

Witney Town Council

Advisory Report on West Witney, The Leys & Burwell QE2 Sports Pitches

Report date: 29th September 2025

Consultant: Michael Boyes

Date of visit: 23rd September 2025

Visit objective: Review agronomic conditions and performance of the natural turf sports pitches at West Witney, The Leys and Burwell QE2 playing field.

Present: Angus Whitburn – Operations Manager, Witney TC
Michael Boyes – Consultant Turfgrass Agronomist, STRI Group Ltd

Weather:

Visit summary

- Despite challenging weather patterns this year, starting with a cold, unproductive spring growth wise and culminating in a hot and dry summer, the natural turf surfaces continue to improve under the stewardship of Witney Town Council, and the focussed supervision of Operations Manager, Angus Whitburn.
- The bowling greens at West Witney and The Leys exhibit improving grass cover, with larger proportions of the more desirable finer turf species. The soil profiles show reasonable soil health and aggregation but a persistent element of thatch in the upper zones, which will require targeted material removal and sand integration to enhance drainage potential and reduce disease activity.
- Post season bowling green renovations will include a programme of aeration and thatch removal with multiple scarification operations, for the introduction of a sand-based top dressing and the selected fescue (80%)/browntop bent (20%) seed mix.
- The southeast corner of the bowling green at West Witney displays signs of localised dry patch which is impacting turf health and an inspection of the profile in the worst impacted areas revealed a soil moisture of just 1.4%, and a significant thatch layer over hydrophobic soils. Substantial organic matter removal and the application of a curative wetting agent (i.e., Aquatrols Aqueduct, or similar) will be key to recovery.
- The cricket outfield at West Witney continues to improve, showing fuller grass cover and no problematic surface undulations. Cricket square renovations have been positive with significant repairs at the wicket ends, comprising clay loam introduction and overseeding. Notable weed populations are evident and will require chemical intervention in spring 2026.
- The cricket pitch at The Leys has reportedly not been used now for the last 5-6 years but the square construction remains viable and could be renovated for the potential return to play for the Swifts CC in 2026. The outfield area is gainfully employed for Junior football but shows significant wear and tear, from substantial levels of use, endured.
- The football pitches at West Witney and Burwell display generally complete grass cover, with particularly encouraging repairs having been carried out in the goalmouths at each site. More frequent cutting operations at each venue have been beneficial to overall presentation and performance, as has the installation of new goalposts.
- Due to the oppressive weather patterns over previous months, the end of 2024/2025 football season renovations have been fairly conservative and simply constituted a top-dressing application (at approximately 60 tonnes per 11-a-side pitch) followed by overseeding. With more favourable prevailing weather of late, plans are in place to deliver a Verti-Quake aeration operation across all football sites, complemented by an application of Autumn/Winter granular fertiliser, via appointed outside contractor.

Record of site conditions – West Witney - Bowls



Photo 1: The condition of the bowling green at West Witney continues to improve, despite the challenging weather patterns which have prevailed this year.



Photo 2: In the strongest sections of the green the grass sward is reasonably dense and healthy, but there are twinges of historic disease incidences still visible.



Photo 3: Following recent rainfall events, soil moisture levels are high for the time of year in places, as illustrated by the random reading of 41.3%.



Photo 4: Encouragingly, surface hardness readings were around close to the projected target range of between 120-170 gravities and the green feels firm underfoot.



Photo 5: In general, the soil profile continues to show improved signs of sand integration and is benefitting from light scarification operations throughout the year.

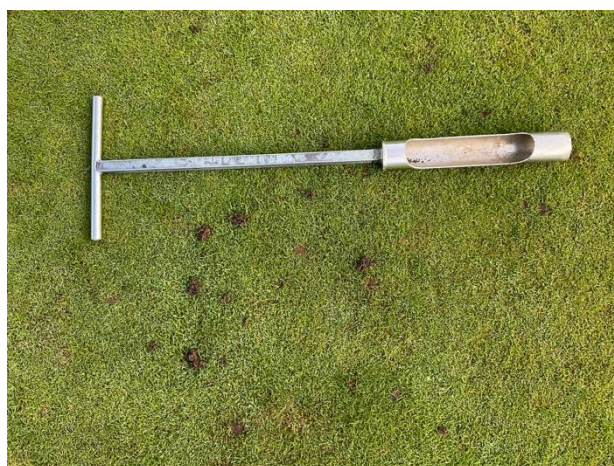


Photo 6: Worm casting still presents a challenge and with no chemical intervention available, continual top-dressing and the use of acidifying fertiliser will help deter activity.

Record of site conditions – West Witney - Bowls



Photo 7: The south-eastern corner of the West Witney Bowls green shows sections of weak grass cover and severe drought stress, from the oppressive conditions over summer.



Photo 8: An inspection of the profile shows powder dry conditions, with water beading (circled) on the surface of hydrophobic soils.



Photo 9: An extremely low moisture reading of just 1.4% was randomly observed in the drier area, against a projected target range of between 15-30%.



Photo 10: Sporadic weed ingress is evident across the green and every effort should be made to remove the offending plant matter, as part of routine mowing operations.



Photo 11: Reduction of the perimeter hedgerow, and potentially removal of the trees as part of depot development works, improves light and air circulation to the green.



Photo 12: Housekeeping operations around the green include necessary repairs to the ditch impact boards where misplaced steps have caused damage to the wooden batons.

Record of site conditions – West Witney - Cricket



Photo 13: Very effective fencing has been employed around the cricket square to provide appropriate protection following the programme of end of season renovations.



Photo 14: The well-discussed “drop off” beyond the stumps at the southern end of the square remains evident but is not negatively impacting wicket preparation.



Photo 15: Repairs around the crease at each of the wickets have been substantial with high levels of loam employed, followed by targeted over-seeding.



Photo 16: The visual evidence of recent aeration operations are clear, and the process helps the profile to breathe and improves overall drainage potential.



Photo 17: Weed ingress is extensive across the cricket square and a selective herbicide is advised when appropriate weather conditions present again in spring 2026.



Photo 18: The health and conditions of the cricket outfield has improved, and displays an encouraging sward colour given the oppressive weather of the summer.

Record of Site Conditions – West Witney – Football



Figure 19: Grass cover appears complete and relatively healthy and is benefitting from an increased regime of cutting with the commencement of the football season.



Figure 20: The football infrastructure is in good condition and the pitches in general are well-presented and ideally situated for the early season fixtures.



Figure 21: Grass cover is a little sparse in the goalmouths but greatly improved on past seasons. An even more focused renovation is prescribed for the end of the 2025/2026 season.



Figure 22: A random surface hardness reading of 144 gravities was recorded in the 18-yd box which is a little on the firm side but deemed perfectly acceptable and safe.



Figure 23: An ingress of weeds was seen in a localised area of the 6-yd box and can be addressed with spot treatment via backpack and a selective herbicide.



Figure 24: The traditionally wet section in the south-east corner of the playing field appears in reasonably good condition and currently hosts a 5x5 and 9x9 pitch.

Record of site conditions - The Leys - Bowls



Photo 25: The bowling green at The Leys was neatly presented on the day of the visit and displays a largely complete grass cover, with reasonable sward colour.



Photo 26: The results of recent aeration practices are clear and help with gaseous exchange whilst improving drainage characteristics. This positive operation barely impacts surface performance.



Photo 27: A random surface firmness reading of 110 gravities is just below the suggested target of 120-170 gravities, but acceptable upon completion of the bowling season.



Photo 28: A positive random moisture reading of 24.2% was taken on the green, which is around the expected value for the time of year, despite recent rainfall events.



Photo 29: The soil profile on the green at The Leys appears reasonably healthy, but there is a persistent element of thatch in the upper zones.



Photo 30: The stronger sections of the green display good grass cover and a particularly encouraging element of the finer, more desirable grass species.

Record of Site Conditions – The Leys - Bowls



Figure 31: In the areas of the green where worm casting is prevalent, the smearing of the displaced materials effectively seals sections of the surface.



Figure 32: This is particularly evident along the sheltered southern perimeter of the green, on the rink ends in the shade of the adjacent hedgerow.



Figure 33: Sections of weed ingress are quite large in localised areas, and it is likely that chemical intervention will now be required with an appropriately timed selective herbicide application.



Figure 34: Evidence of crane fly activity was seen on the green on the day and vigilance is advised in the future to monitor the impact of the insect, and subsequent larval presence.



Figure 35: The large tree at the corner continues to present a challenge with shade across the green but in lieu of removal, efforts should be made to raise the canopy.



Figure 36: The hedgerow also requires continuous attention to manicure the vegetation and optimise light penetration and air circulation to improve the growing conditions for the green.

Record of Site Conditions – The Leys – Cricket & Football



Figure 37: The playing field at The Leys displays a patchy grass coverage which appears to have struggled with the erratic weather patterns this year.



Figure 38: Junior pitches have been configured across the site but sections nearest the busy pavilion have been impacted by increasing use.



Figure 39: The constructed cricket square remains apparent in the central section of the playing field but has reportedly been redundant for some 5 to 6 years now.



Figure 40: An inspection of the cricket square construction highlights the continued presence of the original clay loam profile. The square is deemed recoverable should play recommence.



Figure 41: The recent food festival has had a significant detrimental impact of the separate football field at The Leys, with heavy plant and equipment employed during inclement weather.



Figure 42: The vehicles which accessed the field have caused considerable damage to the goalpost sockets and severely compacted the impacted underlying soils.

Record of Site Conditions – Burwell QE2 field



Figure 43: Grass coverage across the Burwell playing field has improved noticeably and has undoubtedly benefitted from a more routine cutting regime.



Figure 44: New goalposts have been installed on two of the three full-size pitches at Burwell, optimising the provision for the early season fixtures.



Figure 45: A random surface hardness reading of 209 gravities is quite high, but understandable given recent hot and dry conditions. The surfaces are deemed safe for use.



Figure 46: Soil moisture yielded an encouraging random value of 22.9%, which is ideally placed for the time of year, providing good surface cushioning and traction.



Figure 47: Weed populations are particularly high across the Burwell playing field, as evidenced on Pitch 3 above, and a blanket selective herbicide application will be required in spring 2026.



Figure 48: Positive goalmouth repairs are welcome but there is some level differences with the adjacent surfaces, which has caused some scalping which requires attention.

Observations & Recommendations

Bowling Green Maintenance

- Erratic weather patterns saw the season start with cold spring conditions, not conducive to early growth, to only be followed by the oppressive hot and dry weather patterns of the summer. Therefore, it was encouraging to see that the general condition of the bowling greens at West Witney and The Leys continue to improve.
- In the stronger sections of the West Witney green, the preferred fine grass species are forming stronger populations, and the underlying soil profile displays reasonable soil aggregation and encouraging sand integration, despite an element of organic matter accumulation.
- At The Leys, where levels of play are recognised to be more intensive, it was positive to see that the amount of wear and tear experienced does not appear to be as negatively impactful as that seen at the time of the 2024 visit. The soil profile is reasonably healthy but there remains a distinct thatch layer in the upper sections of the rootzone.
- Random soil moisture content on the West Witney green is a little high at present given recent rainfall events which highlights the necessity for ongoing thatch removal and sand integration. A more acceptable random moisture content was identified on The Leys bowling green, but the requirement for organic matter management continues.
- Surface hardness readings were taken randomly on both greens which delivered positive readings and the playing surfaces remain firm underfoot, and were both reported to have performed well over the bowling season.
- The previously discussed southeastern corner of the West Witney green historically sat extremely wet during the inclement winter period and now in stark contrast dried out considerably during the drought stressed period of the past summer. The high element of organic matter accumulation at the surface, combined with hydrophobic soils at depth, effectively bakes-off over the summer and acts like a sponge during the wet winter months. At present, the worst areas display a very low soil moisture content (1.4%) and as advised previously, a significant thatch removal operation is prescribed, and the use of a curative wetting agent will be absolutely essential to correct the soil moisture levels.
- Weed ingress remains evident on both greens, to varying degrees, and as advised every effort should be made in the first instance to remove the smaller examples by hand as part of routine cutting operations, to avoid the need for extensive chemical weed intervention with a selective herbicide.
- Worm casting is apparent, and to some extent inevitable, on both greens and where the disturbed materials have been smeared the surface is effectively sealed off, which can smother out grass cover leading to a thinning of the sward. In the absolute and permanent absence of chemical control for worms the continued introduction of sand-based dressings and the employment of acidic fertilisers will help to discourage worm activity, and should any casting be evident the sandier material will be easier to disperse.
- Regular maintenance of the perimeter hedgerows is key to optimising light penetration and air flow across the playing surfaces at both sites, to improve the general growing environments for the greens and keep the surfaces dry. Strategic tree thinning and removal, including lower limb trimming, would also be advantageous, which could be likely at West Witney with the development of the new Council depot, but probably less achievable at The Leys with the large mature specimen at the southeast corner of the site.
- Housekeeping at both venues would include maintenance of the ditches and wooden support boards, which can be damaged by misplaced footfall from the users of the site, as evidenced on the day at West Witney.

End of Season Bowling Green Renovations

- Essential end of season renovations should include chisel or needle tine aeration (SISIS Dart) and multiple scarification operations with the Dennis 510 mower cassette system, tailored to the respective green. As highlighted, the challenging southeast section of the West Witney green must be subject to a least 4 passes with the scarifier.
- Heavy top-dressing (70:30 mix) should be applied to each green, in conjunction with the suggested specialist Bowling Green seed mix of 80% Fescue/20% Browntop Bentgrass.

Cricket - Maintenance

- The cricket pitch at West Witney has reportedly received a lower level of use this season than has been evident in previous years, so the drought stressed conditions of the summer may not have experienced the negative impact which could have occurred.
- Excellent protective fencing has been employed to preserve the integrity of the cricket square and negate typical animal scrape damage.
- The much-discussed drop off beyond the stumps at the southern end of the square remains but does not have a negative impact on wicket preparation or performance.
- The outfield at West Witney displays a much-improved grass cover, with less signs of surface undulations, and was reported to have performed well over the season. More regular cutting operations undoubtedly helps the development of denser turf and a more uniform coverage.
- It was reported that the cricket pitch at The Leys has now not been used for between 5-6 years and the cricket square is cut as part of routine mowing operations across the extended section of the playing field.

Cricket - Renovations

- The end of season cricket square renovations at West Witney have comprised needle tine aeration, three passes with the scarifier and two runs with the hollow corer on each wicket. The incorporation of a suggested 4 ½ tonnes of loam has followed with appropriate overseeding, with particular attention focussed on the crease at each wicket end.
- It was suggested that the cricket pitch at The Leys could be brought back into use during 2026 to accommodate the expansion of the Swifts Cricket Club, and the necessity for additional wickets. At this point, despite, the lack of use and end of season renovations, the integrity of the cricket square construction remains intact and is recoverable with some intensive renovative operations should the requirement arise.
- There remains a substantial weed element across both cricket squares and chemical intervention will be required as part of routine blanket treatments across the playing field.

Football - Maintenance

- The football pitch area at West Witney is in much better condition to that viewed in 2024, benefitting considerably from more routine mowing operations at a reported 35mm height of cut with the commencement of the season in recent weeks.
- There are fewer clippings on the surface with the return of drier conditions, but there is a minor element of missed cuts with not sufficient overlap being employed with the cutting decks on each pass with the mower.
- General surface levels are very good at West Witney and the repairs to the goalmouth areas are particularly encouraging. The grass coverage in the 6-yard boxes is better, but there is still some thinning of grass cover, so focussed effort is suggested as part of the end of the 2025/2026 season renovations to target specific repairs in these key areas. The goalmouths on the pitch closest to the changing facilities are typically used more than most, so have suffered greater levels of damage already.
- A random moisture value of 31.1% is acceptable and although the surface firmness of 209 gravities is a little high at present, the surfaces are deemed perfectly safe with adequate traction.
- The traditionally challenging southeast corner of the West Witney playing field appears in good condition at present and currently hosts junior pitches. As identified previously, increased aeration in this area would be advantageous to optimise drainage potential over the tricky winter period.

- The cricket outfield/football area at The Leys has been used exclusively for junior football this year hosting two 9-a-side, two 5-a-side and one 7-a-side. Use is extremely heavy and there is significant wear and tear, particularly towards the southern end of the site. It is suggested that reorientation of the pitches could facilitate better use of the areas which display increased grass coverage.
- Regretfully, the historic football area at The Leys beyond the treeline, has suffered significant damage following the hosting of the recent food festival, with heavy plant and equipment situated on site, left during particularly inclement conditions. Substantial damage has occurred to goalpost sockets, and the underlying soil structure has been seriously compromised by heavy traffic.
- The Burwell QE2 Playing Fields also displays very encouraging grass coverage, and a marked improvement on 2024 conditions, despite the acknowledged high levels of use on site. The field currently accommodates eight pitches which constitutes three 11-a-side, two 9-a-side, two 7-a-side and one 5-a-side.
- Routine cutting operations have undoubtedly enhanced presentation and performance but there is an element of clippings following recent productive growth.
- New goalposts have been installed on two of the three full-size pitches which is an excellent enhancement to the provision on site.

Football - Renovations

- End of 2024/2025 season renovations across the sites were reportedly conservative as a result of prevailing hot and dry conditions and comprised a basic top-dressing operation, typically 60 tonnes per 11-a-side pitch, followed by targeted overseeding.
- Now that weather patterns have eased, and ground conditions are more conducive, plans are in place for a Verti-Quake aeration across the pitches to improve drainage heading into winter.
- More slitting and raking operations are also planned across the respective sites.
- Provision is also being made for the application of an Autumn/Winter granular fertiliser application, via appointed outside contractor.
- Localised repairs to the goalmouths have been very positive with excavation of the existing turf, restoration of underlying materials and re-turfing of the impacted areas. There is an element of scalping on sections around the repairs due to a difference in surrounding surface levels, so targeted repairs will be necessary.

Signed



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