

POST MIL-SERVICE HOBBY INTEREST IN GROUNDS MAINTENANCE; CRICKET AND FOOTBALL by John N Wels (NEBOSH Dip,)

Background: Following 36 (and a 1/3rd) years, as a Royal Air Force Aircraft Technician and middle management supervisor; dating back to 1977; I had always partook in sport alongside my daytime aircraft technician specialisation; fixing Jets and Helicopters! Going back all those years; working on the likes of Vulcan, Buccaneer S2Mk A/2MkB, Harrier GR3 (Cat 3) damaged airframes Jaguar Modifications. The RAF then sent me to Lossiemouth, Scotland, 1993 – 1999 on the Moray Firth for Buccaneer S2B Minor and Minor Star maintenance team and the OCU at First Line operations.

Then 1990-1993 onto Chinook HC Mk2 at Gutersloh (Germany), part of the eastern bloc defence ‘Cold War’ infrastructure of RAF Germany. Including a spell in the desert for (Gulf War 1; included) for good measure supporting the Army and Special Forces at the front line with the UKs’ (back then) 12 strong; Chinook Mk2 Fleet. Throughout this time, I was lucky to play cricket on a Wed pm most weeks in Service cricket against other Stations. Where the love of the game brought me closer to grounds preparation. Albeit played on many non-grass, thus artificial wickets.

In ‘93; a further 10 years on Chinook Mk2A/Mk3 Helicopters at UK main base; RAF Odiham Hants as a Chief Technician; in a role as a service design engineer and technical author on the twin rotor helicopter. Before progression again; up the management chain as Flight Sergeant to RAF Wyton, Cambridgeshire on Logistical Analysis in a Defence Equipment Support (DES) capacity; ‘flying a desk’ on data statistics. Before a move into VC10, TriStar and Royal Flight British Aerospace; BAe146 and Hawker Beechcraft; BAe 125; in a Project Team – in a safety management capacity Deputising for my Civil Service Boss when he was away in many meetings for the Royal Flight and Large Transport aircraft fleets. ‘sat mostly on a computer’; typing safety case and minutes of meetings most days; in a MoD Deputy Safety Management role. As well as other responsibilities-of course.



Figure 1- Chinook HC Mk4 overflies Houghton Playing Fields, during pass at nearby RAF Wyton

I finished my ‘full’ – to aged 55years RAF Service in 2013. Working thereafter as a Civilian in Aerospace; safety and as a civilian Airworthiness inspector on the Royal Air Forces’ Tornado GR4 Fleet; for a short

while and later in a carbon/metalwork engineering and composites manufacturing; company in nearby Huntingdon, as The Health & Safety Officer and Environmental waste Manager. During the period (as a civilian), I became more involved at my Cricket Club in East Anglia; Ramsey C.C Huntingdonshire Cricket League and later became heavily involved in Grounds maintenance; starting as a complete novice and now I am a full-time; volunteer grounds-person.

The Grounds maintenance at my Club back then (2013) was purely as an 'interest' as a weekend cricketer. But I could see the importance of the playing conditions and when or if a playing surface was 'true'; had good bounce and carry for the bowlers as well as maintaining a competitive interest in the game itself for the players; who played at a good level in the Huntingdonshire Cricket League Div 1 and at an even higher standard; in The Tucker Gardner Ltd; (now as The Whiting and Partners Div 1-3, Leagues comprising Cambs and Hunts top Clubs.

At Ramsey Cricket Club we had shall we say a challenge as the square was in the main a good scoring playing surface but in certain conditions it had a bad habit of "keeping-low". This is the games worst scenario, as it essentially means a low-scoring affair for both player and spectators. Some of whom would make comments to the Groundsman, mainly in a negative way. Which as you will all know, is not great for the local 'unpaid' volunteer Groundsman or the game itself

Whether it be football and the balls' true bounce; cricket and ball carry; pace, bounce, spin and seam [both ways]. All our sports need a keen competitive playing surface; true in-bounce and true to both sides throughout the day(s) or longer) – 2 / 3 day for example in County standard matches.

Personal Development.

In 2013 alongside my RAF Resettlement [training provision as you depart your engagement term in HM Forces]; which in my case I sought training in Health and Safety and Environmental Protection and Management.

Alongside my primary employment, we spent hours on grounds maintenance and preparations. Stephen the Chair and I decided to expand our knowledge and with extracurricular personal development we sought some professional courses. We found Mr Melvin Pooley; an accredited tutor in outdoor grass sports and playing surface maintenance; as the training provider; in the sports of Cricket and Football. Mel' worked out of March Town C.C. (MTCC) and his business equipment was stored alongside the groundsman's' equipment there. MTCC locally known as being one-of-the-better County out-grounds for Cambridgeshire Cricket Club.

Mel taught us both; Autumn Cricket Pitch and Outfield Renovation in a one-day course held at MTCC in Sep 2014 and using the square as practical working; demonstrations we learned skills and techniques essential to preparing cricket surfaces. We passed the exam with flying colours and recognition by Lantra Awards duly arrived in the postal system.

We put the training to good use at Ramsey CC. The outfield and square at Ramsey benefitted enormously, dividends were soon apparent the ground and wickets; looked to be playing 'truer'; with less uneven bounce and the square looked a picture too after 3 full years of Autumn Renovations. So in March 2015 I took and sat the: Lantra: Spring and Summer Pitch Preparations and Maintenance course; again with Mel' at MTCC.

More Huntingdonshire Senior men's and women's matches needed hosting and Ramsey C.C. as the Club put itself forward to help host the games. The likes of Leicestershire and Northamptonshire Academy sent young aspiring cricketers to face Hunts C.C.C. at our Club and they pitched themselves against a youthful but greater experienced Adult XI in all formats: T20/50 Over and full one-day matches.

The Ground became well known alongside Peterborough Town CCs ground at The Dalrod Sports Ground, Bretton, Peterborough. PTCC Playing in the Northamptonshire Cricket league. We Ramsey C.C, had a fantastic challenge to even be considered for National ECB status; like Northants C.C.C out-grounds and PTCC. Like ourselves PTCC had great reputations to maintain and hold. Hence, our Club were on the 'runway' to achieving [ECB accredited status;] for Huntingdonshire County Cricket Club and Cambridgeshire County Cricket Club with both grounds pursuing high-grade; playing facilities shared between Hunts and Cambs County Clubs Men's and Women's cricket at ECB status - senior level, together with all aged-group cricket (Juniors), and ECB competition at Over 60s/o70s men's cricket.

After leaving Ramsey C.C. in 2018; thereafter up to this present date; 2023 I have maintained Houghton and Wyton Cricket Club in Hunts Div 5. A smaller ground but a great local villages community playing field. It's more demanding as I now hold the Chairmans' position there as well as Groundsman and a Juniors coaching place for AllStars and Dynamos, the ECB standard for coaching Children. It's a superb venue with a great backdrop: see attached pictures. The squares not half-bad either if I may say so.



Figure 2 – John Wells at Houghton & Wyton Villages Feast Week; children's competition; "Find and name the "Scarecrow" entry; with England Capt; 'Stokesy'

Figure 3-The real thing; Ben Stokes v Australia - Ashes match defining; Boundary for 4 - hit 2019 at Headingly, Cricket Ground



Figure 4 - Ash Wells (my son) on the Loam Spreader H&WCC Renovations 2022



Figure 5 Match wicket in prep' and cutting out a new Wicket strip - H&WCC April 2022

Ramsey Colts Football Development

Football. I was approached to assist at Ramsey Colts Football Development (RCFD) as they needed extra pair of hand on groundwork. Notwithstanding being already 'busy' and doing the 'usual RAF done-thing' you volunteer or rather us elder folk do!

1 day a week I assist my co-volunteers; Craig Golightly, his father Keith and a fellow long serving 'lead' at the Ground; Mr John Edwards of Warboys another ex-Blue job! [RAF speak].

It is a mammoth task; we both need a full day there when the grass is growing strongly to stay on top of the pitch cutting and ongoing maintenance to repair damage from matches general play, spectator traffic 'high wear' areas, and the never-ending rabbit scrapes and pest damage; by crows, rooks and even worse – the dreaded; chafer grubs. The high standard of the Football pitches at RCFD is down to their initial laying by FA Accredited grounds professionals and funded via the Trustees. But the high standards on the ground are maintained by the 4 volunteers and Coordinator: Mr Martin Muir, together with the other RCFD Trustees.



Figure 6 -RCFD Kioti and ditch flail operations at RCFD Pitches/Ground

The 12 mix of sizes; Colts Football pitches cover a huge area and alongside which the Fens and associated ditches need regular cutting back. Here's a picture taken last year of the ongoing task utilising the Landowners [Lord De Ramsey -Estates] land, and RCFD Trustees machinery as well as the Clubs Kioti and Flail mower and Aeration machinery.



Figure 7 – Myself on the Kioti and Flail - Ramsey Colts FD



Figure 8- RCFD; Mr John Edwards on the Kioti with Large rotary slitter – during a Pitches aeration task

This last autumn the RCFD Trustees took delivery of TOPSOIL® to BS 3882:2015 from British Sugar Ltd in an artic-lorry load at the ground; to use as a dressing to a full-sized adult pitch inside the entrance gate of the Colts ground. This dressing has enhanced the general appearance of the pitch massively, as well as bringing benefits to the existing grassed areas through its feed and fertilising effects. The trustees and grounds volunteers are extremely pleased with the benefits this should bring to a pitch that remains a work-in-progress bringing it up to FA Standards. The TOPSOIL can only benefit use as we move forwards on the task. We thank British Sugar Ltd for their support to RCFD.

I trust you found my Groundsman's 'background' and descriptions useful.

I am contactable on Mobile or Via email in my Email signature block

John N Wells - Volunteer