

**Top-class Sport Complex - experience the amazing facilities at St Albans school only at the IOG Annual Conference 2006**

Four and a half years ago the IOG visited the new Woollam Playing Fields in St Albans, then under construction. Delegates to the IOG Conference at Watford (April 7-10) will pay a visit to the complex with grounds manager IAN SMITH. Here he brings us up to date.

BACK IN 2001 (during the magazine's last visit) White Horse Contractors were waiting for better weather to finish the then £7million (now £10million) self-financing 73-acre joint multi-sports complex.

Of this, 43 acres is for St Albans School - a 740-pupil independent day school.

The other 30 acres of the complex forms The Old Albanian Sports Association which is part of the school old boys' club.

The site consists of 11 rugby and seven football pitches, one sand-based artificial hockey pitch, one block of four sand filled carpet tennis courts, one block of tarmac tennis courts, two netball courts, seven cricket squares and four blocks of cricket nets. All these are looked after by a full-time staff of five plus one seasonal worker.

The weather finally improved enough for White Horse to continue after the wet autumn and winter of 2000. Although a year later than scheduled I am still thankful that we - along with Guy Shatford of STRI - didn't push White Horse to work when the site conditions were not fit.

White Horse were brilliant in not working the ground in poor conditions even though they were up against it. The site was 40per cent stone so the whole site was stripped, screened, drained, laser-levelled then sand-ameliorated. It has taken three years for the soil to get structure back into it. This would have been longer if the soil had been worked when not fit.

The downside of finishing a year late was that the OAs played a year earlier than had been hoped while the pitches were not established enough. So the damage on the first season was quite bad.

But we did a lot of aeration with our Wiedenmann Terraspikes and end-of-season renovations were done by ATB Sports Solutions using the ground-breaking Sand Master to great effect

Then sand dressing each pitch with 80 tonnes of sand, which we seeded using Barenbrug Bar 7 Ryegrass, improved the pitches enormously.

So much so that our success could become our downfall, particularly after the Rugby world cup. On the OA`s side they now run six men`s and two women`s sides plus 500 minis and juniors.

We are also the home for Saracens `A` Team fixtures and Hertfordshire`s juniors and seniors. We have now been awarded the under-16 international match and are the home venue for England`s Womens six nations matches.

All this is a great compliment to the condition of the ground and good revenue for the OAs - but it is very tough on the pitches . . . and, just when it seems the pitches are to have a rest, summer rugby league is played by St Albans Centurions in the national league.

They also run several sides and in the last couple of years their season has been extended so we can now play both codes on the same day, on the same pitch and our record for turning rugby union to league is 20 minutes.

For the first time in a couple of years, the OA`s pitches are losing grass cover and particularly the training pitch as it is now being used six days a week.

I know there is a lot of opposition to 3G artificial surfaces, but no pitch can sustain grass cover with the amount of use that it is having.

We have tried tall fescue this year but even this has now lost its cover. The training pitch would be an ideal situation to install a 3G pitch, something we hope to do.

The school site also has many community and representative outsiders using the facility, but the school surfaces are in a much better state - they had an extra year to grow because there was no rush to leave the old King Harry Lane site.

With all the pitches we now have we can rotate play. We couldn`t do that before. Now we also have three more football pitches than originally planned as we no longer play grass hockey - all hockey is on artificial.

What things would I have changed now with hindsight?

Each of the 19 pitches has its own drainage systems which are working very well, but the problem is getting from pavilion to pitches or from the maintenance shed to the pitches.

These high wear areas were not drained and turn into a bog during the wet weather. Hopefully we shall rectify this by draining each area and connecting to the nearest pitch system.

We have also had problems with water pressure on our irrigation system. The site is fed by a three-inch water main which we believed would give enough pressure.

Our water cannon requires 4.9 bars of pressure to operate correctly, but the water authority supplies just over one bar saying if they put up the pressure the old cast iron mains in the local area would burst. We are now in negotiations with the environment agency about putting in our own bore hole with holding tank and pumphouse.

Our other big problem is parking. We have 260 parking spaces over the whole site but no off-road parking. On rugby festival days we can have more than 1000 players, plus spectators, so any pitches not in use become car parks - a groundsman's nightmare!

But there are far more positives than negatives. The cricket squares have been brilliant. They were constructed using Boughton Loam sown with BSH Aber Imp and Aber Elf.

In the first year of play the pitches cracked quite badly but the cracks did not move so it still played okay. They have pace and bounce and people are very complimentary - the pitches are now also used by Hertfordshire County Cricket Club.

Lashings Cricket Club, with all their international cricket stars, opened the OA's cricket ground, and enjoyed it so much they came back again this summer.

One of my greatest joys is to walk around the margins of the site. We have planted 35,000 square metres of wildflower meadow, 209 new mature trees, 10,000 metres of hedgerow, 15,000 shrubs and we have also laid a hedge and revived an old overgrown bluebell wood.

We have also erected many birdboxes. The whole place is alive with birds and the constant buzz of bees and all sorts of butterflies. At first some sceptics said I should selectively weedkill the meadows but they have now been won over.

All groundsman should try to do their bit for the environment by planting native trees, hedges and wildflowers as there has been a dramatic loss of these habitats through intensive farming. During the public inquiry for planning

permission some objectors stated that sports fields are sterile environments for wildlife. We have proved at Woollams that this is not so.

To look after the whole site I have myself and four full-time staff plus a summer casual, which is less than ideal. So I must thank Steve Ascott, Jamie Purkiss, Dan Ratling and Chris Copley. Without these boys I could not manage.

I must also thank the Bursar, Richard Brooks and the governors who have been very good in letting me buy all the kit that I need to run such a big site .

We have two Hayter fairway mowers (for the main cutting), an Amazon 180 (for cutting, scarifying and leaf collecting), Wiedenmann terra spike, Toro multi-core, Dowdswell slitter (all for aeration), two 36-inch Allett mowers, a Certes mower and three Lloyds Paladins (for cricket), three cricket rollers, two rotorakes, a Sisis TM1000 tractor-mounted linear aerator, Charterhouse disc seeder and Proseeder, a 1510 rotary deck, two Club Cars, a Vicon spreader, one Gator and four tractors ranging from 20 to 75 horsepower plus assorted other kit. All are housed in a purpose-built maintenance shed.

Line marking is done initially with dimple markers as I still think that they give the sharpest line, but as the pitches become worn the Fleet Kombis come in to use as the sandy surfaces do not mark well with transfer wheel. They are also quicker – which is handy when you have 19 pitches to mark.

We use Super C marking compound, we also use the Kombi to mark tennis courts on the artificial hockey surfaces during the summer and find that it works as well as the aerosols and is much cheaper.

Thanks also go to Neil Decker of the OAs and their grounds committee for trying to understand what the groundstaff and Steve Gingell and Philip Armitage of the STRI are doing and suggesting after the move from a very different set-up at the old OA Beech Bottom ground.

We have all worked together through thick and thin over the last few years (extreme weather and building contractor problems to name but a few).

I think we have achieved something that most people could only dream about – and we are all immensely proud of the result.

Interested? Join the IOG visit to St Albans on Friday 7th April as part of our IOG Annual Conference 2006. Download the full programme and booking form [here](#).