

## **IOG Groundsmanship Expertise help Amateur turn Farmland into Cut-Price, High-Quality Cricket Squares**

The Institute of Groundsmanship (IOG) has played a key role in helping amateur groundsman Kester Clarke steadily move closer to realising his dream of staging a Minor Counties cricket match at Ipswich Cricket Club's new ground, which was formerly agricultural land.

Through his membership of the IOG, not only has Kester Clarke found the institute's Technical Enquiry service invaluable during the past two years as the club's new cricket ground has taken shape, but contacts gained through IOG networking have, he says, also literally helped lay the foundations for a ground that is set to become the focal point for cricket in south Suffolk.

In addition, the IOG influence has enabled him and fellow volunteers to spend around £15,000 on the construction of two cricket grounds that would otherwise have cost up to £100,000.

An amateur groundsman since 1969 at Tattingstone and Copdock and Old Ipswichian Cricket Clubs, and an IOG member for over 30 years, Kester Clarke admits that he didn't take advantage of the full benefits of IOG membership until Ipswich Cricket Club was formed from the merger of Tattingstone and Browns Cricket Clubs.

Tattingstone had previously won the Two Counties Championship and the club knew that real progress could only be made if it was enlarged to include junior, ladies and senior cricket.

Having been seconded to reconnoitre for a new site, Kester Clarke soon arranged with a local farmer an agreement that would benefit both parties both financially and in terms of security of tenancy.

The 10 acres of arable land - on Clay Hall Farm at Copdock, a few miles outside of Ipswich - had no artificial drainage and comprised about 14 inches of heavy clay loam overlying a mixture of yellow clay with sand outcrops, flints and chalky clays - typical of the outwash plains south of the Ipswich Glaciation.

After consultation with and advice from IOG consultants and other members, the soil was analysed by Professor Bill Adams at the University of Wales. Although slow to drain, the soil has a binding strength equal to the Ongar loam used locally to top dress cricket tables and was adjudged adequate for the cricket squares. However, a higher silt content (30 per cent rather than the average 22

per cent in Ongar loam) suggested slower drying and a propensity to crack when very dry.

With little money, the decision was taken in September 2003 to construct a traditional square. The field was ploughed, sub-soiled, power harrowed, stone buried, levelled and seeded. The outfield was seeded, followed by light harrowing. No drainage was constructed, “because we simply couldn’t afford it,” says Kester Clarke, “so a risk had to be taken”.

He adds: “We then suffered an extensive drought with no rain until the November and, as result, germination was patchy. This was followed by an incredible growth of volunteer crops throughout the mild winter – rape, barley, wheat and wild turnips grew in profusion!”

At this time, small work parties spent a back-breaking few months planting thousands of indigenous hedge plants (the cost of these was part-funded by the local council) as part of a three-year programme to improve a mile of hedgerow.

A tractor-mounted rotary mower was used to tackle the weeds, yet despite the tractor’s light weight and 12 inch grass land tyres, a grid of shallow ruts were left over the entire field. Top dressing was out of the question – lack of finances again – so it was decided to sit tight for the following season. Play started in May 2005 and, other than a bumpy outfield, the square produced plenty of bounce and some pace.

In the meantime, work was advancing with the second square, which had been ploughed and stone buried after a six months ‘resting period’ to allow the land to settle. In early May 2005, prolific secondary growth was sprayed off and the intention was to seed immediately. But nature intervened and during an extremely dry spell all thoughts of seeding were put on hold until late summer.

Then tragedy struck and the club lost a respected young player, Martin Hackney. A generous donation by his family prompted the club to dedicate the second ground to him, and to use the money to employ Sovereign Turf, on the recommendation of an IOG colleague, to prepare, seed and drill the outfield. The square had been prepared in similar fashion as previously but this time with more consolidation prior to levelling and seeding.

It is planned to cut a few pitches on the new square in July, thus enabling all the teams to play at the new ground this year.

All this has been achieved with no grant aid, though local companies have generously donated and sponsored various items, such as sand and

aggregates, as well as the temporary pavilion, while Kester Clarke and the club members have devoted themselves to securing useful items and building materials.

“Without all the help and advice we’ve received from the IOG and IOG members, as well as the continuing efforts of our sponsors, supporters and club members, we really wouldn’t be where we are today,” adds Kester Clarke, as he unwraps the ageing 36 inch Ransomes mower that is used to keep the ground in order.

It’s a 12 miles walk behind that machine to cut the entire field. Now that’s devotion!