

Succession planning

A really important, yet often uncomfortable topic

In 2022, the long-standing groundsperson at **Bitteswell Cricket Club** passed away suddenly. He had looked after the ground for over **forty years**. Co-Chairmen **Nick Hutchinson** and **Richard Pearson** have taken on the responsibility of managing the grounds.

For over forty years, Peter Smith had looked after the ground, which is annexed to the farm he owned and worked. Sadly, the club was left with a ground and square that no one else knew much about. This is a scenario that many clubs have and will continue to face. Co-Chairperson Nick told us about the challenges with this.

Peter had been reluctant to accept offers of help - partly because he loved the work so much and partly because, like so many groundsmen, he believed that if something needed to be done right, he was better off doing it himself. And he was certainly right!

Richard and I knew the basics - watering, feeding, rolling and cutting - but we had no idea when, how long or how much. We initially agreed

to take on the role for a “few weeks” to give the club time to adjust. There was a game at the weekend, and we knew Pete would have expected us to ensure it went ahead.

Richard had reached out to other local clubs and their groundsmen were incredibly willing to help. They came over, assessed our circumstances, got us ready for the weekend and gave us some pointers. They continued to check in and offer guidance in the weeks that followed.

Whilst a groundsperson within a club might keep information close to their chest out of fear of interference, the willingness to share knowledge between clubs is a testament to the profession. From village clubs to county grounds, and from suppliers to grant bodies, we received the most generous support and encouragement, for which we are incredibly grateful. We made an

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effort to be good pupils, and in return, they were happy to invest their time and knowledge.

In the first week, none of us even knew the quirky way to start the roller. A few days later, we accidentally let it run out of fuel on the outfield three hours before a junior match. Once again, people rushed to our aid.

In July 2023, the ground was fittingly renamed The Peter Smith Ground, marked by a charity match attended by hundreds of past and present members. There was some pressure, as we had deliberately prepared a brand-new track on the middle strip in his honour, but everything

went smoothly.

Three years on, we are still in the role. It's fair to say we've really enjoyed it. It has been a challenge, but we've seen clear progress and set achievable goals along the way. We know this is something we will never fully master, but we now have the knowledge and confidence to handle most situations.

It's also crucial that there are two of us on an equal footing so that either can seamlessly cover for the other. We have also involved other club members in specific tasks to ensure the workload is shared.

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To prepare for the future, we've compiled our own journal/manual, so that if the unthinkable happens - or when we eventually hand it over - the next people will have a head start with all the principles, instructions and contacts.

Succession planning is a really important, yet often uncomfortable topic. Every club should consider what they would do in similar circumstances.

Village cricket may not be at the pinnacle of amenity turf management, but it is an essential part of the game and British culture, supported by thousands of volunteers.

How have you addressed the challenges?

The square we inherited had been well maintained for years, giving us a great foundation. We've made a few mistakes, but we've learned from them. The overwhelming advice has been not to fear trying something new.

We are somewhat susceptible to fungal attacks. Red thread initially alarmed us, but we now understand it can be managed with proper nutrition. We also have a great network to call on when something concerns us, and they have given us enormous encouragement and confidence.

Some of the equipment we inherited was incredibly old. Pete had a knack for keeping everything running, but we knew we would struggle. This left us vulnerable, so we identified what we needed and secured grant funding to help with some upgrades.

What work have you done to improve the pitch in recent times?

We quickly realised that watering the square would be one of the most time-consuming and tedious tasks. While our mains water pressure is adequate, we developed a simple pumped storage system that delivers the same amount of water in one-third of the time.

We also received early advice to increase our pitch grass length from 6mm to 10mm. This has made the pitches more durable and we hope that, over time, it will also enhance bounce.

Beyond the pitch and outfield, we have extended the car park, tidied up fencing, installed ball-retaining mesh, re-laid a patio area and updated signage. Creating a great first impression has been a priority, and our hard work is now paying off.

You are now ranked 11th in the Leicestershire League for pitch quality. How does that feel?

The pitch marks serve as motivation and we were pleased with our 2024 ranking. It's definitely a batter's pitch, and we now analyse other statistics, such as runs per over and overs per wicket, to compare with past seasons.

The Leicestershire & Rutland League is currently consulting on a two-tier restructure, where only clubs with Grade A or B pitches and facilities will be eligible for the upper tier. Based on the set criteria, we have been provisionally given an A Grade.

We want The Peter Smith Ground to be a key



reason for people to join. We are also now a regular venue for Leicestershire Over 60s and 70s matches.

Does more need to be done to help cricket clubs with maintenance and management?

Help and information are readily available, both in person and online. Every club should consider a 'what if' scenario for any longstanding groundsperson or club officer. While Pete loved

WHAT ARE YOU EXPECTING FOR 2025?

We thought we had completed our end-of-season work early, but days later, heavy rain and intense winds redistributed much of our seed, especially at the pitch ends. We reseeded by hand, and as we headed into spring, we reseeded some areas again.

In November 2024, we switched from bi-monthly granular to monthly liquid feed after advice from Mark Allen (Agrovista Amenity), and we are looking forward to seeing the improvements this brings. Given the budget constraints of a village club, there's not much more we can do with the square, so in 2025, we are turning our attention to the outfield - starting with its first-ever Verti-Draining.

his work, we all felt a bit guilty for not having done more to assist him or look into equipment grants on his behalf.

If funding is available, every groundsperson will have a wish list to improve the ground - so go and secure it for them! Clubs need to take

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It has been a challenge, but we've seen clear progress

responsibility for their own future, and we hope our story encourages others to be better prepared.

Can you tell us about the management of the turf?

We have a ten-pitch square, but primarily use eight for matches, hosting around thirty-five games per season. We always work at least three weeks in advance. Being in a village location makes deploying covers during workdays challenging, so we plan carefully with an eye on

Below

Co-chairpersons Nick Hutchinson (right) and Richard Pearson (left).



the weather.

The pitches at Bitteswell have historically been a bit green. We became obsessed with achieving the classic straw colour, but we have learned that moisture content, rather than colour, has the biggest impact on playing characteristics.

We started by having soil samples analysed, and now our nutrient programme feels more like a doctor's prescription than simply ordering from a catalogue.

We've now moved to liquid nutrients, and it's great that many affordable products are the same as those used at Test Match venues.

How has your new role as Co-Chairperson helped with the management of the ground?

We felt we had a good handle on the ground and believed we could transfer some of that drive and enthusiasm to other areas of the club. However, we still need committee approval to spend money.

Having two chairpersons is a bit unconventional, but we come as a pair. Between us, we have excellent complementary skills - Richard has great contacts, vision and persuasive powers, while I see myself as being more analytical, pragmatic and experienced in achieving our targets.

Recently, we've turned our attention to marketing, social media and expanding our membership, especially among juniors. It can be quite challenging for village clubs to thrive in this sense, but the quality of our playing surfaces is definitely a selling point.

Over the past few years, we've been highly visible to the membership, sharing plenty of photos and a lighthearted, weekly Saturday morning pitch report video. All the players know us well, and we're hoping they will buy into our strategy for the wider club.