

Elton Concert Gives Kent Cricket Groundsman a Rock 'N Roll Experience He'll Never Forget

While rock and roll promoters surely have the staging of extravagant music concerts down to a fine art Mike Grantham, head groundsman at Kent County Cricket Club, has just experienced at first hand the logistical headaches – and test of managerial skills – of being involved in an Elton John concert attended by 20,000 people at the renowned St Lawrence Ground in Canterbury .

It's an experience he will never forget, he says – and not because of the music!

"The squares and net area were well-protected and, thankfully, relatively unaffected," he says, "but the heavy traffic badly damaged parts of the outfield as well as surrounding areas such as grass car parks, and these will not recover fully until next season."

Contractors are now being called in to vertidrain these areas, after which Mike Grantham and his team will level and re-seed them.

In the meantime, the team will be using a two-week window until the next County match to ensure the ground is up to its usual high standard.

Being an ECB Pitch Advisor, and for 10 years a training instructor for the Institute of Groundsmanship, Mike Grantham admits that the Elton John concert was more a test of his patience and management skills as it was of his grounds care expertise, but he does look back positively at the experience of dealing with ten different contractors, a convoy of lorries and the aftermath of having up the 20,000 people seated on the hallowed sward.

"We had, of course, known about the event for several months, though our preparations began in earnest a few days beforehand," he says, "when our small grounds care team began moving sight screens and covers, as well as making-ready the advertising hoardings and helping with preparations for the on-site catering facilities, for example.

"This all had to be done while also juggling the demands of a First Eleven game at nearby Tunbridge Wells while we also had to keep an eye on another ground (Beckenham) for which I am also responsible.

"The concert promoters changed the stage position and seating layout advising us a week before the event, which primarily meant that the stage set was brought forward into the outfield."

Protecting the squares was, of course, his top priority.

"With most of the audience seated, the squares were first covered with a fibreglass-like matting then overlaid with durable plastic 'roller track'. Similar protection was given to the main walkways created between the rows of seats – which were simply placed directly on the pitch."

Once the event finished, various contractors worked into the early hours 'breaking down', and the real work for Mike Grantham and his team began at 7am next day (a Sunday).

"Before we did anything else, it took us four hours to remove all the litter, then the track and table protection was removed and, surprisingly, the squares were fine. The squares were brushed thoroughly to remove all traces of foreign soil left by the roller track (soil from previous events adheres to the track underside) then watered after what for us was a 14-hour day.

"The contractors wanted to bring various six-ton forklifts onto the outfield, to remove the tracking and seats! Needless to say, trollies were used.

"We then set about restoring the outfield itself; rolling and 'filling' any impressions left by the seating."

It was, he says, a lot of hard work and at times very frustrating – "you have to watch every move the contractors make, or want to make, and liaise with them non-stop" – but admits that it was a good test of his management and logistical skills. "It is a sign of the times and a valuable revenue stream for the club."

During his 13 years at the Canterbury ground – the latter decade as head groundsman – Mike Grantham says the pressure on groundsman seems to continually increase.

"Not only because of the demands made by staging pop concerts and the like but also because the results of our 'day job' are now constantly scrutinised.

"The pace and bounce of every ball in every game is filmed, so the pitch has to be faultless."

What with hoards of concert-goers to contend with, let alone a likely drought order, Mike Grantham and his colleagues – like so many of their peers – certainly have their work cut out.