments. "Worcestershire was one of the first clubs to bring back furloughed players and, whilst it added to the pressure, it was good to see them and gave us something firm to work towards."

There had been no time for renovations in the net area, which had simply been maintained, so nets and bowling areas were set up in the centre and further practice areas on the outfield.

Thoughts of trying a new seed mix were quickly discarded, with the reliability of local supply of the tried and tested mix from Carrick Sports more important.

Ironically, after all the flooding, the dry spring was now causing problems.

"We had just 15mm of rain, and there was that really hot spell in the middle," Tim recalls. "We haven't historically needed to water much in the summer so have no pop-

up sprinklers at the moment and having fitted a booster pump to the water system I was moving sprinklers by hand between mowing runs!"

By this time, Tim was working largely on his own - the club had kept on a skeleton staff from 14th March to 13th April, but then furloughed the three groundsmen.

"It was actually enjoyable to be more hands-on, and I ended up doing the majority of pitch preparations myself. But, without the

matches, I was still working shorter days."

The peace and quiet soon ended with the news that Pakistan would be coming to Blackfinch New Road to train in eleven days.

"We were all very pleased - it was a boost for the club and proof that we are not a 'one trick pony.' We provided a 'bubble' for the squad, who were staying in the Premier Inn next door, accessing the ground directly from the hotel and being provided with all their meals by our caterers. It was very successful and we hope there will be demand from other overseas squads in the future."

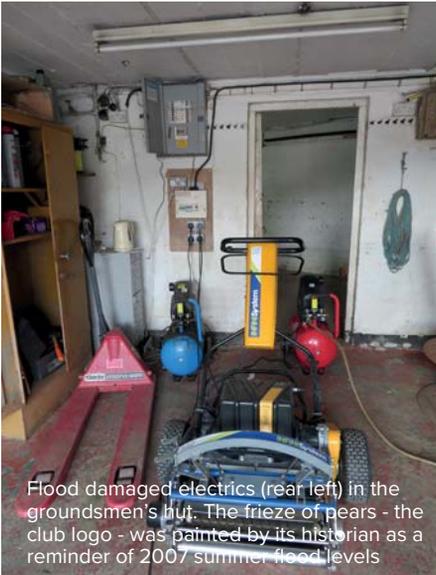
Tim and other club staff - plus the rest of the grounds team before and after furlough - had already proved adept at social distancing, but the 'bubble' protocols took it to another level.

"We were not allowed within 20m of the players so, if we needed to get them off the field, we'd have to use the horn on the tractor to get their attention. It took a bit of getting used to and we made liberal use of What's App to communicate."

The club's players transferred to nearby



Evidence of the layer of mud which coated the groundsmen's hut



Flood damaged electrics (rear left) in the groundsman's hut. The frieze of pears - the club logo - was painted by its historian as a reminder of 2007 summer flood levels



Mown and almost there on 9th June

Kidderminster to continue training during Pakistan's visit, having also used this ground for a week before returning to Blackfinch New Road in June.

At the start of lockdown, work plans were submitted to the club's Covid officer to formalise social distancing, and the protocols are still in place – the mess room is off limits due to a narrow corridor, with hospitality boxes deployed for breaks. Each member of staff has a daily temperature

check and has to complete a three question health check on What's App before coming into work.

"From the first week of the pandemic, if a player had left his bags or even a bottle of water in an area where we wanted to work, we couldn't touch them. No-one realised how long it would last, but it has become normal practice now."

"When just two groundsman are working, it's easy, as we have two rollers and two

tractors which are assigned to different members of staff. With more staff now back at work it's more difficult, but we disinfect everything regularly and just have to remember that you can't jump on and off any tractor."

Plans to recruit a fifth member of staff have been put on hold, and Tim 'borrowed' a groundsman for the first week of the Pakistan fortnight, only for his assistant to break his wrist, taking them back down to a

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Gary Barwell at Edgbaston set up a regular zoom meeting and it's been very helpful - we've all come together much more for the sake of the sport

team of three again. For labour-intensive jobs such as covers, a member of the bar staff has helped out.

"As we work outside, we're in the best situation but, if we have to come closer than 2m, we will wear masks. The only time that it's likely would be to roll out new sheet covers for example," he says.

There may be a few head-scratching moments as play resumes however - only umpires will be allowed to touch the stumps, so if the stumps are not pulled during a bad weather interruption it could be difficult to put the covers on!

"We're not supposed to be on the field when the players are on, so the onset of rain could require some quick action."

The first fixture scheduled was a 'neutral ground' match for Lancashire vs Leicestershire, ahead of the home squad return to Blackfinch New Road on 8th August.

The season may be extended for the Bob



The Pakistan squad spent a fortnight training at Blackfinch New Road in July. With the help of the Premier Inn next door, the club was able to provide a Covid-secure 'bubble' for the squad

Willis four-day matches into the first week of October, with a 'neutral ground' club hosting the final.

"It's not ideal because we will be wanting to get on with renovations but, if spectators are allowed later in the season, it would be very positive for the club and we will obviously support it."

Tim suggests that budgets have not been affected significantly, although fertiliser is only being bought in as needed for each application.

"We know it would be cheaper to buy in bulk, but we can't store it due to our winter flooding issues. One impact of the pandemic is that we have rethought our machinery policy, and intend to purchase our own renovation equipment in the future to reduce our reliance on contractors, so we are now actively seeking off-site storage."

"We'll generally topdress the outfield at the end of the season, but for 2020/21 we will focus on getting the grass cover and top

dress in February if needed - so much topdressing was washed away this year. However, the square will be renovated in the autumn to give it the full growing season."

Other plans include making the ground as 'flood ready' as possible after the mess room electrics were damaged in winter 2019, and refurbishments to public facilities as and when they are needed.

When asked of any positives that have come out of this most unusual of seasons, Tim comments on the improved communication between county cricket groundsmen.

"Gary Barwell at Edgbaston set up a regular zoom meeting and it's been very helpful - we've all come together much more for the sake of the sport."



Back in the game...Blackfinch New Road looking good after a late renovation and truncated preparation due to Covid uncertainty



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The Victory Sports Ground

Dad's army take the flack

During a typical Friday in June, the final preparations would usually be being made to the square at The Victory Ground but, instead, it is routine mowing and watering that is the order of the day. Operating the Toro Reelmaster 5410 is Head Groundsman, **Mark Flack**, with his father and Grounds Director, **Bobby Flack**, hand watering. Their involvement in this proud Suffolk sporting institution has spanned decades, and their passion and love for 'The Vic' is shared by many. Blair Ferguson reports

The Victory Sports Ground, located in the historic Suffolk town of Bury St. Edmunds, should have been celebrating its centenary in style during July, showcasing a proud history of hosting Minor Counties cricket, including welcoming some of the greatest names in the English game including Sir Alastair Cook, Ian Botham and Alan Lamb. Instead, like so many in June, they were unsure when cricket would return and were trying their best to be ready for when the green light was given.

The Victory Sports Ground was created to commemorate the employees of Greene King - who have been brewing beer and running pubs from Bury since 1799 - that served in the First World War. Many died in

the conflict, and twenty-one of the brewery's employees were amongst them.

It was Managing Director, Edward Lake, who came up with the idea of a permanent memorial; he himself had six sons serve, all of whom remarkably returned home. Edward convinced Greene King to purchase twenty-six acres of land and open a sports ground for the returning members of brewery staff.

So, in July 1920, it was opened along with a plaque that read; "Edward thought nothing could be more appropriate than a large recreation ground where men of the present and future generation could join in those manly sports which have made the English nation what it was".

Over time, the ground built a fantastic reputation whilst being maintained by

Herbert Hargreaves, who had played cricket for Yorkshire alongside some great players, including Sir Len Hutton. In 1975 it was purchased by St Edmundsbury Borough Council who operated it as a community facility. The quality declined, and the pitches were deemed unsuitable for Minor Counties cricket. In 1995, a group of individuals took over the running and maintenance of the site. The quality steadily increased and, in 2007, discussion commenced concerning improving the pavilion and changing facilities. The old pavilion had served its purpose and was badly in need of replacement. These discussions involved Bury St. Edmunds Cricket Club and South Lee School, who





I'm a solicitor by profession and remain a solicitor. I had been in a law firm for twenty years and was just looking for something different to do

were seeking to provide an indoor sports hall but had insufficient space on their adjacent site.

The discussions, negotiations and fundraising culminated in the creation of the superb new indoor sports centre and community pavilion which was built in 2013 at a cost of £2.25 million. The old pavilion was taken down in 2014. In it were memorial boards containing the names of Greene King employees who died in both World Wars and these have now been returned to the company to be displayed in their museum. The ground is now owned by The Victory Sports Community Interest Company (CIC) who purchased the ground from St Edmundsbury Borough Council on January 1st, 2013.

In its current format, the ground has two cricket squares (twenty-nine strips) in the summer, nine football pitches used by Sporting 87 FC - who have 750 members from four years old up to seventy - and a croquet lawn that is looked after by the club. Having three stakeholders funding the



ground has been pivotal in the development of the site and will be a crucial part of the future with all parties needed to ensure it thrives.

Maintenance of the fifteen acres is undertaken by Mark Flack and his enthusiastic group of volunteers - Bob Flack (his father), John Hargreaves, Keith Bishop, Roger Howlett and Chris Winning - who have an average age of seventy-two. Mark makes it clear that without the help of these men - whom he refers to as his dad's army - the site wouldn't be in the superb condition it is now, and that, without the guidance of Bob and John, he wouldn't have the skills or knowledge he now has.

Mark explains: "I'm a solicitor by profession and remain a solicitor. I had been in a law firm for twenty years and was just looking for something different to do. I think life is about making changes, doing different things and learning new skills, so I was looking to do something else, the groundsmen here left and so the planets sort of aligned."

"Dad was working here with John, whose dad was a great professional cricketer and the original groundsmen, who everybody looks up to here at The Victory Ground. Dad and John were running the ground between them on a voluntary basis, and they said why don't you come up and see what you think to it, and I've been here ever since."

"It was lovely to spend time outside, notwithstanding some of the awful weather that we got. It was a completely different skill set to pick up, which was great. It was a real learning curve - and I'm still learning, even though I've been doing it for ten years. I was very lucky in that I was working alongside people who had so much experience. I don't think you can really teach this job. You have to suck it up like osmosis, the more you do it, the more bits you pick up."

"Nobody can really sit you down and say 'right, this is what you do today, and this is what you do tomorrow'. So I think I was very fortunate to be able to do that. Although you could say the level of volunteer assistance



I don't think you can really teach this job. You have to suck it up like osmosis, the more you do it, the more bits you pick up



Baz is ten and a half years old - or seventy in human years - making him the youngest volunteer!



I think the distribution of the funds, be it on the grounds or elsewhere in the club, needs to be carefully considered because money isn't easy to come by

naturally starts to tail off a bit as these guys get older, I have been fortunate that my knowledge and skill set has increased as some of them haven't been able to spend as much time up here as they used to."

"On the volunteer ground staff, we had more minor county cricketers than Bury St. Edmunds cricket club for most of the time I've been here. It's lovely to work with those guys who have such a passion for not just cricket but this ground. They have all played a high standard of cricket together, so it's

great to spend time with them and hear their stories about cricket and the ground, and that's what it's about. Not just all the hard work that comes with it but being able to enjoy their company and the contribution that they make."

"Providing and maintaining sports isn't cheap, and often it is the contribution of volunteers that make the standards possible, and sometimes that contribution can be overlooked. We host semi-professional cricket here where players are being paid,

and sometimes I think the distribution of the funds, be it on the grounds or elsewhere in the club, needs to be carefully considered because money isn't easy to come by. People putting back into the sport after they have finished playing is very important at grassroots level and for a number of reasons you see less of it nowadays, but it is vital to a lot of clubs and sports as it is here."

"So many people that I know have a real love of the ground, dad in particular, and it was important for me to try and do all I could



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It's now my responsibility to try and maintain the standards that they have worked so long and hard to get it to. I do feel that if it doesn't look good or a wicket doesn't play well that I'm letting them down

to maintain that at the highest level we can. But it's true, without the volunteers, the ground wouldn't look half as good because it's only through their assistance that I'm able to keep it at a certain level. I don't feel responsible for the way they look at the ground, yet I do in a way. I feel as though I've been handed the baton, and it's now my responsibility to try and maintain the standards that they have worked so long and hard to get it to. I do feel that if it doesn't look good or a wicket doesn't play well that I'm letting them down."

Meeting the standards of the three interested parties is something Mark has to contend with constantly. The needs in terms of quality are much higher for Minor Counties cricket than they are a school sports day, but there isn't an option to flit from one standard to another; the default setting is always as high as possible. Ultimately, the aim is to give everyone a bit of what they want while working within the collective financial means of the CIC because everyone contributes to the running costs of the site.

Usually, this is achieved with a tried and



tested formula, but a visit to Edgbaston last year gave Mark inspiration to experiment, with time being the only restricting factor. The punishing schedule that swings from cricket to football within days doesn't give time for experimentation, but a complete cancellation of sport has allowed for some tinkering and pitch improvements without the worry of ruining a pitch for a matchday.

"The pinch point for us is the changeover between cricket and football," Mark explains. "That is the time that you're putting the squares to bed, footballers are screaming for their pitches and a lot of people at that time are talking about reseeding pitches. So we never close. I appreciate that everybody wants to get on and people want to play longer and sooner so we tend to get squeezed in the middle there, which can be a bit of an issue for us. So we try and work around people as much as we can, and we try and get people to come and help us during that time so we can get the goals up and the work done. The guys from the football club give us a hand during that time, and they'll happily help us put the squares to bed, even though they don't play on them

and that's something I really appreciate."

"But it is difficult to find a good time to do major pitch renovations. This year, we would have been quite fortunate, and I've done some on the football pitches myself. Initially, I thought great, there will be no one on it so I can do some reseeding, but it's been too dry. We're quite lucky with irrigation, we can irrigate practically anywhere but it is one source of water, and the pressure is about two bar, so it's not great. We are able to get some water out, but it is cost as well."

"There are lots of things I'd like to do, but we have to be realistic about the resources that we have. We are always open to new ideas like the little training wicket that we've cut out in the last few weeks, just to give the guys a chance to get out on the grass and it's been great. I think the ground staff have been just as excited about it as some of the lads that have come up and used it."

"But it's difficult because you want to give things like that a go, but you don't want them to go wrong and impact the Saturday. This year, in particular, it's been great to have a little tinker out there. With our little practice strip, we've started trialling some



That is the time that you're putting the squares to bed, footballers are screaming for their pitches and a lot of people at that time are talking about reseeding pitches





Gary was so generous with his time and understood the trials and tribulations of ordinary groundsmen at lower levels - he really spurred us on to try and put some of these things into action

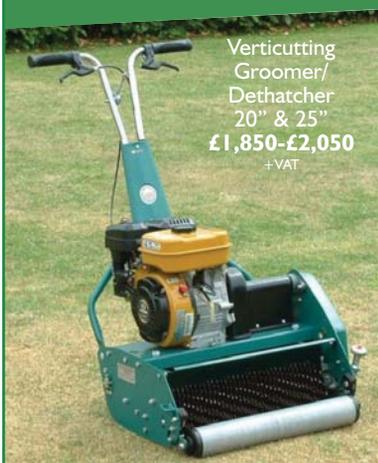
different techniques, and if it does go wrong the guys are terrific, they won't mind because they are grateful to have something to use. It's been a good opportunity from a fairly negative situation."

"Through Bob's County Cricket connections [he is a level 4 cricket coach], we were fortunate enough to spend some time with Gary Barwell, Head Groundsman at Edgbaston, last year and, in many ways, he opened our eyes to the science of

preparing wickets and was a catalyst for our experimentation here. For example, he suggested far more brushing up of the grasses during preparation, not cutting the strip down until much nearer match day and looking at the effects of varying cutting heights. He was so generous with his time and understood the trials and tribulations of ordinary groundsmen at lower levels - he really spurred us on to try and put some of these things into action."

"We always used to really rip out our wickets and really rip out the grass with a manual scarifier. This time, what I've been trying is to verti-cut it really low instead, and I'm finding that it is preserving a lot more of the grass and the finer grasses. We aren't ripping as much of the good quality stuff out, and I think it will mean that the wickets will come back quicker because we have to re-use them and that's always a big challenge here. We need to get them off the wicket

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We're not all so stuck in the mud to think that we can't dig up a bit of The Victory Ground and put a 3G pitch in, very much even my hardened volunteers who lived on the ground and were born here see it as the right thing to do

that they've played on, even though they want to keep training on it all week, because we need to get water on it to be able to re-use it later on in the season. This new method of preparing the wicket will mean there will be more grass left on it and makes it easier for us to get the wickets back to re-use, so that's just a little thing that we've tried."

"We've also made the training wickets slightly narrower, and that has saved us a bit of time because we can roll them easier. Obviously, we can't do that when they are playing, but it's quite interesting to see how things change when you try something else. We always have to look at ways we can save money or use what we have better, and I think that really is the key. We use the rotary mower to cut the outfield on the second pitch, and there was a big resistance when it was first suggested a few years ago because we always used a cylinder mower. But we gave it a try, and it's been great because it's been much quicker and the quality of the result is good. So that's saved time by using more modern technology."

"It's working around things and trying to find constructive solutions to the problems you've got without saying I need more money. We all need more money, but is there a workaround and will it compromise the quality, and that's the issue. But so far with the help and budgets that we get and the support we have from the voluntary workers we're sort of there."

Finding a balance that suits everyone has been a process, and one that Mark, along with the CIC, has been able to find. There is longevity in their thinking and an appetite to ensure that, in the year 2120, those in charge speak fondly of how the site progressed. One way of ensuring that is by diversifying the site for additional income. Though not a big town, the demand for sport in Bury is large and other clubs, such as Bury St. Edmunds Rugby Club, operate floodlit midweek football leagues.

Although the history of The Vic is built on cricket, it is somewhat ironic that its future



may be supported by football. Through Sporting 87 there is a plan to construct a floodlit 3G pitch that can be used for training and rented out to local schools and clubs. There have been countless examples of football clubs sharing space with cricket clubs and eventually edging them out of the site but, as with everything else here, it's the combination of clubs that makes the operation work.

"The Victory Ground has always been associated with cricket, and nothing will change there," Mark said. "But, from a financial point of view, in many ways football may turn out to be a significant part of the future. A lot of cricket grounds have found that to their cost in that football has taken over, and cricket has been put in a corner or disappeared completely. We are very keen that shouldn't happen here, and I'm sure it won't, but the income that a 3G pitch can generate is something we cannot ignore."

"We're not all so stuck in the mud to think that we can't dig up a bit of The Victory Ground and put a 3G pitch in, very much even my hardened volunteers who lived on the ground and were born here see it as the right thing to do. I thought there would be quite a bit of resistance, but everyone sees it as a good thing. You've got to move with the times and, to preserve what they like about the top of the ground, you maybe have to give a little bit at the bottom."

"The different stakeholders have worked together and played together for years now, and I think that has helped them not feel threatened by each other, and they see the way it's going and see how expensive and difficult it is. So, they understand that a floodlit 3G pitch is a potential solution to the problem. It's looking to the future, and for us as well it is about trying to bring everyone together. There are a lot of partisan issues, but the future of the ground has got to be a collective thing."

"We have to be more together, and there needs to be a better synergy, we've all got to respect each others' positions and support each other and, from a ground point of view, that's what we try to do. You can't live on memories, we need to create new memories that resonate with people today, and I think there is definitely an enthusiasm to do that."



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Drifffield Town Cricket Club

All smiles at Drifffield

After a delayed meeting due to the Covid-19 crisis, Lee Williams, finally caught up with **Mark Goddard**, the club's Head Groundsman and his right-hand man, former Head Groundsman Phil Skelton, on what turned out to be a sunny day in July



Drifffield Town Cricket and Recreation Club is situated in the East Riding market town of Drifffield, also known as Great Drifffield. The club hosts a variety of sports, but its main attraction is cricket, with the first team playing in the ECB Yorkshire Premier League North. First-class cricketers Andrew Gale, Richard Pyrah, Steven Patterson, Jonny Bairstow, Ishara Amerasinghe and Abid Ali have all played for the club.

The site covers eleven acres and provides a variety of sports for the local area, including two cricket pitches, two bowls greens, six grass tennis courts, three hard tennis courts and a two-lane fully enclosed ECB approved 'tp365' non-turf cricket practice facility.

At the age of fifteen, Mark was playing

cricket for his local village club in Hutton Cranswick. This is where and when he began to take an interest in the maintenance of the square, helping the groundsman look after it. "After leaving school, I took out a motor engineering course for two years, I enjoyed it but, at that time, I started to play golf. With my interest in gardening and now golf, I had a change of heart in what career path I wanted to take. Through Bishop Burton College, I got an apprenticeship at a golf club/caravan park, where I gained experience maintaining both sites. After ten years there, I ended up becoming a plumber for four years, working with one of the wife's relatives. The job wasn't for me working in people's houses all day, and I decided I wanted to get back into the sports turf industry and back out in the fresh air."







Not being at school, and as soon as the government relaxed some of the rules, he volunteered to help me out five days a week. He has been here for the last nine weeks and has really stepped up

"It was 2017, and I was playing cricket for Driffield when I heard that Chris Skelton, who had spent twelve years working alongside his dad Phil as a groundsman, was looking at leaving, which opened up an opportunity."

With his son leaving, Phil was ready to consider retirement. "I was turning sixty-five years old and thought this was a good opportunity to retire as I didn't want to have to go through the whole process of training anyone up," Phil explains.

Fortunately for Mark, this meant the club were now looking for a Head Groundsman, which became a much more attractive proposition for him.

"I applied for the job and started in August; Phil wasn't due to leave until October, so I had two months with him showing me the ropes. Once we had finished the autumn renovations that year, the club asked Phil if he would stay on two days a week to help me out, which I am pleased he agreed to do."

Since lockdown, Mark has been without the help of Phil for over three months as he



Left to right, Ruben, Mark and Phil

was furloughed, but a special mention has to go to Ruben Syrett. "Ruben was meant to be our Saturday lad, and we had agreed to employ someone to do two days a week over the summer months, but we were not able to take him on with the Covid-19 situation. Not being at school, and as soon as the government relaxed some of the rules, he volunteered to help me out five days a week. He has been here for the last nine weeks and has really stepped up. Without him, I would have been struggling to maintain the site."

I asked Ruben if he would like to take an apprenticeship in groundsmanship at the club if that was an option? "I have enrolled on an engineering course, but I'm undecided on what career path I want to take. If the opportunity arose to join Mark here, I would seriously consider it as I have enjoyed my time here so far."

Mark tells me he would love the club to provide the opportunity for Ruben to join him as an apprentice and he has already approached the club. "Four weeks ago, I put the idea to the committee. We have looked

at the figures, and it is much more beneficial for us to take on an apprentice five days a week full-time than a bloke on the minimum wage for two days a week over the summer. They agree it is a brilliant idea, but we have no income at the minute with the bar only just being able to open. The government have just announced a scheme pushing for apprenticeships. So, fingers crossed, we may be able to give Ruben the option of joining us very soon."

The grass surfaces are constructed out of old farmland and Phil explains that the old furrows still present problems where they run right through what is now the bowling greens and cricket squares. "No matter how much we have topped over the years, they just settle again," bemoans Mark. "It is starting to get a lot more obvious on the outfield as well."

The club has two full sets of roll-on covers, lay flat sheets and an irrigation system which they extended out to the square last winter. "We have four old Toro pop-ups around the bowling greens. We have extended this system, adding four new





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It is much more beneficial for us to take on an apprentice five days a week full-time than a bloke on the minimum wage for two days a week over the summer

outlets around the main square, and we also took one across to the back square. It makes it much easier to hose down the squares when required, plus it saves time.”

In 2018, final plans were put in place to install an ECB approved 'tp365' non-turf cricket practice facility. This project was funded through various organisations, including Sport England, a Tesco Bags of Help grant, the Horace Taylor Trust, East Riding of Yorkshire Council, the ECB plus

other external sources.

By February, Anthony Burton, Product Development Manager at total-play Ltd, met Club Chairman Mick, Ian Stabler (Secretary, Junior Section) and Mark to discuss final build location and rerouting of power cables to make sure everyone was happy with the design specification. They decided to build the nets on one of the grass tennis courts.

Everything was set to go ahead when there was an unprecedented amount of

snow and rainfall, so work eventually got underway in April. The build by total-play was in two phases with their 'construction' team followed by their 'finishing' team who attended the site to complete it with steelwork, netting, shock pads and carpets. This was no small endeavour with 200 tonnes of material shifted, then care and attention given to making sure the natural grass access into the site was remediated, graded out and put back to grass. "It's as if



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There is always talk of clubs having to sell off land to keep some revenue coming in, which is something that has been mentioned here in the past



they've never been there," says Mark.

Mark talks me through the maintenance of all the grass surfaces, starting with the cricket square. "The squares are cut at 12mm all summer, raked out every two weeks, and we will verti-cut as well now as we have just purchased a verti-cut unit for our Allett C20. To prepare a wicket normally two weeks out we will water if needed, thin out using the verti-cutter or the SISIS rake on the back of the tractor. We cut out the debris with a John Deere 2653A triple mower on its lowest setting until we stop getting anything in the boxes. From there, we will soak it if needed and commence

rolling depending on how quick it dries out. These factors determine how frequently we roll. A lot of people control their drying by sheeting, but we have cricket every night, so there is no way we could leave sheets on to stop it drying out. So, the wicket is determined a lot by the weather conditions, even though we do have the roll-on covers and sheets available."

"The outfield is cut at 12mm with the triple, keeping it at the same height as the square so it can all be cut in one hit. We box off the main outfield twice a week and the back outfield is double cut on a Thursday without the boxes attached."

"We cut one bowling green a day with the Allett C20 set at 5mm. Then we would normally have a 3-week rolling programme of works - we verticut one week, spike with pencil tines the next and cut the following week."

"Tennis courts are cut twice a week with the John Deere triple at a height of 10mm with the boxes on and the headlands at 12mm. Then they are marked out once a week."

Fertiliser programmes on the grass playing surfaces are basic, which comes down to the budgets available to Mark at the time. "On the outfields, we will use a

Getting Personal

Mark Goddard: come up and see me, make me smile

Who are you? Mark Goddard, Head Groundsman at Driffield Town Cricket Club and Recreation Ground.

Family status? Married with two girls, 5 and 9 years.

Who's your hero and why? My little girls as they can actually get me to smile.

What's been the highlight of your grounds career so far? My job at the moment as I've always wanted to work here from when I was a kid.

If your younger self saw you now, what would they think? I wish he would smile.

Which famous people wind you up? Overpaid football players.

What job would you love, other than your own? Would love to work at a County cricket ground.

What was the most embarrassing moment in your life? Any time someone asks me to spell something. It is definitely not my strong point.

What is your favourite film? The Shawshank Redemption.

What scares you? Having to give a speech. Something happening to my girls.

What would your autobiography be called... and who would play you in the film? Carry On Regardless. Ricky Gervais in Afterlife.

What is your favourite sport? Cricket.

What would you cast into Room 101? Soap Operas.

Which historical time and place would you most like to visit? The Industrial Revolution. I would like to work on steam engines.

Do you have a lifetime ambition? Swimming at the Great Barrier Reef.

Which three people, living or dead, would you invite to a dinner party? David Jason. David Attenborough and Fred Dibnah.

What's the best advice you have ever been given? Proper preparation prevents poor performance.

What's your favourite smell? Fresh baked bread.

Which three albums would you take to a desert island? Coldplay. Queen. Robbie Williams.

What's the daftest work-related question you have ever been asked? Can you not use white tape instead of paint on the grass courts? Or, is this your full-time job?



What's your favourite piece of kit? John Deere Aercore walk behind.

What three words would you use to describe yourself? Quiet. Reliable. Inventive.

What is the single most useful thing you could tell a 16-year-old groundsman? Do it right, do it once.

What talent would you like to have? To have a good memory.



20:5:8+MgO+Ca once a year. The square normally gets a feed in spring and autumn with a 4:0:8 at 70g/m², but this year we have also used Evolution Micro 14:4:8 from Agrovista Amenity. Phil and I have been impressed with the results. To give it a boost through the season, we will use some liquid products from Yara which are cheap and cheerful.”

One slight advantage Mark has is the club's chairman works for Complete Weed Control, so every so often he will spray the outfield with a selective weedkiller and will also apply some liquid iron.

“The bowling greens in autumn will get a dose of 4:0:8 and, in winter, they will also be sprayed with a winter package to harden the turf. In the summer, once a month we will apply a wetting agent, and two weeks later we will go on with a feed of chelated iron, maintain and nitrogen. The tennis courts will get one application of 20:5:8 per season, and that's it.”

Where possible, most of the renovations on the grass surfaces are carried out in-house. “The square will be scarified four ways with the Huxley TV36 scarifier at 5mm depth, then we will go over with the brush to clear out all of the grooves we have got. We will then go over with the spiker fitted with 3/8” solid tines at a depth of half an inch. We will brush in as much seed as we can and then put down ten bags of Ongar loam on

each of the twelve main wickets - the rest will get seven bags a wicket. It is dragmatted in and a feed applied. The outfield will be scarified as much as we can at the back end of the season.”

“Bowling greens are cut down to 4mm and then scarified two to three ways depending on how the surface holds together. Then we will spiker, overseed and apply topdressing if the budget can stretch that far. We have a large Sisis Trulute, which is six metres wide, to help disburse the dressing and get the levels back.”

Since Mark has been at the club, they have purchased a new Allett C20 cylinder mower outright, plus a second-hand spiker, but this had to go through the executive committee which includes the cricket, tennis, and bowls sections of the club. “If they agree, each section has to pay towards the purchase of the machine. The club runs hand to mouth and, with the pandemic, this has only worsened our situation. So, if we needed to replace the tractor or the triple, which are our biggest expenses, we would have to look at grants. We do have someone looking for grant money all the time and, if they are successful, that's when we will get a new piece of kit.”

As much as is possible, Mark and Phil will carry out servicing and maintenance of the machines to keep the costs down. “We do the oil, air filter, fuel filter changes, replace



bottom blades, backlapping and will fix what we can ourselves. Anything we cannot fix, along with the cylinder regrinds, we send to F G Adamson & Son who are our local machinery dealer.”

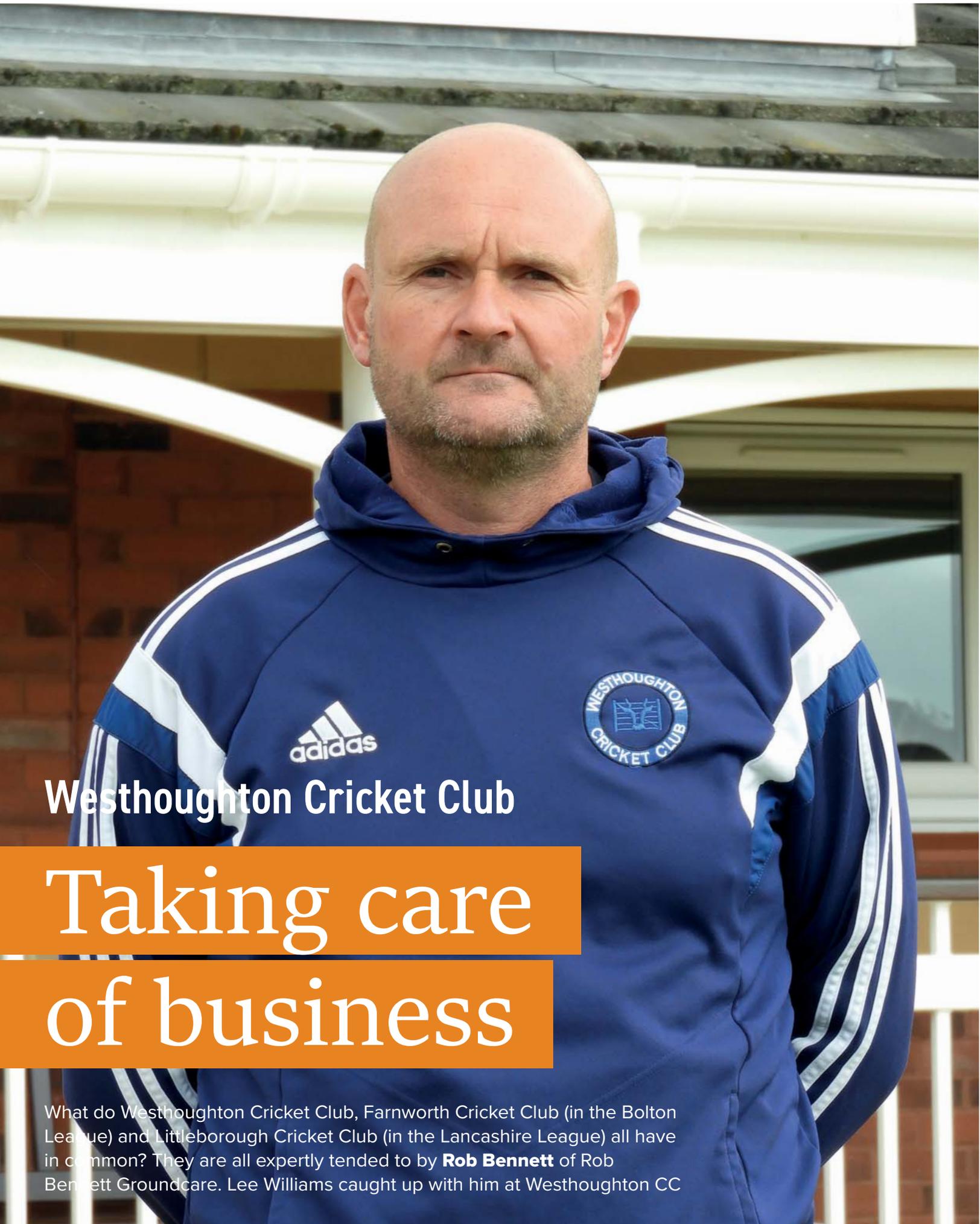
Phil has spent over forty years working at the club and has seen many changes over the years. I asked him what he thought the future of clubs like Driffield were when funds are so hard to come by? “Tennis is a dwindling sector, and they are taking up a lot of land. And bowls is hardly thriving, unlike cricket. There is always talk of clubs having to sell off land to keep some revenue coming in, which is something that has been mentioned here in the past. Clubs may have to look at ways of diversifying that may include accommodating other sports such as football. This would help drive people towards the bar facilities in winter when cricket isn't being played. Or investing in artificial surfaces which can be used day and night, if floodlit, to provide that much needed extra income.”



What's in the shed?

John Deere 2653a triple mower
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Westhoughton Cricket Club

Taking care of business

What do Westhoughton Cricket Club, Farnworth Cricket Club (in the Bolton League) and Littleborough Cricket Club (in the Lancashire League) all have in common? They are all expertly tended to by **Rob Bennett** of Rob Bennett Groundcare. Lee Williams caught up with him at Westhoughton CC



I don't know what we are going to do as an industry to attract more people, it is a difficult one and cleverer people than me have tried to sort it out in the past. I believe getting involved in the industry most of the time comes from being interested in cricket, golf, football etc.



Westthoughton's modern clubhouse

What first caught my eye when I entered the car park at Westthoughton was the pristine-looking outfield - which was all striped up and ready for play - and the impressive, modern-looking clubhouse.

I have known Rob Bennett for quite some time, and it was interesting to see how his career had moved on since his time at Rochdale Football Club. While I was at Oldham Athletic AFC, we would be on the phone most weeks discussing our similar situations.

Rob has found his way back to doing what he loves the most - looking after and preparing cricket wickets - which he has been doing since he was fifteen, beginning by helping out his dad who looked after Astley & Tyldesley Cricket Club.

"After leaving school, I was given the wrong careers advice and ended up going

into joinery. If I had been given a choice to go into groundsmanship, I would have done, but that wasn't an option back then. I gained most of my experience as a groundsman whilst working with my dad, cutting the outfield and preparing the wickets for free. When I turned twenty-seven, I was given a chance to start my career in the sportsturf industry at Wigan Athletic FC through Rob Turnbull, the club's head groundsman. I started as a groundsman at Orrell Rugby Club (also owned by Wigan Chairman Dave Whelan) but, after a year there, I was moved down to Wigan Athletic's training ground where I spent a few years working under Rob."

"From Wigan, I moved to Middleton Cricket Club in the Central Lancashire League, where I took over from Ian Mather Brewster as their full-time head groundsman. I spent eight really enjoyable years there before moving to Rochdale

Football Club to take over from Olly Makin, as head groundsman. My first game was in deepest darkest winter - and it had been snowing - so that was a baptism of fire - or should that be 'snow'! After what was a tough and difficult time for me at Rochdale, I had two months of getting my head right."

"I was keen to get back into cricket full-time and saw an advertisement for a head groundsman at Worsley Cricket Club, so I ended up there. A week later, I saw that Farnworth Cricket Club needed a groundsman and I got that too, and I was also doing Heywood Cricket Club part-time."

Rob now had a good base to start his own business. "It works well for me as I can earn more money being self-employed; it is the best thing I have ever done to be fair. Last year, I heard, on the grapevine, that Westthoughton were looking for a groundsman and, after I went for a first and second interview, they said they had heard



I will normally go to Littleborough first, which is the other side of Rochdale, for 6.00am and spend four hours there. From there, I head back down the A58 to Farnworth, and then the rest of the time I spend here at Westhoughton

about the work that I did elsewhere, so they took me on. This place is brilliant, and ideal for me as it's just five minutes from my house. It is a premiers club really, and they have the money to back up what they want to achieve."

Rob's qualifications include an NVQ Level 2 in Sports Turf, plus he has completed most courses and qualifications in cricket. He would also like to do NVQ Level 3, but it is a cost he cannot commit to at this moment in time.

So, how does he manage to split his time between all three clubs when the season gets started? "It's difficult," he confesses. "I will normally go to Littleborough first, which is the other side of Rochdale, for 6.00am and spend four hours there. From there, I head back down the A58 to Farnworth, and then the rest of the time I spend here at Westhoughton. I feel managing three clubs is enough. I don't want things to suffer. I could do more and take the money, but then one of the clubs would suffer, and I don't agree with that. If you're doing a job, you do it right, don't you? I work seven days a week



Littleborough Cricket Club

in summer, and I don't take any time off from March to October, I take my holidays after the season has finished."

Rob appreciates any help he can get along the way and is grateful to the volunteers who help him out. "At Littleborough, Mark Whitley helps me out with the rolling and will even meet me at 7.00am on a matchday to move the covers. At Farnworth, Simon Booth is great when it comes to the organisational side, like getting machines. Here at Westhoughton, I have a few people who help on a day to day basis; Steven Barton, Keith Horton and Neil Plimley. They cut all the surrounds, gardens and do all the strimming. This enables me to concentrate on the outfield and square, especially with it being such a big site."

Each club has their own set of challenges, with various constructions, budgets and machines available. "It is all monetary. Here, the square is relatively new, having been constructed eleven years ago. Lancashire CCC were going to use this as their second ground, but they seem to have gone cold on the idea, which is unfortunate. Farnworth

and Littleborough are not constructed squares as such and are probably 100 years old, and a lot of different loams have been put on the squares over the years."

"We have roll-on-covers, general covers and Bowcom Bowdryes at each ground, so we have everything we need at each club to help get the matches on."

"At Westhoughton, we have a fully automatic irrigation system with eight Hunter pop-ups around the wicket, which is fed by a tank through the mains. It is great if I want to put the water on; I can do it while sitting at home in the evening. I can either put one of the pre-programmed cycles on, or I'm able to pop up each individual head if I have the covers on part of the wicket."

Rob talks me through the maintenance he undertakes at all three sites. "During the season, I have to prepare a new wicket nearly every week. I try and use the same method to prepare the wickets at all three sites. On a Monday-Tuesday, I will put the verti-cut through it, making sure not to break into the profile, otherwise the wicket would explode! For half an hour a day it will be



Westhoughton's electronic scoreboard



New nets at Westhoughton



Farnworth Cricket Club

rolled and, if it needs water, this can be applied on a Monday. Cutting will be done daily, taking the height down to 3mm, and then marked out on a Friday. The squares and the outfield are cut four times a week at 13mm, as I find, if I am cutting four times a week, it is quick enough. I do tend to leave a bit more grass on the square at Littleborough with it being an old square. To be honest, it is dead and needs ripping out. It is something we have talked about, but it

would cost the club a hell of a lot of money to put a new square in."

At Westoughton, Rob has a fertiliser programme in place as they have a bigger budget available. At the two other sites, he devises his own programmes. "Here, I use ICL products, and I have Phil Collinson to provide me with a programme which best suits our soil profile. We have seen some excellent results on the square and outfield since starting the programme. I use fertiliser

//

If I want to put the water on I can do it while sitting at home in the evening. I can either put one of the pre-programmed cycles on, or I'm able to pop up each individual head if I have the covers on part of the wicket

from a local supplier on Farnworth and Littleborough. I have a good idea of what is required and what works as I have been using their products for a while."

With the government having given the go-ahead for domestic cricket to restart after lockdown, Rob says this has come as a great relief to both himself and the clubs he works for, as it will bring in much-needed revenue. It also meant he could prepare his first wickets of the season, whilst his plans for

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If we don't get more young people involved, soon people like myself will be working until we are eighty years old, and I do not want to do that!



renovation at all three sites will now go ahead. "I will work with Richard Roberts, Head Greenkeeper at Hart Common Golf Club, to carry out renovations at all three sites. At Westhoughton, I plan to fraise mow the square to take all the vegetation out and start afresh as there is a lot of Poa in it. I will decide at the time to either put the ProCore or Verti-Drain over it, as this will help when keying in the loam. You need something to key into with loam; you cannot just drop it on without keying it in, as you will just start to make pans. We will put down 300-400 bags of loam, which is around seven tonnes, using a drop spreader. I would like to get a laser grading machine in just to move the loam about and fill everything in. After eleven years, there is a bit of settlement on the square. Don't get me wrong, it's flat, but not as flat as I would like it. We will disc seed it three ways with the Vredo using eight bags of Barenbrug Bar Extreme 100% perennial ryegrass. This will come through thick, but I feel it is better having more than not enough, I can just verti-cut out if required."

Rob has some of his own machines that he uses at each club, but he does have machinery available to him which the clubs own themselves. When purchasing machinery, the budget at each venue

determines how they can buy new equipment. "Farnworth and Littleborough would tend to buy second-hand equipment. Here at Westhoughton, if they are going for the smaller machines like a new wicket or square mower, they would go brand new. The bigger purchases they will buy second-hand, like the Toro outfield mower we recently bought from Cheshire Turf Machinery."

Rob suffers from worms on the square and outfield. "I use Purity which is a soil conditioner on the squares. It is not designed to control worms but, if you put it on in the right weather, the surface is heaving with the critters shortly after. Other than that, I will brush the squares every day during the winter months to knock the worm casts off. On the outfield, I will use a brush to knock off the casts; it is the best practice we have available to us."

Rob hinted to me during our catch up that he would like to take on an apprentice, so he can pass on what he has learned over the years. This would also give someone a good base to start a career in the industry. "I think we need more kids involved and more money from the government to help with apprentices. I have looked at getting an apprentice, and I have asked my friend who owns a company what the annual costs are

to take someone on, and it is around £11,000. For me, I just cannot afford to pay someone that kind of money, especially for a young person who cannot touch a machine in the first year hardly. I would love to bring someone into the industry and give them the chance I should have had when I was leaving school but, unfortunately, it is just too much money."

"I don't know what we are going to do as an industry to attract more people, it is a difficult one and cleverer people than me have tried to sort it out in the past. I believe getting involved in the industry most of the time comes from being interested in cricket, golf, football etc. If we don't get more young people involved, soon people like myself will be working until we are eighty years old, and I do not want to do that!"



Westhoughton's pristine outfield



Rob outside the pavilion

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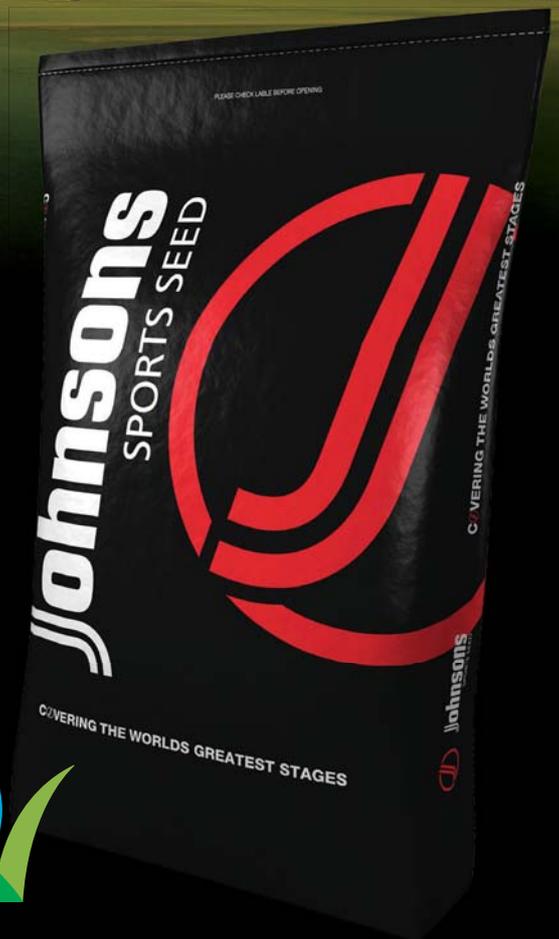
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Brodsworth Hall

Brodsworth Bounces Back!

Brodsworth Hall, virtually unchanged since the 1860s, is one of the most complete surviving examples of a Victorian country house in England. Located in Brodsworth and close to Doncaster, this Grade 1 listed building is often referred to as English Heritage's flagship property in the North. Unable to visit due to Covid-19 closure, David Mears was invited to return recently and spent some time with Senior Gardener, **Edward Watchorn**



Edward Watchorn



The reworked rose arch and new box hedging

My visit was arranged to coincide with the reopening of the grounds to the general public following the Coronavirus lock-down period. Fortunately, it was a warm, sunny day when I arrived at the gardens maintenance facility and met Senior Gardener Edward Watchorn. We stayed outside, sitting either side of a huge table to maintain social distancing and chatted briefly before embarking on a tour of the grounds on foot. Before setting off, Edward explained the two main objectives at Brodsworth Hall: Firstly, conservation of the property and contents rather than restoration. "Curators and conservators realised that the best and most



historically sympathetic approach was to preserve and conserve as much as possible of the house and its contents, whilst staying true to the history of the hall”, says their publicity. Secondly, return the gardens to their earlier formality. Naturally, it is this second objective that is the subject of my visit and the mantra the team work too.

Work on the gardens, as we see them today, was first carried out in the 1860s and, most unusually for that time, were designed by the then owner Charles Thellusson himself along with his head gardener Samuel Taylor. As Edward remarks: “They certainly deserve credit for such splendid and innovative gardens!” Certainly, lavish funds were spent as, in 1863, it has been

recorded, £100,000 was spent on the gardens compared with just £20,000 in the previous year. It has been interesting for me to see this long-term project evolve over the years and the dedication of the gardening team.

Grounds and Facilities Tour

As we entered the public area of the grounds, a few people were to be seen walking through. Edward explained that, because of the Coronavirus requirements, all visits now had to be pre-booked for a particular time, with social distancing being maintained and with limited numbers. There were hand sanitising points, a one-way system around the grounds with discreet



I was posted to Chatsworth. I was truly amazed that I got this opportunity as I had a great fondness for Chatsworth and horticulture



Brodsworth Hall



Busy planting below the Laburnum Arch

signage and a number of stewards strategically placed throughout to provide advice. Some parts were understandably cordoned off, such as Game Larder, Summer House and Target House, which remain closed but otherwise all seemed relatively normal; an impressive arrangement to meet the latest regulations and not as off-putting as one would have envisaged!

We started in the Rose Garden where I noticed a different look (Brodsworth is close to where I live, so frequent visits are made here). Edward showed me the new beehives hidden in one corner. It seems all is working well and the plan is to produce Brodsworth Hall honey! Much had been done in this area, it was plain to see and a good transformation (see project work later).

We moved on to the Target House (see projects) and Range. Where the area leading to the target area at the far end had been lawn in the main previously, it now features new beds, tastefully planted with a wide variety of flowers; the Canterbury Bells were in full bloom as we passed.

From there, we moved into the Fern Dell and one of my favourite areas, with over one hundred fern species, a trickling waterfall and ivy-covered chain swags between iron posts around the upper surrounding paths. This and the previous area were originally a

disused quarry and incorporated into the garden design in the 1860s. From here, we climbed stone steps and walked to the laburnum arch where volunteers and gardeners were planting. We took this opportunity to take the team photo! We moved on to the edge of the gardens and stopped at an ornate pedestrian gate in an old iron fence which opens onto a pasture. Edward wanted to point something out here that I knew absolutely nothing about. He pointed to an area a few yards in front of the gate and asked if I could see the depression in the ground. Yes, it was there but didn't seem to have any significance. Edward said that this area, in the times the house was built, would be full of water in winter and would freeze. The gate was there for staff to access the area to enable them to break the ice and carry it to the nearby ice-house which we saw next and situated under the elevated summer house; amazing! Just yards from this structure is a quiet area of grass shaded by large, well established trees and this is the pets' cemetery. There are proper miniature headstones each engraved with a particular pet's name. Favourite family dogs and a parrot lay here!

We returned to climb the steps up to the Summer House to take in the view of the formal flower garden and, of course, the

house. We then came down to get closer for a photograph of the wonderful planting. I must confess that I was (and probably hundreds more were) disappointed at being unable to visit when the magnificent spring flower beds were at their best; so much beauty and effort and passed unseen! Not to be undaunted however, the gardening team and volunteers were out there planting up new displays. The main feature flower garden, fortunately, had been completed and looked splendid, certainly worthy of photographs. Edward was proud to tell me that he had designed this and that a staggering 24,000 plants had been used; Brodsworth is certainly bouncing back!

We walked through the flower beds to the house and turned to take in the two wonderfully manicured croquet lawns. These two lawns are special as they are an SSSI site due to the presence of Brodsworth Thyme in the grass! They are treated with great care and the mowing, as you'll see from the photograph, is to a high standard. A very strict maintenance regime is necessary and there are restrictions on the use of fertilisers, etc. There is an active croquet club at Brodsworth and a visit when they are playing helps to convey the quintessentially English feel. During summer Sundays (in normal non-Covid times), brass bands play



Beehives behind Rose Garden



View towards the Target House with spring flowers © Dan Hale



The wonderfully manicured croquet lawns

on the terrace and folk sit on their picnic chairs or rugs on the croquet lawns to enjoy the music.

We moved round to the front of the house and took in some of the ten, Grade II listed, marble statues that are placed around the grounds. We saw too the Game Larder and the Privy (the sole toilet in the gardens in the early days). We passed wild flowers growing in unmown areas and caught a glimpse of Brodsworth church before returning the maintenance facility.

Edward's career path

Edward tells me a little more about himself and the job at Brodsworth.

Now thirty-one, Edward went to Myerscough College near Preston at the age of sixteen and studied arboriculture for four years, which included a year in Canada! "Why Canada?" I asked. "Well," he said, "they speak English, have mountains and plenty of trees!" Edward wanted to be a gardener when growing up. Then, having taken up rock climbing too, thought it seemed sensible to try a job with adventure. He found his own placement with a large tree care company and the college approved. "The trees out there are on a totally different scale to here, I can tell you!" said Edward. "I was so lucky as I was well looked after by my new boss Bruce Larson. I

was eighteen years old at the time and needed to sort out a visa and accommodation. Bruce helped me with both and even put me up for a time. I worked hard and must have made an impression as I was promoted and had my own team!"

Back from tree surgery in Canada and returning to college, Edward completed his studies, gaining a triple distinction in Arboriculture. He then went self-employed and included some garden maintenance too. This helped him to be able to care for his dad who was suffering from M.S. During this time, Edward was an explorer scout leader (14-18-year olds) and was able to arrange annual three-week trips to Europe for them

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I presented all these and then was asked to give a public talk at Sheffield Botanical Gardens on a career in horticulture. It was well attended and received, I'm pleased to say!

along with other UK trips throughout the year.

In 2010, Edward took up a job with Anderson Tree Care in Sheffield as foreman and stayed for eight years. Work included domestic council work and emergency 24-hour call-outs. Clients included the National Trust, English Heritage and the Environment Agency. In 2018, and probably wanting to answer his original desires, Edward secured a place on the Historic and Botanic Gardens Training Programme (HBGTP) operated by English Heritage and "luck was with me again" as he said. "I was posted to Chatsworth!" Here he spent a year gaining extensive gardening experience in an historic setting. "I was truly amazed that I got this opportunity as I had a great fondness for Chatsworth and horticulture". Whilst at Chatsworth, academic work was essential too and he had to produce three projects: 1) Conditioning Survey, 2) Career Development (all about the industry) and 3) Rose Garden. "I presented all these and then was asked to give a public talk at Sheffield Botanical Gardens on a career in horticulture. It was well attended and received, I'm pleased to say!"

In September 2019, a well-timed job opportunity came along. "At the end of my



The Team, left to right Daniel Hale, Head Gardener; Edward Watchorn, Senior Gardener; Joel Dibb and Mick Grundy, Gardeners. (Not on photo Georgina Yates, Gardens Supervisor)

one-year placement with Chatsworth on the HBGTP, a Gardener position at Brodsworth was advertised. I was thankfully successful in my application and started a week after finishing at Chatsworth. After six months of working here, an opportunity came to apply for the Senior Gardener position. After a lot of preparation and an in-depth interview process, I was successful in gaining the position".

I asked who had inspired him; "Mick Brown, the Horticultural technician at Chatsworth, was my main inspiration. His help and guidance convinced me that horticulture was the right choice!"

Meet the team

Dan Hale, 33, has been at Brodsworth for five years and came from Wentworth Castle. He's been in the industry for fifteen years and gained his qualifications at Askham Bryan College. Before applying for the job, he visited Brodsworth; he likes the formality.

Joel Dibb, 26, went straight from school as an apprentice at Alnwick and gained his qualifications whilst there. Returned to Yorkshire and has been at Brodsworth for nine months this time; he had a spell here previously.

Mick Grundy, 41, spent twenty-four years

in the Army and became a volunteer at Brodsworth. Now four months into the full-time job.

Georgina Yates (unfortunately absent on the day of my visit) has been at Brodsworth for four years.

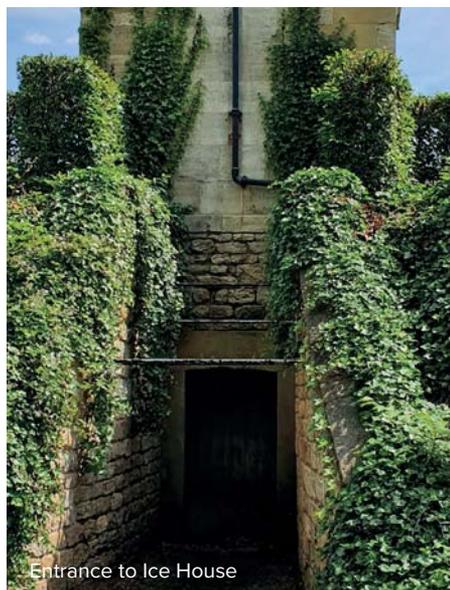
To assist the gardening team, Brodsworth can boast forty-five active and keen volunteers at present; This could be one of the largest volunteer bases in the country! Their help is invaluable; I saw quite a few of them out in the gardens, planting in the main, during my visit.

Budgets are set for the whole department, which Head Gardener Dan Hale administers. Alongside the regular budget funding, the department has C.I.P. (Capital Investment Projects). "We need to put up our case and apply and this is not guaranteed. Each year, we've received the funding requested, so we must be getting it right!" said Edward.

About the site

The whole site is on a limestone ridge, so there's always stones in the soil. Compost is produced on site and a tractor PTO driven Seko SAM 5 composting machine is used throughout the site.

Edward responded to the question about additional equipment and lighting: "We don't



Entrance to Ice House



The Fern Dell



View from The Summer House

have or need any additional equipment for regular use, but the Enchanted Garden event every winter sees the whole garden subtly illuminated to give a real fairy-tale experience!" This is an event that is seen by hundreds of people and one not to be missed. The lighting is very sophisticated with 1000s of LEDs, including fairy lights leading you along pathways, plus uplighters and floodlights add to the ambience; a truly magical event ... but will it happen this year?

The whole site covers twenty acres, if the parking areas are included. It is one, rather large, Victorian garden with names allocated to different areas; Flower Garden, Rose

Garden, Fern Dell, etc. There are seldom problems with natural occurrences and, as the property is on a hill, flooding is not an issue. High winds can be experienced but regular surveys (some trees are quite large!) ensures that the likelihood of damage is prevented.

Maintenance regimes

More often than not, maintenance regimes revolve around visitors. For example, because the grassed areas are so popular with picnickers, the team mow early each day before visitors arrive; usually two hours each day. "We use Hayter rotary mowers (we

//

We maintain a high standard, so to retain the authentic experience needs much care and attention. The right plant has to be in the right place

have three) as there is no cylinder mowing now. Time and manpower!" says Edward. "We also have a ride-on triple Kubota and a Kubota flail mower."

As far as who does what, Edward explained: "We can all carry out the range of jobs and each day I usually hand out the jobs involving machinery and George (Georgina) allocates volunteer tasks." Presentation is ranked very high at Brodsworth. "We maintain a high standard, so to retain the authentic experience needs much care and attention." says Edward. "The right plant has to be in the right place. We need to remember we are offering a visitor

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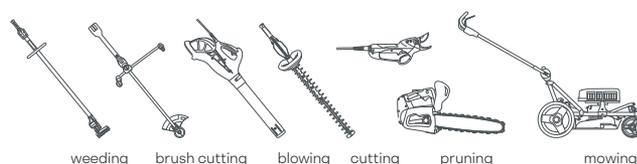
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PELLENC



Dogs were an important part of the family, as can be seen from the pet cemetery positioned within the garden, and were both companions and used in game shooting



Rear of the Rose Garden where dog kennels were originally

experience.”

Renovations are not really affected by events. Vintage car rallies are held, as too are brass band concerts for example, but there is plenty of huge lawned space for these and the ground suffers little.

Changing weather patterns seems to have raised irrigation as a growing issue and a badly timed frost can cause problems. Sprinklers have been installed in the flower garden and fern dell to help watering, but the huge urns still need hand watering which is labour intensive. Soaker hoses are used in the herbaceous borders. Ferns in the dell are carefully wrapped in winter and need even more careful unwrapping when spring comes! Delicate species, such as bananas are brought into the greenhouse during winter and dahlias are lifted and brought in too.

Projects

“What are you working on at the moment?” I asked. “The Rose Garden has been quite a project it seems”. Timing was good, as the current rose garden project had just been completed. The object was to restore it to its original layout and with two hundred period-correct roses! The old ironwork of the arch needed work too and there was also a major issue with the box hedging to remedy. Box Blight was the problem and so all was removed along with the soil. The reason, Edward told me, was that the disease comes from the soil and rain splashes transfer this to the box hedging. So, all new disease-resistant box hedging plants were planted in new soil but, this time, with a top mulch to prevent splashing should the disease return.

I’d heard about dog kennels in this area, so Edward explained: “The old dog kennels

we’re situated behind the Rose Garden, near to where the herbaceous bed is now positioned and not far from the stables. Dogs were an important part of the family, as can be seen from the pet cemetery positioned within the garden, and were both companions and used in game shooting. The kennels fell into disrepair around the 1960s and were later demolished. When English Heritage (EH) took on the site in 1990, the design for the new herbaceous bed, and the yew hedge behind, took influence from the old building which once stood there. This was done by partitioning the bed into sections, using the yew hedge to replicate the kennels. The yew hedge has now matured and thickened up and provides a neatly cut backdrop to the billowing herbaceous bed in front.” This project certainly has been carried out very



Pets Cemetery



The newly planted Flower Garden

well and the team are pleased with the authentic look.

The upcoming project is the restoration of the Target House situated at the end of the rose arch and with a long view down the range. The Target House, originally turned into a Swiss Chalet appearance by Thellusson, was where the family would take tea. This is where, subsequently, the highly fashionable sport of archery took place in the 19th century and the necessary

equipment was stored inside. In recent times, it has been used for a small exhibition about the garden. It has shown signs of deterioration and is closed awaiting the upcoming project.

Project work over the past years has been ongoing and driven by the main objective: to return the gardens to their earlier formality! Main project work is carried out during the closed period in the main. Landscaping and groundworks are carried out in-house but

work on structures, all listed, require the services of specialist contractors.

Training, education and Health & Safety

As would be expected, all staff are suitably qualified and hold appropriate certification, and for all machinery used. Edward commented, "We have a very good training budget here. If there is a cost benefit to English Heritage of us doing, and being trained, for a job instead of using

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Getting Personal

Edward Watchorn - he's started so he'll finish ... at some point!

Who are you? Edward Watchorn - Senior Gardener for English Heritage at Brodsworth Hall.

Family status? Married for two years, together for twelve.

Who's your hero and why?

Both my grandads, for their happy outlook on life, despite what they went through during the war years and the time they devoted to teach me so many practical skills.

What would you change about yourself? Be more decisive (I think).

What's your guilty pleasure? Cereal, at any time of the day.

What's been the highlight of your career so far? Working in so many beautiful places.

What are your pet peeves? Wonky hedges.

If you could go anywhere right now, where would it be? New Zealand, we still haven't been there on our honeymoon yet.

What's the best part of your job? The variety of the work and knowing that so many people get to enjoy the results.

... and the worst? Thorns!

What's your favourite sport? Mountaineering in some remote location.

Which three albums would you take to a desert island?

The Black Keys - Magic Potion, Nick Mulvey - First Mind, Hocus Pocus - 73 touches.

If you won the lottery, what is the first thing you would do? Go travelling.

What would you consign to Room 101 and why? Over packaged items, eg. you just don't need bananas to be in a bag.

Which three people, living or dead, would you invite to a dinner party? Leonardo da Vinci, Bill Bailey, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.



Do you have any bad habits?

Starting new projects before finishing others first.

... or any good ones? Getting up early.

Do you go to bed worrying about the next day's workload? Not anymore, now that I'm not on-call 24/7 for emergency tree work.

What is your favourite film? Anything by Wes Anderson or Taika Waititi, they're all a bit bonkers.

What's the best advice you have ever been given? The worst thing you can do is nothing.

What's your favourite smell? Freshly clipped box hedging.

What do you do in your spare time? Mountain biking, rock climbing, camping with friends, thinking about my next project at home in the garden (before I've finished the last one).

What's the daftest work-related question you have ever been asked? Can you put that branch back on the tree again?

What's your favourite piece of kit? Stihl battery hedge trimmer or my homemade lawn levelling lute.

What three words would you use to describe yourself? Hard-working, logical, positive.

What talent would you like to have? To be able to play the piano better.



Looking down the replanted Target Range © Dan Hale

contractors, it's done! We are looking into bringing in apprentices for next year."

Brodsworth has a regionally based H&S officer and everyone on the gardening team has the appropriate skills and training for first aid.

Machinery and equipment

Machinery is sourced, usually locally from either PTE in Doncaster for small kit, or Marr based Farmstar for the bigger kit. "They are so helpful" Edward tells me "and literally just up the road; so convenient and handy for any breakdowns!"

New pieces of kit that have made the job better have been the new Hayter mowers. "The grass collection is far superior to the previous model" says Edward. "The motorised tillers are a great asset too; very handy between shrubs, cutting down on hand weeding!"

One big piece of kit that has made a real difference to the composting at Brodsworth is the SEKO SAM 5 PTO compost maker, purchased in 2013. This towable unit, PTO driven from a tractor, will chop and shred twigs, small branches, leaves, grass, etc. and discharge from a conveyer for composting.

Servicing of machinery is carried out by the two local dealers or in-house if possible. "What's on the wish list?" I ask. "Two things" is the response. "Our own mini digger please and a drip system for watering!"

Pests and diseases

There does not seem to be any real problems with animals, birds, etc. but there have been disease issues with Aucuba Blight. I saw evidence of this in the yard (see photo) where removed bushes with foliage blackened by the blight had



Aucuba blight



What's in the shed?

Kubota B2200 tractor
 Kubota B3030 tractor with front loader
 Kubota MK5000 tractor with front loader
 Kubota trailers x4
 Water bowser and pump
 Ferrari 340 (2-wheeled tractor) x 2
 Flail & sync mower attachments
 BCS Tracmaster 710 rotavator
 Manitou 626MLT telescopic loader
 Niftylift 170HE MEWP
 Timberwolf 150DHB chipper
 Seko SAM5 PTO composter
 Bogballe S-line grit spreader
 Kubota G23 48" deck
 Kubota F3680 60" out-front deck
 Hayter Harrier Pro 56 x 3
 Allen 446 hover mower
 Atco 24E cylinder mower
 Stihl HS B1TC hedge trimmers x 4
 Stihl HSA 86 battery hedge trimmers x 3
 Stihl HLA 85 battery extendable hedge trimmer
 Husqvarna H25 combi x 3
 Stihl MS650 chainsaw
 Stihl MS 261 chainsaw
 Stihl MS 260 chainsaw
 Stihl MS 200T chainsaw
 Stihl BG 86C blowers x 4
 Stihl BR 600 blowers x 3
 Stihl FS 55 strimmers x 5
 Husqvarna combi lawn edgers
 Mantis tillers x 2
 Whacker plate

been brought to be destroyed. I learned that Aucuba (Spotted Laurel; no, I didn't know either!) is recommended for its robustness and ability to grow in dry, shaded sites. However, despite this reputation, Aucuba can become stressed such as when its roots become waterlogged during cold, wet winters and, as a result, the leaves and shoot tips turn black. The storms and persistent rain earlier in the year probably were the cause.

Ecology and Environment

Local fauna and flora is most important to Brodsworth and the team take great care to encourage both. As Edward commented; "We leave certain grass areas long to encourage wild flowers. We have a number of orchid species here and there are a number of butterfly species too". Something else he mentioned, that I found interesting, was that there is Yellow Rattle in meadow areas; "Yellow Rattle weakens some of the dominant grass varieties and this allows more wild flowers to spread across meadow areas," Edward informed me. A number of wildflower areas have been created and the beehives are making a contribution to the

environment; I'm looking forward to the Brodsworth Honey!

English Heritage are keen to be compliant with current environmental legislation, particularly from the pollution prevention and environmental protection standpoint. This is exemplified at Brodsworth by the installation of a ClearWater washpad water recycling system, some years ago. The system prevents pollution of the groundwater but also saves thousands of litres of water by recycling. The system, used to wash all the garden machinery, is regularly serviced by The ClearWater division of Acumen Waste Services Ltd.

Brodsworth have also updated their fuel and oil tanks in recent years by installing fully compliant bunded tanks. To further demonstrate the recycling programme at Brodsworth, I was shown just a small portion of the thousands of plastic plant pots and trays that are recycled each year.

An Environmental Policy is in place and produced by English Heritage Head Office. The team has access to their own environmental consultants who can liaise with the Environment Agency if required.



Brodsworth Hall- A Brief History

Brodsworth Hall was built between 1861 and 1863 for Charles Sabine Thellusson who inherited the estate in 1859. The house replaced the huge Georgian house, previously rebuilt, which was demolished in 1861. The new property, now a Grade 1 listed building, was built further uphill, away from the church and village and to meet the Thellusson's requirements; a house and estate suited to family life and entertaining their social set. It was to be more efficiently planned and set in private gardens overlooking newly opened up parkland.

Philip Wilkinson, then twenty six years old and a little known London architect, was commissioned by Thellusson, to build the Italianate mansion at great speed between 1861 and 1863. Lapworths, a London firm, furnished it in the conventional taste of the day. It had a subsidiary wing for the servants to live and work in, with a separate laundry and gas works.

By the end of the 1860s, the Thellusson's remodelling of Brodsworth was complete. The gardens had been fully laid out and the estate improved, with woods to provide good shooting and well-designed new farm buildings and cottages.

Brodsworth Hall survives as a mid-Victorian vision of a comfortable country house, with many of its original furnishings and the formal gardens laid out around it. However, Brodsworth had fallen into disrepair by 1990 when it was given to English Heritage. Since then, its fragile interiors have been gently conserved, whilst the gardens have been returned to their earlier formality.

For a more detailed history, please visit <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/brodsworth-hall-and-gardens/history/>



The Privy

Coronavirus

A new inclusion in my questions was: How has Coronavirus affected you, your job and your business? Edward said that over ninety percent of English Heritage staff were furloughed and choices were given, based on personal circumstances and skills. This meant saving the business as loss of revenue was huge. Management were in regular contact though and Edward found this helped. He was certainly impressed by the way all was handled throughout this difficult period.

Gardeners were the first back to work from the furlough scheme as this was seen as so important! "After all, the gardens are what folk come to see!" Edward emphasised.

One thing that did change was the mowing regime because of the lack of resources. Some areas have remained unmowed, including the sides of the grassed banks around the house. This has been commented on favourably, so some areas may stay that way! Extra work has been necessary to produce signage and mark out a one-way system around the grounds, close certain areas and completely refurbish the toilet facilities; how timely for visitors



The Game Larder

during this period of Covid-19 precautions! An outside seating area only is catered for by a reduced catering facility. Volunteers are assisting to provide the extra stewards required throughout the route.

About the industry

Edward was armed with some interesting facts concerning the state of our industry:

- Ornamental horticulture contributed £12.6 billion to GDP in 2018
- £1.35 billion worth of plants produced and sold in the UK in 2017
- £1.2 billion were imported
- £1 in every £100 of household spending is on horticulture goods

Edward suggested; "Maybe we should produce more in the UK. Surely its's better for bio-security and the economy?"

Incidentally, there is an All-Party Parliamentary Gardening and Horticulture Group (APPGHG) which was established almost two decades ago to promote and facilitate communication and understanding between representatives of the world of gardening and horticulture and Members of both Houses of Parliament. Perhaps greater communication and promotion can be achieved between this group and the industry?

Asked if he felt undervalued Edward's response said much: "in 2014, fifty percent of under twenty-fives saw horticulture as an unskilled career!" He thought that TV was helping to raise the industry's profile. There's certainly a proliferation of programmes now!

The team attends the interesting 'open to all gardeners' annual English Heritage conference which includes garden visits, seminars, etc.

Edward's concluding comments after such an interesting and informative visit were: "I just love horticulture because you never stop learning. There are so many avenues for specialisation. Demonstrating how to look after our heritage will hopefully inspire others to care for our future!"



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Plumpton Racecourse

Hats off to Mark - both of them

Like all sports, racing is facing up to big changes thanks to Coronavirus. One of National Hunt's best-loved courses is preparing for an extra change. Its long serving Head Groundsman and, in recent times, its Clerk of the Course too is retiring at the end of the year. Neville Johnson visited the course to talk to **Mark Cornford** to get his thoughts on how 'the turf' has changed for him

In mid-July there was a post-lockdown tranquility at this lovely Sussex course, which first held a race meeting back in 1884. Tranquil yes, but because of what's held sport - all of us, in fact - up, there was also an air of pent up expectation for the first new season 'off' just a few weeks away.

National Hunt's 20/21 season officially started on 1st July, but Plumpton's first meeting, billed as Family Race Day, is scheduled for Sunday September 20th. Mark and his team, now unfurloughed, were setting about getting the course in tip-top shape for racing.

He takes time out to talk about 'the turf' and what is a special final year for him.

Pitchcare: This is your 40th year here. To many you are Mr. Plumpton. Was it always your plan to retire this year, or have the effects on racing of the Covid pandemic affected your thinking?

Mark Cornford: My older brother Tony, who had also worked on the groundstaff here, died last year and it got me thinking about my own future. I made the decision then that it was the right time to sign off. Covid has been, still is, a massive shackle on racing, but no, my mind had been made up before it took hold.

About a year ago I wrote to the course owners expressing my thoughts and suggesting that plans be made for a take-

over of my dual responsibilities. My principal aim was to ensure a smooth transition.

Who's taking over? Will they be doing both jobs?

Marcus Waters, who has experience as a groundsman at Brighton racecourse and, more recently, on the grounds team at Premiership Brighton's Amex Stadium. He is more than qualified to take over course care reins.

He was only able to shadow me for two meetings prior to lockdown and, since that time, has been part of a small team gaining good hands on knowledge of the course and the art of fence refurbishing. Unfortunately, his formal training has been



Hurdling at Plumpton last season



Quite soon all of this will be yours... retiring Mark Cornford with the man taking over his dual role, Marcus Waters



Nothing has happened on the course at all since our meeting in the spring just prior to the Cheltenham Festival. It's been unreal for long periods, and many of the Plumpton team - myself included - have been furloughed

on hold but, as a trainee Clerk, he is welcome at other courses to see different set ups and methods of handling a raceday, which is an excellent grounding. Already a fully qualified Head Groundsman, Marcus is well on the way to reaching the standard expected by the British Horseracing Association (BHA) which governs all racing in this country.

This isn't just a job. You have to be interested in everything you do. Marcus loves racing and was a Pony Club member here as a youngster. He's tailor made for both of them.

I think my aim of achieving continuity is neatly in place.

When are you actually hanging up your 'hats'?

I will continue as Clerk and Head Groundsman up to December 31st. I've already agreed, because Marcus' training has been delayed somewhat, that I would be available to help out at meetings beyond that date, if necessary.



Our fingers are crossed that there will be at least some lifting of current restrictions. Who knows, we may even be able to welcome some racegoers?



Landing areas are kept neatly mown to thicken growth

I live practically next door to the course in Plumpton Green, so I'm here in minutes.

Meanwhile, how will you deal with behind closed doors racing and all the restrictions associated with the Pandemic?

Nothing has happened on the course at all since our meeting in the spring just prior to the Cheltenham Festival. In all, we lost seven fixtures last season. It's been unreal for long periods, and many of the Plumpton team - myself included - have been furloughed.

It does now begin to feel more like a racecourse again as the new National Hunt season gets moving. There is certainly a buzz around here thank goodness.

The lurking anxiety is will the racegoers return? Will they have turned to other things?

We have yet to race since the lockdown and putting restrictions into practice is completely new to us.

We're used to face masks and sanitisers because we've had to use them anyway, but the button has yet to be pushed for handling

distancing on race days as far as jockeys, race teams and officials is concerned.

Plumpton is a delightfully intimate course, but it is small and space restriction would be difficult. We have materials and contractors ear-marked for measures, but our first meeting is still some weeks away and things may well have changed by then.

Our expectation and thinking is flexible to say the least. We'll do what we have to do to make it a good day's racing here come what may. Our fingers are crossed that there will be at least some lifting of current restrictions. Who knows, we may even be able to welcome some racegoers?

Aside from the unprecedented situation in racing this year, how has the sport changed during your career, especially at National Hunt courses?

Safety is what sticks out. I suppose it has had to be, not least because, bit by bit, racing - as all sport - has come under bigger and bigger public gaze. It used to be just television and the betting world, but now it's



The final jump in the straight is getting some birch filling ahead of September's first meeting



In the old days the beater was the way to flatten the course after a meeting. Mark has kept one in the weighing room and shows how it was done

“
Post-race repair used to mean wielding a beater, a heavy-handed way of trying to level the surface after a racing. It was hard work just thumping the ground level and it was by no means totally successful

constant Internet viewing and everyone these days has a smart phone camera. Nothing escapes attention. We're in the public domain. Everyone's watching you.

Racing - especially National Hunt - has its dangers. These have always been accepted, but the industry, and we who look after the courses, are doing so much more to keep it as safe as it can be.

When I first came into racing there were concrete posts and aluminium rails. Plastic rails were around, but they shattered on

impact and could still present menace to horse and jockey. Nowadays, non-shatter, foldable plastic rails and wings are the order of the day and, with the addition of padded fence guardrails and extra padding added to hurdles, great strides have been made with equine welfare.

Turfcare has moved on tremendously, too. Post-race repair used to mean wielding a beater, a heavy-handed way of trying to level the surface after a racing. Certainly it was when I started here. It was hard work

just thumping the ground level and it was by no means totally successful.

You might also do a bit of filling, broadcasting sand by shovel - very crude. Not like the more precise methods today using a bucket and trowel to deliver a balanced mix of rootzone and grass seed to repair divots.

In the old days here at Plumpton, we relied on a team of locals to help with repair work and the like. They enjoyed race days and got real pleasure from a couple of days



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The crowds will surely be back this season

helping the full-time team to fork the course making good hoof damage. They were wonderful. Gradually, reliance on local help dwindled, as much as anything because we couldn't guarantee sufficient numbers and the time the job took got longer and longer. What once was getting done in a couple of days was taking a week or more.

Like most courses, we've come to rely on a company called Sterling Services for an experienced workforce for post event repairs. They know what they're doing and what's expected of them. An experienced workforce of a guaranteed number is such a benefit, much as I loved the old days and the fun we had. Generally, we can expect the course to be back in shape in a day. It means we can have more time spent on preparing the course, fences and hurdles for our next meeting.

Training courses for ground staff is another worthy advance. These have meant improved course repair methods and better racing surfaces. Also groundsmen getting recognition within the industry and not just classed as agricultural workers, as we were when I started.

In general, back in the day, Clerks of the Course would principally have either a military or agricultural background. Things have changed substantially during my forty years, with Clerks these days having to be

highly tuned in to what groundsmen are doing and the effects on going. Everything is so much more professional all round.

Yet to happen is a workplace pension for ground staff. The Government NEST scheme is available now but, in my opinion, racing should have done it years ago for its lower paid workers. We'll see.

How have things changed at Plumpton in your time here?

Enormously. The majority of the stands and associated buildings were timber structures when I first came here. These have all been replaced and Plumpton, though a small course, offers racegoers a very comfortable, modern environment on race days and, of course, it's a much-used venue for business and social gatherings.

I think the best thing about Plumpton, for all the modernisation, is it's kept its intimate, family feel. It's one of the very few courses that lets you see the whole of the circuit wherever you choose to watch the racing.

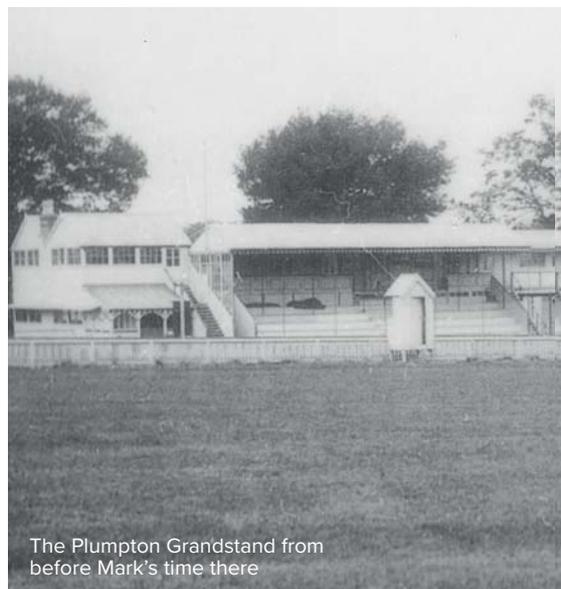
When I first started here in 1980 there were no offices, no management. There was just the grounds staff and a foreman, who was termed the Racecourse Manager. There were just five of us. There was a Clerk of the Course and we would get to see him, on average, once a week, until a race meeting was imminent.

Investment was measured during my early years and the buildings' paintwork and signage all started to look tired as we entered the mid-90s. The current directors, Peter Savill and Adrian Pratt, have invested heavily in the infrastructure since they took over ownership in 1998, including substantial drainage works.

Only this summer we have had secondary banding drainage added in the home straight where water was slow to get away last season, MJ Abbott's being our preferred drainage contractor.

This is where regular topdressing plays a big part in preventing capping of drains to allow downward movement of surface water.

The considerable investment in drainage here has saved meetings that would previously have been lost. The directors deserve huge credit for their continued support and faith in the course. Other recent investments have included upgrading the stable staff hostel and building a barn centre course to protect machinery, as well as providing a dry environment for staff to work on hurdles and fence sections.



The Plumpton Grandstand from before Mark's time there



I think the best thing about Plumpton, for all the modernisation, is it's kept its intimate, family feel. It's one of the very few courses that lets you see the whole of the circuit wherever you choose to watch the racing



Aerial view of the delightful West Sussex racecourse

The machinery available to ground staff has been steadily upgraded in recent years. Earlier this year, pre-Covid 19, we took delivery of a new Kubota front-loader tractor, which is a real boon.

Staff welfare and training have grown too. We have visited trainers' yards, other racecourses and, last year, the Sussex Equine Hospital, our course vet's state of the art headquarters.

What are the best things that have happened to course upkeep methods and materials in your time?

Quality grass seed and better topdressing materials, unquestionably. Forty years ago there used to be a sand pit just up the road and we'd take a trailer - which we even had to borrow - fill it with sand and simply spread it across the turf.

The advancement of plastic rails was a huge step forward. Apart from the safety aspects, already mentioned, it means we can make alterations to layout speedily and less arduously.



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I have always tried to treat people as I would like to be treated and stand by this quote from one of the film greats in the saddle, John Wayne: 'it's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice'

How do you see the future of National Hunt and especially smaller courses like Plumpton? Will racegoers return in numbers and will there be lasting changes to the way courses present racing and entertain visitors?

It's the funding of racing that's coming into question as this pandemic crisis goes on. The industry is worried about owners leaving the sport. Without owners we don't have horses: without horses there is no racing. That's the worst scenario.

Income from public attendance at meetings is another big concern all the time there's a ban on public gatherings. Also, without a flourishing betting industry there's the consequent downturn in levy income to worry about.

These are all causes for concern right now. It's a vicious circle creating questions for which we would all like solutions.

I'm an optimist and I do think we'll get back to a near normal soon, but there are certainly going to be changes in the way racing is presented and experienced.

Thank goodness no UK courses yet look threatened by closure, and certainly Plumpton is ready for the off in September. We can't wait.



I feel we have a good geographical spread now of all-weather tracks and, personally, whilst I appreciate their place in our sport, I think enough is enough. Turf racing is the very essence of British racing.

One of the biggest challenges is how to crack the younger market. Here at Plumpton we have family days and that certainly does bring in more youngsters and whet their appetite for racing.

Which has given you most satisfaction in recent years - looking after the Plumpton turf or seeing that its meetings run smoothly? Groundsman or Clerk?

After a successful day's racing here and you see everyone going home happy, as Clerk it gives a real sense of satisfaction, pride if you like, in a job well done.

The satisfaction as a groundsman comes before that, on the morning of race day, when you know the course is ready for a good day of racing. You've put everything into getting the best possible surface.

I'm lucky really. I get a double whammy and can be proud at both ends of race day. It's a long day. I get in here about 5.45am on race days, but if things go well there's nothing like it, dawn to dusk.

Will you be a racegoer after you leave your jobs at Plumpton? What about your plans for the future?

I will always come and watch racing here when I can. Racing is always going to be a

big part of my life. It has been since my dad first brought me here on a race day back in 1966.

I have no specific plans, maybe a bit of allotment gardening. I just want to enjoy some 'me time' I think it's called, and pay back some of the time I owe my wife for being a racing widow all these years.

Final thoughts?

As a humble village lad I was very lucky to be given the chance to Clerk at Plumpton, having had a state secondary education with just three low grade CSEs to my name. I hope I have managed to repay their faith in me.

My other good fortune was being supported over the years by a loyal local team of men and women, adding plenty of extra pairs of hands when needed. I am pleased to say many of them remain friends to this day.

Over the years, I have always tried to treat people as I would like to be treated and stand by this quote from one of the film greats in the saddle, John Wayne. He said: "it's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice."

There are six race meetings to go at Plumpton this year. It's going to be a busy and poignant few months for Mark.





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Frank Newberry

How to Give Bad News

Trainer and Conference Speaker **Frank Newberry** looks at how to give bad news to people in the workplace. Giving bad news can be hard on everyone. It needs to be handled well if everyone's morale and performance levels are to be sustained.

This article is primarily aimed at people in a supervisory role, or those who aspire to be a supervisor. This is not a requirement though - you need only be interested in the topic. Maybe you want to help out if you can. I helped out when a supervisor called me in once and asked me (as a favour) to make half of the work team redundant!

"Why me?" I asked. The answer came: "Because you know them better than me". The supervisor would never see them again, I had been involved in making people redundant in the past, and I was a trained counsellor. It was probably (as they say) for the best.

Ten Tips on Preparing to Give Bad News

1. If more than one person is affected by the bad news, you may wish to see them as a group initially. At this meeting, you could explain that you have some important news that affects everyone, but you would like to speak to them individually first.
2. Separate meetings will help if individuals have private issues that they wish to discuss with you. You can all get together later on, but once you have started seeing individuals, I suggest you carry on until you have seen everybody. Even if you run late, avoid telling anyone to come back in the morning. By morning, they could well have heard a number of different versions of your message - and some of those versions may not be accurate.
3. Make appropriate arrangements if any of the individuals has special needs, especially if their communication skills are not very good.
4. People have the right to have a friend or witness present, and you may wish to do the same - for your own protection. Individuals can react in an extreme way to bad news, and some have even been known to make false accusations about the news giver.
5. If possible, take the individual and any witnesses to a private area - away from their usual workplace. Ensure there is privacy. Turn off your mobile. A quiet room with comfortable seats would be best.
6. If you dress smartly, it will show respect for the person and for the situation.
7. Think through your specific aims for the

meetings, as well as the possible goals and aspirations of the people you are meeting

8. Make sure you know all the relevant information about each person's situation, particularly the known consequences and future options.
9. You may experience strong emotions of your own when you have to give bad news. It might help to talk to a friend or a colleague about it first - to help you to be objective.
10. Rehearse or role play the 'bad news' discussion with a friend or colleague - before you start the meetings. Ask the friend how it was for them, discuss what was hard for them to take and what was easier for them.

Ten Tips for Giving Bad News

1. Check at the outset what the individual or group knows already. You could ask a question like: 'What is your understanding of the situation you are in?'
2. Give fair warning: "I am afraid I have some bad news", then pause for a moment.
3. Be polite and respectful. Speak slowly, deliberately and clearly. Provide information in small chunks. Choose words and phrases you know people will comprehend. Check understanding frequently (yours and theirs).
4. Present the bad news in a succinct and direct way. Be prepared to repeat information and be ready to give additional information in response to people's known fears or questions. In situations like these, you should expect to be asked to 'Go over it again'.
5. Sit quietly. Allow the news to sink in. Wait for people to respond. Do not interrupt them.
6. Listen carefully and acknowledge people's emotions. You can do this by reflecting back your understanding of both the facts they give and the emotion in their responses.
7. Indicate how normal and understandable any emotional responses are in the circumstances: e.g. feeling numb (shock), anger, sadness, and fear.
8. Give people opportunities to ask questions and make comments (even though they are their first reactions). Again, do not interrupt them - even to correct them. Wait for your turn.



9. Present information at the person's pace; do not overwhelm them with detail. If the situation is complex, then provide an initial overview. Assess their understanding of the complex issues. Answer all their questions and, if it would help, provide them with the next level of detail.
10. Explain what you will do next and what the options are for them now.

If you have concerns and questions about what is a very big topic, please feel free to contact me via my website www.franknewberry.com. Just click on the Contact tab.

I wish you good luck with giving bad news at work. It is better to do it than to avoid it. In the next issue we will look at how to take bad news.

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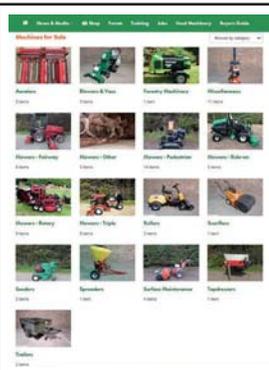
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OFFSIDE

The not so serious side of the industry

Student fails exam after naming his hero

A student failed his French exam, by a single mark, after he named Cristiano Ronaldo alongside a picture of a goat.

Ahmed Nabil, 15, was presented with a variety of different animals in the paper but rather than write down a 'sensible' answer, he included a certain five-time Ballon d'Or winner in his work.



"For me personally, it was a very hard test and one of the sections was: write the meaning of every animal we show you but in French."

"I couldn't remember what a goat was called in French, so I thought I'd do something creative and make a couple of my mates laugh instead of just leaving it empty."

The tweet did receive over 15,000 likes in the space of 24 hours, though, so that may provide a crumb of comfort as many agreed that Ronaldo is in fact, the greatest of all time. Nabil believes that is the case, although he does admit a hint of bias!

Stolen swings

The theft of play equipment from a park in the Wiltshire village of Doggridge, was recently discovered by a parish council groundsman.

Councillor Susan Relfe (pictured right), reacted to this bizarre crime: "It just beggars belief that somebody thought it was a good idea to take them."

Her comments were echoed by chairman of Purton Parish Council Ray Thomas. "I just find it incredible the anybody would stoop to low to steal children's play equipment," he said.



In common with other play areas, the Doggridge park has been shut during the lockdown. The swings had been taped up to dissuade children from using them.

Leeds United remove Osama bin Laden

English Championship side Leeds United removed a cardboard cut-out of former



Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden from the stands at Elland Road after it was spotted in a photo posted on social media, a BBC report said.

With fans not being able to come to the grounds to watch their teams in action due to Covid-19, the club invited fans to send in photos of themselves or loved ones to put on the empty seats.

The BBC quoted Leeds as saying they will "ensure there are no more offensive images" in the stands. However, the cut-outs obviously worked, as Leeds won promotion to the Premier League.

As seen on social media ...



We all need one of these!



Many of you will also need one of these!



Lloyds of Letchworth Managing Director, Clive Nottingham sure did start young!

If you spot anything you think might give readers a chuckle send it to: kerry.haywood@pitchcare.com

Could you persuade your wife to honeymoon around a stadium visit?

Tim Pyke, an avid Football Manager fan, persuaded his wife to honeymoon in Bulgaria so he could visit Nesebar, the second division team he was managing in the virtual world.

In an extract from the book 'Football Manager Stole My Life,' Tim tells the tale.

"My future wife and I had set a date for our wedding and a month later we would go on our honeymoon," he writes.



"She had been looking in Spain, Greece or Portugal and I was all for it. But, then came the fateful day I started beta-testing the Bulgarian league for Football Manager. I picked a random team. That team changed the whole concept of holidaying. That team was Nesebar, in the Bulgarian Second Division West."

"Now, in Bulgaria, I just needed to figure out a way to go and see Nesebar in action. We made some new friends and the girls wanted to split off to have some girlie time. I convinced the lads to go see the football. To this day, my wife doesn't know I chose Bulgaria because of the team I managed online. She does now!"

DIARY DATES

SEPTEMBER

1st: Cricket - England v Pakistan 3rd T20, Old Trafford (ecb.co.uk)

10th-13th: Women's golf major - ANA Inspiration, Mission Hills Country Club, California (anainspiration.com)

12th: Football - 2020-2021 Premier League season to start (premierleague.com)

17th-20th: Golf - US Open, Winged Foot, New York (usopen.com)

18th-20th: Rugby Union - European Champions & Challenge Cup quarter-finals (epcrugby.com)

25th-27th: Rugby Union - European Champions & Challenge Cup semi-finals (epcrugby.com)

OCTOBER

8th: Football - International friendly - England v Wales, Wembley (thefa.com)

8th-11th: Women's golf major - PGA Championship, Aronimink Golf Club, Pennsylvania (kpmgwomenspgachampionship.com)

15th-18th: Golf - PGA Championship, Wentworth (europeantour.com)

16th: Rugby Union - European Challenge Cup final, venue TBC (epcrugby.com)

17th: Rugby Union - European Champions Cup final, venue TBC (epcrugby.com)

17th: Horseracing - QUIPCO British Champions Day, Ascot (ascot.co.uk)

NOV

12th-15th: Golf - Masters, Augusta National (masters.com)

19th-22nd: Women's golf major - LPGA Tour Championship, Tiburón, Florida (lpga.com)

To have your event included in this magazine diary section, please email details to kerry@pitchcare.com

QUOTE ME HAPPY

"You could never describe anything to do with Wood's bowling as effortless - if Holding's run-up led to the nickname Whispering Death, Wood is more Grunting Harassment." **The Guardian's Rob Smyth compares how Michael Holding and Mark Wood reached 95mph bowling speeds with somewhat contrasting styles.**

"Being from Salford, Manchester United is all I have ever known. I went from playing on my estate, pretending to be Wayne Rooney to being in the academy and doing the same. Sadly the time has come to end a beautiful chapter that has been my life for fourteen years." **Angel Gomes broke the silence with a heartfelt letter after Manchester United exit.**

"The loss of Cheltenham, the Grand Prix, the Ryder Cup, England's home Five Nations matches, the FA Cup final and now the Test matches ... This is not cherry-picking. They have stolen the orchard." **Julian Wilson, the former BBC racing commentator talking about Sky's assault on broadcasting rights, ahead of Test cricket returning to the Beeb.**



"I think the majority of players will, but it would be silly to expect nobody would break the rules and the protocols. You've seen that in the NBA and I think it has happened in golf!" **Andy Murray wants players who break US Open protocols to face 'severe repercussions'.**

"In 1892 the then 17-year-old was back in court, summoned for assaulting Annie Farly, a domestic servant, at Horsham. According to the evidence of the complainant, the assault consisted of the defendant having kissed her." **The Guardian's Simon Brunton recounts the antics of Sussex cricketer Ernest (Tim) Killick.**

"The lifestyle that Aubameyang has got at Arsenal in London is stardust and I think he likes that. I think he plays on that. He's got his supercars and he can do whatever he wants because he's the king. If this is about money, he can say to Arsenal: "this is what you need to pay me". If it's not and he just wants to move, Arsenal can't stop it." **Charlie Nicholas speaks out on Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's future.**

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