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WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL

Advisory Report on the Leys and West Witney Sports Pitches

Report Date: 12th August 2020
Consultant: Michael Boyes



Date of Visit:	Wednesday 12 th August 2020
Visit Objective:	Review of agronomic conditions and performance of the sports pitches at The Leys and West Witney.
Present:	John Hickman – Witney Town Council Dave Gilson & Jess – Continental Landscapes Michael Boyes – Turfgrass Agronomist, STRI Ltd
Weather:	Very hot and sunny (31°C).







Headlines

- Encouragingly, Continental Landscapes have been able to carry out routine maintenance operations on both the Leys and West Witney sites throughout the Coronavirus lockdown period and playing surfaces in general have benefitted from a relaxation of play whilst mandatory restrictions for sport were in place. Works are now undertaken in conjunction with STRI Sports Pitches Maintenance Specification & Pesticide Policy compiled for and agreed with Witney Town Council in 2019.
- Prolonged hot and dry weather conditions are having an impact on the playing surfaces, particularly where irrigation provision is restricted, but all surfaces are conducive to recommencement of play, with the noted exception of the football pitches at the Leys which have been removed from use due to the impending Health & Safety risk detailed in last year's report.
- End of season renovations were completed as scheduled on both bowling greens and comprised the recognised multiple scarify, hollow core thatch removal, sand top-dressing and over-seeding operations. Progress is seen in root extension and sward development but the main issue facing both bowling greens is the irrigation provision with a failure of the entire system at Leys and poor coverage at West Witney.
- Both cricket squares are well-presented but the "drop off" at the end of each West Witney wicket still requires addressing. Lack of use at the Leys means routine maintenance can be eased at present.
- The football pitch area at West Witney has been well-maintained and goalmouths have been successfully repaired during the period of no play. Plans are in place for cutting and marking out for fixtures to begin at the start of September 2020.





Key Actions

- Apply a curative wetting agent (i.e. Aqueduct, or similar) to the entire bowling green at the Leys and the drought stressed central section at West Witney with applicator gun and significant hand watering to drench the soil profile to correct localised dry patch and hydrophobicity issues. Make recommendations to the respective Club's for irrigation system enhancement/replacement to improve water delivery and safeguard against distinct possibility of loss of grass cover.
- Cut and mark out football pitches at West Witney in preparation for commencement of play in early September.
- Make provision for use of the Earthquake aerator as part of the renovation operations on the football pitches at West Witney.
- Reduce routine maintenance of the cricket square at the Leys due to lack of use but retain one wicket near "match ready" in the event of last-minute booking.
- Plan to strip, supplement loam and restore levels at the wicket ends of the cricket square at West Witney to deliver a uniform level and eradicate the drop-off at stumps.

Photo Observations and Comments – Bowls West Witney

	
<p>Figure 1: The bowling green at West Witney was well-presented on the day of the visit despite the extended spell of hot and dry weather in recent days.</p>	<p>Figure 2: The sward composition continues to improve and current drought conditions favour the desirable fine turf grass species being promoted.</p>
	
<p>Figure 3: An inspection of the greens profile illustrates the persistence of the thatch layer in the top 30mm but encouraging root extension in tine holes created during greens renovations.</p>	<p>Figure 4: The ingress of moss is still evident across much of the green (main picture). Isolated incidences of weeds are also evident (inset) which can be hand rogued during each cutting operation.</p>
	
<p>Figure 5: A central section of the green is extremely dry (moisture meter inset recorded 4.4%) due to the irrigation sprinklers not achieving sufficient coverage.</p>	<p>Figure 6: Removal of vegetation surrounding the green and a reduction in footfall as a result of the coronavirus lockdown has allowed the perimeter of the green to recover somewhat.</p>

Cricket – West Witney

	
<p>Figure 7: Play was reported to have recommenced on the cricket square at West Witney and the surfaces are generally well-prepared and well-presented.</p>	<p>Figure 8: Drop-off at the end of the wicket continues to prove problematic and extensive restorative works were agreed in order to establish a level cricket square.</p>
	
<p>Figure 9: Individual wickets are cut, rolled, and marked out in accordance with the proposed fixture list. An adjacent irrigation valve provides the required water supply for wicket preparation.</p>	<p>Figure 10: The cricket outfield is cut sporadically in line with growth patterns and prevailing weather conditions. The boundary has been marked accordingly.</p>

Football – West Witney

	
<p>Figure 11: Football is yet to commence on the pitches at West Witney, but the grounds have still been maintained with regular cutting operations.</p>	<p>Figure 12: Goalmouth repairs have been largely effective due to a lack of use as a result of the coronavirus mandatory lockdown.</p>

Photo Observations and Comments – Bowls Leys



Figure 13: It was reported, following inspection three days prior to the visit, that the automated irrigation system had failed on the previous weekend and an engineer is due to visit in three day's-time.



Figure 14: The impact on the green is severe under current drought conditions with soil moisture recorded at 4.5% against a target range of between 15-30%.



Figure 15: An inspection of the soil profile revealed hydrophobic conditions at depth with "powder dry" rootzone materials.



Figure 16: The result of a significant lack of moisture is that the surface effectively bakes-off which is reflected in a surface firmness reading of 213 gravities (e.g. target 120-170 gravities)

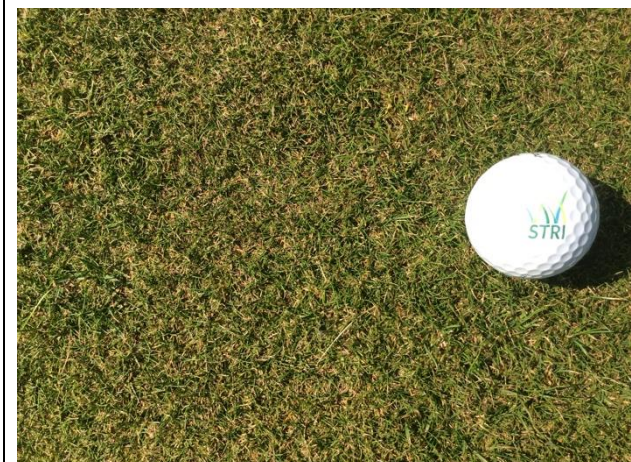




Figure 17: Where the grass sward is strongest the finer grass species dominate the turf under the drought conditions they favour. Elsewhere, there is a distinct risk that some loss of grass cover could occur if the situation is not rectified.





Figure 18: Some groundworks have been undertaken on the utilities traversing the site and it is not known if this may have impacted the irrigation system leading to the problems currently faced.

Photo Observations and Comments – Bowls Leys

	
<p>Figure 19: Some ingress of invasive weeds is evident in localised areas where a thinning of grass cover has occurred. Physical removal is advised, ensuring the resulting void is dressed with approved material and seed mix.</p>	<p>Figure 20: Some growth of the boundary hedge is evident which casts a shadow on the perimeter of the playing surface, as shown above. Plans are in place to undertake the necessary trimming works.</p>

Cricket - Leys

	
<p>Figure 21: No play is planned for the cricket field at the Leys for the foreseeable future, but the square has been well-maintained throughout the lockdown period.</p>	<p>Figure 22: A single wicket is being maintained, should any urgent requirement be made for use of the facilities. General routine maintenance can be eased at present.</p>
	
<p>Figure 23: There remains a need for end of season scarification to target procumbent growth and coarser grasses and deliver the required top dressing and seed.</p>	<p>Figure 24: There has been no requirement for cutting maintenance on the cricket outfield due to lack of play and restricted growth under current oppressive conditions.</p>

Recommendations

The contractor (Continental Landscapes) is currently working with Witney Town Council under the agreed terms of the STRI Sports Pitch Maintenance Specification & Pesticide Policy written in 2019 for the maintenance of the sports pitches at The Leys and West Witney. An annual review of the Pesticide Policy will be undertaken as part of the site visit to ensure compliance with current legislation and will be updated and re-issued when any changes occur, in the meantime the original issue remains valid.

Bowling Green Maintenance

- The end of season renovations were carried out as planned in accordance with the STRI Sports Pitch Maintenance Specification supplied and the benefits are most apparent at West Witney with improving root mass development, root extension in holes channels created by the hollow coring and sanding operation and improvement of the grass sward from the scarification and over-seeding works.
- Irrigation system reliability and capabilities are the greatest concern at present for both of the bowling greens.
- A contractor inspection at Leys on the Monday before the visit found the green to be in an extreme drought stressed condition and it was reported that the irrigation system had failed completely on the previous weekend. Attempts had been made by the Club officials to hand water the green via hose pipe, but the delivery appears to have been wholly inadequate and urgent action is required immediately to prevent loss of grass cover. An irrigation engineer has been engaged by the Club but cannot attend until next weekend and with soil moisture recorded at 4% (target 15-25%) and hydrophobic soils present, the use of a curative wetting agent is prescribed immediately with significant hand watering to depth to soak the profile and effectively “re-wet” the soils.
- Irrigation delivery in general has improved at West Witney but a central section of the green is not receiving sufficient cover from the existing sprinkler distribution and displays localised dry patch symptoms. As similar programme to that prescribed above at the Leys is advised to correct hydrophobic conditions with appropriate wetting agent and ample irrigation.
- Long-term it is advised that responsibility for the irrigation system, maintenance and irrigation scheduling should be the sole responsibility of the appointed contractor, with appropriate remuneration, as the expertise is with them and not the Club members or officials.
- Routine cutting operations, three times a week (i.e. Monday/Wednesday/Friday) at 5mm are maintaining sound playing surfaces at both sites but with a relaxation of play as a result of the coronavirus restrictions this may be moderated as the “season” draws to a close. As previously advised, daily dew removal is still required on non-cutting days to minimise conditions conducive to pathogen activity.
- The adoption of regular verti-cutting/light scarification, when the current oppressive weather conditions have eased, and conducive growth conditions have returned, is key to targeting moss ingress and undesirable coarse grasses populations. The use of conventional Lawn Sand in Spring 2021 ahead of pre-season preparations will help to desiccate the moss plant prior to removal with light scarification.
- Problematic and opportunistic weeds have invaded the green sward on both greens, typically where a thinning of grass cover has occurred, and should be removed by hand in preference to any proposed chemical intervention. Ensure that the resultant voids are dressed immediately with the approved 70:30 top dressing mix and over-seeded with specified fine turf grass seed mix to facilitate speedy recovery.

- Increased tree removal on the perimeter of the West Witney green is having the desired effect with and improvement in light penetration and air circulation leading to a gradual improvement in sward health in the previously shaded and sheltered areas. This has undoubtedly been aided by the reduction in footfall in these relatively weaker areas as a result of the mandatory restrictions in play for the coronavirus lockdown. The border hedge at the Leys has grown up somewhat and instructions were presented to trim the top to eradicate the shade which is currently evident.
- Encouragingly, signs of bird foraging for insect grubs are greatly reduced this year with a few minor occurrences evident on the perimeter of the Leys green. Remember, the best way to discourage insect activity is to develop and sustain a strong, healthy and dense grass sward and promote an open airy environment on the green through structured tree thinning and removal.
- Continue to remain vigilant, particularly during periods of high disease pressure, for the early signs of pathogen activity ensuring preventative fungicide is available for application as a safeguard when humid and warm conditions are looming.

End of Season Bowling Green Renovations

- Despite the significantly reduced levels of play this year due to the mandatory lockdown of sporting facilities it is essential that end of season renovations planned for the bowling greens at The Leys and West Witney are still undertaken as specified in the agreed STRI Sports Pitch Maintenance Specification & Pesticide Policy 2019. Organic matter will continue to accumulate, regardless of footfall, therefore the programme of multiple scarification, hollow core aeration to remove thatch, top-dressing and over-seeding is key to promote a friable rootzone which supports a strong, healthy and dense grass sward at the surface, dominated by fescue and bent grasses.

Cricket - Maintenance

- Both cricket squares have benefitted from reduced play this summer and have been well-maintained throughout the lockdown period to present surfaces ready for the recommencement of play. Proposed patterns of use have changed somewhat from previous years with matches having already been played at West Witney and no immediate use planned for the Leys.
- Wear and tear is none existent on the Leys square and minimal on the utilised wickets at West Witney so it is suggested that routine maintenance can be reduced on the Leys pitch to ensure that one wicket remains on the verge of “match ready” so minimal work will be required should the facilities receive a booking at short notice. Regular maintenance and pre-match preparations to the recognised standards remain essential on the West Witney pitch ahead of the planned fixtures.
- Current hot and dry weather patterns have severely reduced growth and therefore eliminated the need for extensive cutting of the outfield at both venues, so resources have been appropriately directed to the ongoing care of the bowling green facilities.
- Water provision is more readily available at West Witney with adjacent hand watering points but the previously highlighted issues at the Leys with access to irrigation and water pressure will not present as great a concern this year with no play planned and the aforementioned relaxation in routine maintenance practices.

Cricket - Renovations

- As with the bowling greens and football pitch areas, it is encouraging that Continental Landscapes have routinely carried out end-of-season renovations and kept up maintenance operations as required on the cricket squares throughout the coronavirus lockdown. In conjunction with significantly reduced levels of play the playing surfaces have benefited from the “rest” but end of season renovations will still be required in conjunction with the adopted STRI Sports Pitch Maintenance Specification & Pesticide Policy. The agreed steps are detailed within the document but basically comprise hollow coring, scarification in multiple directions, incorporation of Ongar loam and over-seeding with an approved perennial ryegrass and chewing’s fescue grass seed mix. If no play is undertaken at the Leys it may be possible to adopt a more conservative renovations programme at the end of the season but this will depend on the Contractor’s assessment of thatch accumulation throughout the Leys square soil profile and there remains a distinct need for sufficient scarification operations to target the whorly grass growth evident on the day of the visit.
- The drop-off in surface levels at the wicket ends noted at both sites in previous reports, and most evident on the square at West Witney, requires urgent attention to restore a level and uniform platform for the establishment of consistent wickets. In the current condition the stumps and bails will be incorrectly sited at the affected wicket end as the ground level is substantially below that of the popping crease.

Football - Maintenance

- **The area originally designated for football pitches at Leys has been withdrawn from use as recommended in the last report due to the impending Health & Safety risk from unsafe surfaces entirely inappropriate for play.**
- The areas designated for football pitches at West Witney have been regularly maintained with routine cutting operations in preparation for re-commencement of play in early September 2020. Marking out is planned for the weeks following the visit.
- Goalmouth repairs, for both levels and restoration of grass cover, have proven largely successful due to the absence of play.

Football - Renovations

- With the resumption of play in September 2020 the fixtures are expect to run until the start of May 2021 and it was agreed that a full 8 weeks are required to undertake the prescribed end of season renovations as per the agreed STRI Sports Pitch Maintenance Specification & Pesticide Policy so pre-season use cannot start until 1st July 2021, at the earliest.
- The benefits of adopting further EarthQuake aerator operations, as previously employed at West Witney, were discussed to alleviate the ongoing drainage issues issued under heavy play during the wetter, winter months. It was agreed that this should not completely replace the current twice a year deep solid tine aeration operations (i.e. Verti-Drain) but instead should be adopted every other year to complement a single use of the Verti-drain.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Boyes".

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