

James Mead

HEAD OF THE GRASS



James Mead has been the head groundsman at this renowned public school for the past ten years and is responsible for the day-to-day management and maintenance of a wide range of sporting surfaces. Richard Fry went to meet him.

The Rugby School grounds cover over 300 acres and offer an eye-watering array of diverse sports from polo to netball. Historically, from a sporting context, the school is known as being the birthplace of rugby football (more of that later) but in addition to having 13 pitches devoted at any one time to this game, school pupils have the availability of 9 soccer pitches, 5 cricket fields, 3 hockey 'Astro' pitches, 35 tennis courts (summer), as well as netball courts and a polo field.

James Mead is a Birmingham born and bred and has a wealth of experience in the management of turf surfaces. Following a four year training period at

the Kingsheath Horticultural College he gained experience as a groundsman at King Edwards school in Birmingham, Harbourne cricket club and before moving to Rugby, he was at the distinguished Millfield public school in Somerset

Each year, renovation of the cricket fields begins the first week of September and the top surface is scarified and verticut with ½' tines. A BLEC overseeder is used to sow Rigby Taylor's R9 'Ultra Fine' rye mixtures containing Clementine, Duparc, Dylan and Mercitwo on the wicket and R4 'Species Rich' mixtures in the outfield. "We get excellent early establishment with

these two mixtures, which allows rapid root and shoot development and good colour" states James.

"Following germination we apply the biostimulate Activate R (liquid and granules) to boost root development, supplemented by regular applications a 16-3-8 + Mg and Fe granular fertilizer. Grass cutting in-season is held at a height of 13mm on the outfield using Toro mowers. Dry Patch can be problem and to control this we use Breaker Advance granules and tablets. We also like to keep our rootzone microbial population stimulated and for that we apply Rigby Taylor's seaweed extract." ▶

“Always remember, grass is a living thing that needs nurturing and at times protecting to achieve a quality and sustainable sporting surface.”

James Mead



Rugby School boasts extensive facilities which keep James and his team busy including a residential Manchester United Soccer Camp.

► Renovation of the Rugby pitches starts in the early spring with scarifying and verticutting. Overseeding is undertaken using a BLEC Disc Seeder sowing R14 mixtures of Columbine, Posiedin, Duparc and Berlioz 1. Vertidrainage is done on all areas to a depth of 10” using ½” – 1” tines. Grass cutting is undertaken using Toro cylinder and rotary mowers. On the first team rugby pitches, the grass is cut with Allett stadium mowers.

With such an extensive range of sporting surfaces, pitch linemarking is a time consuming operation. Most recently James has introduced the Impact system to the school and has taken delivery of iGO spray

marking machines. “We decided to undertake a test comparison of different paints and marking machines and the time taken to mark out our pitches. From that trial we found that the iGO machines and Impact XP paint provided the best combination”, stated James, “Our groundsmen like it as there is no downtime mixing, measuring and pouring of the paint and no constant refilling of the tank. They can just plug in the Impact XP paint container and are ready to go.”

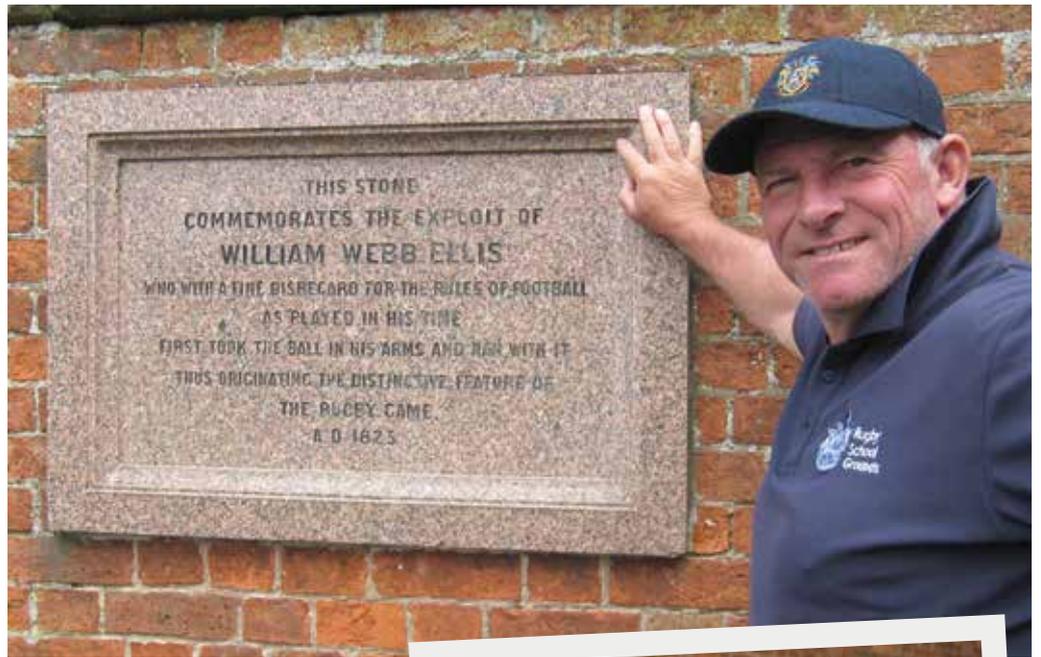
The pitches and wickets at Rugby School are all watered from Rainbird hose fed sprinklers. The water is taken from the mains and with a pressure of just 2psi,



watering can be a long process.

For James and his staff, pitch preparation and maintenance is a 'revolving door' with the end of one sporting season overlapping the start of another. He has a grounds staff of 20, with eight full time fine turf groundsmen, 11, gardeners and a mechanic to manage and maintain 300 acres of grounds. Currently, a project is underway to develop the Spring Hill part of the estate, which will have its own pavilion and cricket centre.

"The facilities are superb" states James, "with such a diversity of sports, we get a great variety of work and this sets us exciting challenges. We also have a great sense of teamwork and are constantly



looking to see what new ideas and/or equipment we can design in-house."

Most recently, James and his team designed and constructed a cricket cover that offers similar benefits to a Hover Cover but at a fraction of the price. Speed is essential for protecting cricket wickets and when rain threatens, James and his team can cover 17 wickets in just 3 minutes!

The school also has its own Enterprise Department, which is a commercial venture, marketing its sporting facilities to outside organisations. For six weeks the school has a residential Manchester United Soccer Camp that teaches soccer skills and playing etiquette whilst also promoting the ManU brand.

In addition, there are summer camps that combine English language teaching with sporting activities and the school is also a venue for weddings, though there has to be a connection with the school, and also corporate events.

For a number of years, Rugby School has been the venue for international ICC cricket tournaments. In 2015, the school hosted the matches between Denmark, Holland, Ireland, Scotland, Jersey and Guernsey boy 15s and ICC Ladies. Following the ICC matches, Rugby School will play host to Warwickshire versus Sussex in the Pro 50, Royal London Cup.

In addition to the natural turf sporting surfaces, James and his team look after the schools extensive hard and synthetic surface tennis courts and hockey pitches. Most recently the tennis hard courts have received a £130k upgrade with 5 tarmac courts



installed, complete with shelters and nets. The synthetic Astroturf courts have to be maintained every two months using a Hoerger machine with an industrial cleaner for deep cleaning and removal of debris. The sand dressed synthetic hockey pitches on an Edel, Dutch system carpet.

With the 2015 Rugby World Cup being played in England, Rugby School has been the centre of attraction. All due to a local lad, William Webb Ellis who in 1823 first ran with a football.... the rest as they say, is history.

"We have had film crews from all over the world making visits and filming at the school" commented James, "we also received visits from Prince Harry and sporting royalty in the form of Jonny Wilkinson."

When asked what his philosophy was as regards his job, he commented "Keep it simple. Always remember, grass is a living thing that needs nurturing and at times protecting to achieve a quality and sustainable sporting surface."

HALL OF FAME: James Mead pictured with the plaque erected in memory of rugby's creator William Webb Ellis. Indeed, the birthplace of rugby has played host to many dignitaries including Jonny Wilkinson and Prince Harry.