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# WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL

## Advisory Report on the Leys and West Witney Sports Pitches

Report Date: 26<sup>th</sup> August 2021  
Consultant: Michael Boyes



Date of Visit: Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> August 2021

Visit Objective: Review of agronomic conditions and performance of the sports pitches at The Leys and West Witney.

Present: John Hickman – Witney Town Council  
Angus Whitburn & Tracey Minns – Witney Town Council  
Luke Gladdy, Duncan Corby & Terry Turner - Continental Landscapes  
Philip Blakeman – Swifts CC  
Michael Boyes – Turfgrass Agronomist, STRI Ltd

Weather: Cool with extensive cloud cover (16°C).

### Headlines

- Challenging weather patterns have caused a slow start to growth this year but more favourable conditions of late have facilitated increased maintenance operations leading to improved general presentation and performance of the vast majority of playing surfaces under the remit of Continental Landscapes.
- Bowling greens at West Witney and Leys are in reasonable condition, performing well and under increased use which results in the evitable wear and tear. Aside from routine end of season renovations, focus is required on the more heavily impacted areas of both bowling greens to alleviate compaction, improve development of the rooting systems and grass health at the surface. Irrigation systems continue to present a considerable challenge at both bowling venues and greater control by the Council is key to deliver an improvement in the playing surfaces.
- The cricket pitch at the Leys is being routinely maintained with basic cutting operations but has experienced a complete lack of play this season. The cricket pitch at West Witney is subject to a more intense maintenance programme, due to its reported use for some 34 fixtures so far this season and is presented very well and performing excellently according to the representative in attendance from Swifts Cricket Club.
- The football pitch area at West Witney has not received the level of cutting maintenance required to prepare for recommencement of play on 3<sup>rd</sup> September and significant urgent operations are necessary to reduce the height of cut in graduation ready for play.
- Repairs to goalmouths at West Witney are intact but are poorly established due to a lack of routine irrigation delivery which will be key to ensure that the turf “knits in” sufficiently in these traditionally heavily impacted areas, ahead of play in September.

## Key Actions

- Apply a curative wetting agent (i.e., Aqueduct, or similar) to the hydrophobic area identified in the central section of the bowling green at West Witney with an appropriate applicator gun and hand hose. Investigate the delivery of the automated irrigation system to identify shortfalls in the irrigation arc and make the necessary recommendations to the Council and the Clubs for appropriate upgrades and repairs.
- Contact the home Clubs that use West Witney Bowls to re-established autonomous control of irrigation system operation by the appointment contractor Continental Landscapes.
- Make provision as part of the end of season renovations on both bowling greens to undertake additional aeration operations on the heavily compacted perimeter areas adjacent to the pavilions to alleviate soil compaction and develop a more friable soil structure which is conducive to root mass extension and improvement of turf health at the surface.
- Cut football pitch area at West Witney with the Amazone Flail Mower for a cut and collect operation to reduce the height of grass and collect the debris in one single process. Mark out pitches for commencement of play on 3<sup>rd</sup> September.
- Deliver adequate irrigation to goalmouth repairs on the football pitches at West Witney to ensure the turf “knits in” correctly and provides the necessary levels, stability and traction for these heavily impacted areas.
- Maintain routine maintenance on the cricket square at The Leys to facilitate the preparation of a wicket should the venue be required for a fixture at short notice. Aim to promote increased use of the cricket pitch at the Leys by contacting junior cricket clubs and local schools.
- Ensure the rinks are turned on a regular basis at Leys Bowls Club to alleviate the damage at the rink ends due to the current orientation causing significant wear and tear.
- Continue to promote plans to strip, supplement the loam and restore the levels at the wicket ends of the cricket square at West Witney to deliver a uniform level and eradicate the drop off beyond stumps.

## Photo Observations and Comments – Bowls West Witney



Figure 1: General condition of the bowling green at West Witney is acceptable for the time of year.



Figure 2: Closer inspection of the grass sward reveals reasonable grass cover with the typical impact of moss.



Figure 3: Historic disease scarring can be seen in localised, more sheltered sections adjacent to the pavilions.



Figure 4: Inefficiencies in the irrigation coverage is highlighted by hydrophobic soils in a central section of the green.



Figure 5: Compaction is evident on the perimeter edge immediately outside the pavilion due to extensive footfall from the bowlers using the same area to access the green.



Figure 6: Sporadic weed ingress should be removed regularly with hand weeding.



## Photo Observations and Comments - Cricket West Witney



Figure 7: Presentation of the cricket square and wickets was very good on the day at West Witney.



Figure 8: The wickets are being well maintained largely by Continental Landscapes with assistance from Swifts CC with additional rolling operations as required.



Figure 9: The historically reported "fall-off" beyond the stumps at the end of the wicket still requires addressing but is reported by Swifts CC, not to influence play.



Figure 10: The outfield is currently maintained with a single weekly cut and additional mowing operations were advised to optimise presentation, performance and definition.



Figure 11: A highly visible plastic chain system has been installed to protect the cricket square but has unfortunately fallen foul to vandalism.



Figure 12: Dedicated covers have undoubtedly proven beneficial in protecting the wicket and feedback on performance of the cricket pitch this season is very positive.

## Photo Observations and Comments - Football West Witney



Figure 13: The grass sward is extremely long on the football pitch area at West Witney and will require considerable attention ahead of commencement of play on 3<sup>rd</sup> September.



Figure 14: Goalmouth repair is encouraging but it is essential that significant and ongoing irrigation is required to help the turf to knit in ahead of use.



## Photo Observations and Comments – Bowls Leys



Figure 15: The bowling green at Leys was under heavy use on the day so the inspection was largely limited to the out of play rinks.



Figure 16: In the areas of strongest grass cover the composition, density and healthy of the sward was very good.



Figure 17: Inspection of the soil profile on the green at Leys shows some accumulation of organic matter near the surface.



Figure 18: The rink ends are extremely worn due to localised and heavy footfall from the bowlers under their current orientation.



Figure 19: Localised weed ingress should be removed by hand as part of the routine maintenance, prior to regular cutting operations.



Figure 20: Regular cutting maintenance on the perimeter hedge is key to optimising light penetration and air circulation to improve the growing environment on the green at Leys.

## Photo Observations and Comments – Cricket Leys



Figure 21: The cricket square at Leys is quite rightly still being routinely maintained despite a complete absence of fixtures this season.



Figure 22: Soil water management remains key to correct dry patch and fairy ring symptoms seen on the square on the day.



Figure 23: The protective plastic chain has also been installed at the Leys in an attempt to protect the cricket square. Unfortunately, the intervention has suffered the same vandalism.



Figure 24: The cricket outfield is being used for mini-football pitches and a number of community events so is currently being maintained with basic cutting operations.



## Recommendations

### Bowling Green Maintenance

- End of season renovations centred around well recognised practices, and in conjunction with the STRI Sports Pitch Maintenance Specification agreed with Witney Town Council 2019 have been carried out at both bowling green venues and the playing surface condition and performance was acceptable for the time of year.
- Less oppressive hot and dry conditions have prevailed this summer due to the unseasonal weather patterns and so the substantial drought impact viewed in 2020 is not as prevalent this year. However, the weaknesses and frailties of the irrigation system at both venues remains a concern. It is important that the necessary action is taken to ensure that the most efficient delivery of irrigation is provided by the current systems or urgent steps are taken to identify the shortfall and make the necessary funds available for compartmental upgrade and repair.
- An imbalance in soil moisture management is best highlighted by the hydrophobic soil condition viewed in the central section of the West Witney Bowling Green on the day. An inspection of the soil profile in the central section of the green where the irrigation delivery falls short, and the soil particles are water repellent now and the use of a curative wetting agent tablet via applicator gun and hand hose will be essential to effectively rewet the soils.
- Beyond this immediate action, it is essential that the irrigation system as a whole is audited to identify ongoing problems and make plans for corrective action. Also, the control of the automated irrigation system should rest entirely under the direction of the appointed contractor, Continental Landscapes, as they are the experts in the field with regards to turf care and we should not rely on the Club officials to turn on and off the irrigation system when they deem it necessary. Undoubtedly, representatives of Witney Town Council will need to co-ordinate with the Clubs which use West Witney Bowls to smooth the transition of irrigation control.
- A more balanced picture with regards to soil moisture levels was apparent at The Leys, which as reported had been significantly impacted by the frailties of the irrigation system with prevailing drought conditions last year. Vigilance is advised to ensure that irrigation delivery is co-ordinated with Continental Landscapes in accordance with changing weather patterns.
- The routine cutting maintenance of three times per week (i.e., Monday, Wednesday and Friday) is nicely balanced to service both bowling greens but the necessity to remove dew on a daily basis on the "non-cutting" days still holds true.
- The promotion of vertical cutting operations is still recommended to target the mild moss ingress on the bowls at West Witney, but it is essential at both facilities to target some of the coarser, less desirable grasses and encourage the finer turf grass species we wish to promote.
- The sporadic ingress of opportunistic weeds on both bowling greens is not a major issue but will present a considerable problem with time if the offending plants are not physically removed with a pen knife during routine cutting maintenance. As previously advised, where removal of weeds results in a void in the playing surface ensure sufficient top dressing and seed is available to affect immediate repair.
- As part of the routine end of season renovations, it is suggested that additional solid tine aeration is undertaken on the perimeters of both bowling greens, particularly in areas immediately adjacent to the exit and entry points to the greens from the pavilion, where soil profiles were noted to be extremely compacted and grass cover particularly weak. Attempts should be made to direct players and maintenance crew and equipment to enter and exit the playing surfaces at alternate positions to avoid future damage of this nature.
- Further reduction of the perimeter hedge at the Leys Bowling Green is required at the earliest opportunity to facilitate greater light penetration and air circulation particularly as we enter the latter part of the year, and the sun sits lower in the sky.

## End of Season Bowling Green Renovations

- A structured and timely programme of end of season renovations are key to the ongoing health of both bowling greens and should be carried out in line with the well-recognised practices previously adopted and detailed in the STRI Sports Pitch Maintenance Specification 2019.
- It is essential that scarification operations are carried out in multiple directions to remove thatch and surface debris, complemented appropriately as required with hollow core aeration, top dressing and overseeding to restore a healthy, strong surface over free draining soils in preparation for the recommencement of play with the 2022 season.
- The expertise of Continental Landscapes is key in identifying how much material removal is required with regards to each respective surface and thereby how many scarification operations will be necessary to achieve the intended aim.

## Cricket - Maintenance

- The maintenance of the cricket square at West Witney is very good under the recognised programme of a weekly cut with the final preparation of the wicket typically carried out on the Saturday or Sunday of the fixture. A reported 34 games have been played this season so far and it was good to have a representative from Swifts Cricket Club on the day of the visit to receive their members feedback directly. The wickets were reported to have performed very well this season, with a nice even bounce, and the Club officials were more than happy with the services provided.
- The main challenge at West Witney Cricket remains the provision of irrigation but the surfaces are being managed within the confines of the current water provision.
- The cricket square at the Leys is being maintained on a routine basis although it was reported that the pitch has received no play this year. The square is being regularly maintained to remain in position to be ready for match play if there is an urgent requirement to cut out a wicket at short notice. It is suggested that the facility should be promoted for junior cricket as a proactive measure to try and engage with the local communities and schools and raise interest in the game.
- Cricket outfielders are being maintained with routine cutting operations, but two different circumstances persist. The outfield at West Witney would benefit from some additional mowing to optimise presentation and definition of the playing area but also enhance performance. At The Leys the cricket outfield is primarily being used for junior football and other community exercise events and is therefore most appropriately maintained under its current mowing regime.
- Some discussions took place regarding water provision at the Leys as it is understood that testing has been carried which confirmed that water pressure is adequate, and it was suggested that at next year's visit a demonstration of the irrigation provision should be undertaken to ascertain the actual delivery of water and whether any further corrective action is required.

## Cricket - Renovations

- Despite a complete lack of play at the Leys this season, it is suggested that a full programme of end of season renovations still be carried out by Continental Landscapes at both venues to ensure that the excellent provision at West Witney continues and that the situation at the Leys is ready for immediate use should it be required. It is suggested although the programme is clearly identified with regards the need for hollow coring, multiple scarifications and the introduction of loam top dressing and overseeding, that a more conservative programme could be adopted at Leys due to the lack of play. Undoubtedly some form of renovations will be required as generation of thatch is continual, and the area will have been impacted by general public use throughout the year. As previously identified, the expertise of the contractor will be key on ascertaining the actual level of organic matter accumulation which has developed throughout the Leys cricket square to tailor the suggested operations.
- Deep solid tine aeration (i.e., Verti-Drain) is key to maintaining the outer areas and optimising drainage potential but it was noted that operations of this nature are restricted at The Leys due to the shallow nature of the sewer installation in the area. Ultimate care is advised to avoid these areas in conjunction with direction by Witney Town Council.
- The ongoing issue with the drop off in surface levels beyond stumps on the cricket square at West Witney remains outstanding and at the earliest opportunity as part of end of season renovations works should commence to aim to address this outstanding problem. It was encouraging however to hear from the Swifts Cricket Club official that this issue is having little impact on play at the moment and there has been no complaints with regards to ball/surface interaction. It is suggested that these works cannot be carried out in one end of season renovations and therefore levels should be gradually corrected over a number of seasons to achieve the desired results.

## Football - Maintenance

- The football area at West Witney displays extremely long grass growth and immediate action is required to reduce the height of cut in graduation to the desired playing height in preparation for the commencement of play on 3<sup>rd</sup> September.
- At this late stage the grass is so long that significant debris will arise from any cutting operations so the employment of an Amazone Flail Mower “cut and collect” operation is suggested to reduce the grass height significantly and collect debris in one single operation. It is suggested that in the forthcoming seasons, routine cutting maintenance is absolutely essential throughout the close season to prevent a reoccurrence of this problem.
- Goalmouth repairs have been undertaken at West Witney, but the turf is poorly established at present and significant irrigation delivery is required to ensure stability and traction is achieved with the turf rooting successfully prior to recommencement of play.
- The marking out of the football pitches and installation of the goalposts will also be required in the coming weeks.



## Football - Renovations

- End of season renovations at West Witney will follow the programme laid out in the STRI Sports Pitch Maintenance Specification in 2019. A typical programme centres around extensive deep solid tine aeration (i.e., Verti-Drain), delivery of ample top dressing (approximately 160 tonnes) and an overseeding operation. However, discussions took place regarding the adoption of the Earthquake Aerator as this has proven particularly beneficial in previous seasons to optimise drainage potential in these difficult soils.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Boyes", written in a cursive style.

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