



OLD BOYS' PITCHES GO BACK TO SCHOOL

We report how a recent playing fields construction and redevelopment project represents a classic example of best practice in terms of project management, agronomic advice and contractor flexibility on site when soil conditions meant major changes mid-stream



Opposite page: late July: a bird's eye view of the earthworks. Above: pressing the base of the cricket square prior to Surrey Loam application. Rigby Taylor's R9 was used for seeding

One of Rugby Union's most traditional old boys clubs, Old Merchant Taylors', is going back to school - literally. When it sold its Hertfordshire grounds at Croxley Green to Barratt Homes for the construction of 180 new houses, part of the planning consent for the development was that the famous sporting club had to relocate locally. And where better than to the grounds of its namesake Merchant Taylors' School just four miles away!

Money from the land sale provided the funding for the redevelopment of the school's playing fields: starting in the summer term, pupils would have the weekday term time benefit of new outdoor playing facilities while Old Merchant Taylors' would gain a new state-of-the-art sporting home. It had to be the perfect marriage.

Merchant Taylors' School has always been, and continues to be, a school that enjoys its sport to the highest standards available, so two new rugby pitches, three cricket squares and a running track were created (plus a water-based Tiger wett hockey pitch laid in January 2009, by Smith Construction) were part of the overall sport resettlement of the old boys. One of the rugby pitches lays within a new 400 m running track.

These were major features of the project managed by Gardiner and Theobald, and Sports Turf Consulting. The 'cutting list' for tenders also included a new cricket ground comprising three new cricket tables and outfield, and sports ground contractor Agripower was awarded all the groundwork and pitch installation work. The first sod on the 9 hectare site was turned on April 6.

Agripower set about levelling the site, removing a half to one metre bump with significant re-grading. This was no problem at all, but what the contractor discovered once earth moving had begun was. The movement of equipment revealed a significant underlying problem within the first two weeks on site.

"What we were uncovering could only be described as weird ground conditions," said Agripower director Jerry Anderson, in charge of site operations. "It was literally moving under our traffic."

The unexpected instability was caused by an unusually high silt and clay combination in the sub-soil, quite unlike the sound gravel-type conditions elsewhere in the school grounds. This unwelcome problem was found in localised areas scattered across the whole of the project site. It seems this tract of land is reputed to have once been where the Thames flowed which may account for the localised nature of the sub-soil deposits.

For Agripower it meant 'the goalposts had been moved' and a new operational plan had to be adopted if the work was to be completed on schedule. Screening 12,000 m³ of topsoil - the top four inches - was to have been an in situ operation, but inevitable rutting would have meant a lot of sub-soil being squeezed close to the surface and consequent grass establishment inconsistency, so the contractor had to switch to track dumpers. Drainage at three metre centres also had to be introduced and the soil screening process suitably altered.

It was appointed agronomist for the project, Noel MacKenzie of Sports Turf Consulting, who provided expert appraisal of the shifting ground conditions and the game plan for dealing with them. Noel



Three metre drainage bands across one of the new rugby pitches (above); below: Agripower's Gary Plummer uses a dual-grade laser for levelling the cricket square

explained: "This was the first time in 20 years I had encountered such localised instability within a generally stable soil over a large site. Solid ground at first able to withstand vehicle movements became unstable after a small number of vehicle passes, which threatened the project. In consultation with the school and Agripower we had to develop a solution and present it to the project management team.

"Agripower reacted swiftly and proactively to these changes mid-project when a different route was agreed," said the school's Grounds Manager Richard Ayling.

The inclusion of a state-of-the-art running track in the project was putting additional time constraints on the earthworks schedule anyway. The existing cinder track was ripped up and for the school's summer term athletics, Richard Ayling marked out a grass track on another part of the sports field. "Not a year for records," he said. "They will surely come next year on the new track."

The new cricket square under Richard Ayling's guidance is of County standard specification. Apparently, there have been 'conversations' about it with Middlesex's Angus Fraser, so the school may already be on the County's radar. It will be ready for play next April.

Across the whole of the new grass surface facilities there is a full pop-up irrigation system and the pitches were completed slightly behind schedule, mainly due to the poor weather during August and the enforced change to the earthworks schedule. As we go to print, a small proportion is waiting to be seeded.

Richard Ayling describes the new pitch development as a pretty good example of best practice: the overall project management, the agronomic advice and the contractor flexibility on site.

"The standard of tendering for pitch projects sometimes does our professional image no favours," he said. "It is something the IOG is trying to instill into the way we promote ourselves. So, since we first put our project into motion back in February, it has been invaluable

having the support of professional project management and agronomy services from the word go, first with the tendering documents and then daily on site. This ensured the school secured accurate tenders and selected the most experienced and suitable contractor for our needs to ensure a professional operation on site."

Said Noel MacKenzie: "We were pleased to work on the school's behalf and to see Agripower working proactively on the job. Gary Plummer, Agripower's Site Manager, showed particular diligence and care with the topsoiling and screening works."



Equipment supply: best price plus best service

In terms of equipment supply, Merchant Taylors' School Grounds Manager Richard Ayling unsurprisingly says "best price" is always his main aim - and Sports-e-equipment, a company that specialises in the provision of sports posts and netting, grass seed, fertilisers and line marking equipment to a client list that includes a large number of independent schools and local authorities (as well as golf and football clubs, for example) is a major supplier. In terms of the recent ground redevelopment project at the school, Sports-e-equipment has supplied:

- Aluminium rugby posts (various heights) and sockets, plus post protectors
- Free-standing steel mini soccer goals and netsw
- Rugby and football electronic scoreboards
- Steel pitch barrier systems
- Corner poles, flags and sockets as well as corner post protectors.

For the reconfigured cricket pitches:

- Electronic scorefascia and trolley, plus repeater board
- Six traditional timber sight screens
- Four mobile cricket covers with side sheets
- Mobile cricket scoreboard
- Mobile shelter
- Boundary rope
- Special 1m high steel perimeter posts and sockets
- Netting for above.

Products previously supplied include: socketed and freestanding football goals and nets (senior, junior and mini soccer); fence folding

senior and mini soccer football goals and nets; integrally weighted hockey goals and nets; team shelters; storage units; manual timber scoreboards; tennis posts and nets; cricket netting; and Johnsons grass seed.

"I've always found the company – and in particular its South of England sales consultant Alan Warner – great to do business with," comments Richard. "The depth of product knowledge is immense and the back-up is superb. At the end of the day, it's all about service and Sports-e-equipment consistently leaves no stone unturned in providing a solution to any problem I might have."

www.sports-e-equipment.co.uk



Grounds Manager Richard Ayling (right) with Agripower Director Jerry Anderson