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Ampleforth College

Colin is having a Ball!

It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it. Arriving every day to absorb the sheer scale and spectacle of Ampleforth Abbey and College spurs a highly committed mixed-skills team to excel. Greg Rhodes meets Colin Ball, the college's new Head Groundsman

Did Julian Fellowes, creator of *Downton Abbey*, once dream of an international blockbuster charting the lives of the gentry whilst enjoying the splendour of his school surroundings at Ampleforth Abbey and College?

We may never know, but the acclaimed actor, novelist, film director and screenwriter surely marvelled at the scale and grandeur of this entrancing corner of North Yorkshire.

The co-educational school, one of the world's foremost Catholic boarding establishments, is home to 550 students, aged 13 to 18 - the girls in St Aidan's, St Bede's and St Margaret's houses, the boys in St Cuthbert's, St Dunstan's, St Edward's and St Wilfrid's, St Hugh's, St John's, St Oswald's and St Thomas'.

"Ampleforth is more than just a school," states headmaster Fr Wulstan Peterburs OSB. "Our students do well academically [seven in ten pupils go on to Russell Group universities] excel on the games field, make inspiring music and stretch themselves in many different ways through the enormous variety of activities we offer."

Everything here is scaled up from

the ordinary. The outdoor sports provision and ornamental areas sprawl across 120 terraced acres, keeping head groundsman Colin Ball and the team of turfcare and gardening professionals busy year-round.

"The College is built into a bank side and the grounds are steeply sloping in places, more gentle in others, but we manage pretty well," says Colin.

"We have mixed soils here," he continues. "The bottom of the valley, where the beck flows, is made up of heavy clay which, in wet times, can cause big problems for the grounds team, although throughout the summer months it provides perfect growing conditions, producing strong healthy grass due to moisture retention and the soils ability to naturally retain nutrients and prevent loss of added fertiliser through leaching."

As if the sporting and academic opportunities did not offer students inspiration enough to excel, the College setting, in the Howardian Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty north of York, was a wise choice indeed for the Benedictine monks who established the school here.





“Our main cricket square is the jewel in Ampleforth’s crown without doubt,” states Colin. “The view from the pitch is matchless with the backdrop of the Abbey and College on one side and the valley fields in the distance on the other.”

The school is proud of its long and successful cricketering tradition. The pavilion hosts all the 1st XI team photographs dating from 1922 to the present day, forming the heart of summer sport.

“Hospitality is one of our Benedictine core values, most evident in the pavilion over the summer,” adds Colin. “Tennis, rounders and cricket teams all congregate for tea throughout the day on Saturdays, creating a welcoming environment that’s hard to beat.”

The College boasts eight synthetic practice strips, four grass ones and four carpeted nets indoors at Ampleforth’s St Alban’s Sports Centre, keeping the students busy throughout the winter.

“We’re working with multi-surfaces and setting a standard for their differing requirements,” says Colin. “The 40-year old

‘roro’ covers, which once belonged to Scarborough’s North Marine Road Cricket ground, are still the main protection when preparing the 1st XI wickets, supported by the use of a number of different size climate sheets, some of which can stretch across two and half wickets, and are easier to work with.”

He has to vie with other departments for funding. “More sight screens and new scoreboards are planned to enhance the standard of the rest of the grounds.”

Hockey is growing in popularity. After sterling service, the full size sand-dressed hockey pitch was replaced last July. “The engineered base was in an acceptable condition - only the shockpad and carpet were replaced,” says Colin.

“The existing Politan surface was laid about seventeen years ago, so it certainly lasted well and still played true but, due to the

surface becoming increasingly slippery in damp conditions, there was a need for replacement.”

Student competitiveness aside, rivalry amongst heads of sport can surface regularly, as it does in many schools committed to excellence across the board of provision.

“There’s talk about the need for a full size 3G pitch for rugby and football training,” says Colin, “but the eight synthetic cricket practice strips need

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renovating, and the consideration of improving the drainage on more of the natural grassed playing surfaces is maybe a more economical alternative."

"Every house presses for a five-a-side facility because they are so versatile," he continues. "The fenced, floodlit one installed two years ago is working well for us - there's been no need to top up the rubber crumb, although a little is lost through the fence and we're removing leaves twice a week to

reduce contamination within the infill."

The prospect of a tennis bubble to overarch the school's three main courts also shows clear intent of where Ampleforth is bidding to be in its next level of provision.

In previous years, former Yorkshire and England cricketer Jim Love has helped the school's cricket step up another notch. The school runs three regular senior teams as well as A and B teams at U14 and U15 ages. "Girl's cricket is the fastest growing sport in

the world reportedly and we currently number several girls who are promising," Colin reveals.

The school also hosts the ECB Northern U15 trials from which several students have taken up county contracts and some have even gone on to play for England.

"As well as the regular Saturday and Wednesday match day programme, we are planning to hold senior and junior house competitions, played in coloured kit with



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“We try to work it that we can all adapt to each other’s tasks, to cover for sickness and holidays and ensure nothing is neglected



“I’m pushing for drainage to be installed under an ameliorated grass pitch, along with sand slitting, to give the school a uniform standard of playing surface

white balls and all the fanfare you’d expect for a modern T20 occasion,” Colin adds.

At 44, Colin plans to see many years ahead of him at Ampleforth, not only managing a diverse team of groundsmen and gardeners but also being there to enjoy the continuing evolution and development of the school and its sports facilities.

Colin has been head groundsman since September after being in post as a groundsman for the last six years. He’s enjoyed a varied career, qualifying as an engineer, working for Scarborough council cutting the town’s prestige lawns, before moving into agriculture as a contractor, based in York.

A great advocate of education, Colin completed a Level 3 technical diploma in sports turf management, achieved via a distance learning programme online at home in his own time.

Delivering high service levels is the foundation of his approach to the job. “If two tennis courts have to be prepared at short notice, for example, I’ll go and do it if no-one else is available, because my priority is to deliver them ready for play - that’s my commitment to ensuring the school has the quality of facility it expects.”

He applies his agricultural nous frequently to helping create the most cost-sustainable fleet of machinery in a sector where one mower can cost five-figure sums.

“We’ve adopted a more streamlined approach,” he explains, “to reduce lost time due to machinery going off site for repairs. I’m very open to change and it’s important to hear all views about how we go about maintaining such a vast area.”

A Ransomes Spider comes in handy for cutting the elevated grounds and slopes in front of the Abbey Church, while recreational lawns need tending ready for activities such as javelin, archery and al fresco lessons.

Notching up twenty-one years on site, groundsman Andrew Cornforth, 48, is arguably the most experienced groundsman at Ampleforth. “I do some of everything,” he

says, “although maintaining the cricket squares ranks high with me. There’s far more to preparing pitches than many realise.”

“We try to work it that we can all adapt to each other’s tasks, to cover for sickness and holidays and ensure nothing is neglected, but I take the responsibility of being the spray man at Ampleforth, whilst other members of the team use knapsack sprayers to control weeds around the site. I ensure the College keeps up to date with all new legislation best practices and reduces application of chemicals through the use of integrated pest management.”

Also on the education track, George Kirk, 25, two years at the College, has just started his Level 2 technical certificate in turf surface maintenance. He’s already taken on the role of gang mower specialist and last year had his tractor replaced with a new Kubota L4240, whilst apprentice Nathan Roberts, 19, arrived last March and is on block release to Askham Bryan College block on his City & Guilds sportsturf maintenance Level 2 course.

Every one of the College’s boarding houses has its own gardens - reason enough for the grounds team to include a fair smattering of gardening prowess.

Stephen Kneeshaw, 43, is completing seventeen years, Wayne Theobald, 27, six years on gardens, estates and forestry duties, while gardener Mike Pike, 44, has tended the grounds for more than six years.

Much of the tree management work rests in the hands of college forestry manager Mark Podgorski, 60, who can boast forty-four years at Ampleforth - his father working here before him. Close behind comes Geoff Thrower, 65, with thirty-five years’ service working on forestry as well as estates and gardens.

Ampleforth runs a full-time and part-time forester to help manage the mainly deciduous woodland on the 2,000-acre estate. “The vast majority is leased to the Forestry Commission, but we have plenty of leaf fall to tackle as trees line the back



boundary of the rugby and football pitches," Colin explains.

"Wind sometimes can help us remove most of them, although they tend to gather up around the cricket square perimeter nets when it blows from the South West."

The quantity of timber generated from trees pruned and condemned is large enough to fire two biomass boilers.

And still the sporting provision rolls on. "Miles Skehan who looks after the 9-hole

course at nearby Gilling Golf Club is nudging merely a decade of duty. "The course is owned by the College, which allows us to borrow each other's machinery when needed," explains Colin.

Pride of the rugby provision is the Lawrence Dallaglio Match Ground, created in 2010 from an existing pitch. A former Ampleforth pupil, the rugby legend won the Open and Festival Tournaments at Rosslyn Park with Ampleforth Sevens team in 1989.

"Most of our rugby pitches lack drainage systems, but the Dallaglio pitch was laid with 4m centres on a grid system with a 150mm outlet into a nearby beck."

"I'm pushing for drainage to be installed under an ameliorated grass pitch, along with sand slitting, to give the school a uniform standard of playing surface, especially as we are hosting Rugby 7s tournaments, which require up to eight pitches to stage."

The team's SISIS brush and divoting

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What's in the shed?

Kubota M6040 tractor loader

Kubota L4240 lighter tractor unit, used mainly to pull the Lloyds Leda triple gang units on some cricket outfield and grounds

JCB/Tym 354 compact tractor, to haul the Progressive TDR-15 Tri-Deck roller on the rugby fields

Iseki TX622 small compact tractor for the "2G" sand-filled or dressed synthetic surfaces implement power unit

Jacobsen TR3 triple cylinder mower for the main cricket outfield

SISIS Tee star triple cylinder mower for Ampleforth's second X1, U15s, U14s and 3rd X1 outfield

Amazon Profihopper self-propelled scarifier/flail cutter collector with high lift tipper

Dennis G860 34in squares mower

Two, Dennis FT610 24in wicket mower with Verity cutting cassette

Allett Tournament 20in wicket self-propelled professional cylinder mower

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machine helps the cause, "without causing too much compaction of the turf", Colin adds. "Our Amazon Profihopper is a godsend although we have only put 200 hours on the clock since we bought it. I believe it's one of the best self-propelled scarifier/flail cutter collector machines of its kind - we use it on outfield of the cricket squares and the rugby fields - it's also great at collecting leaves and fallen twigs."

Wet, mild conditions stimulate grass growth and, over such huge areas, control measures come into force. "This is the first year we have applied Primo MAXX regulator on the fields to stem growth and reduce thatch. As we don't box cuttings, reducing the quantity is a key consideration."

Linemarking has brought about a shift in practice. "Time of day to linemark is important and we tend to avoid days when it's wet or a heavy dew. Sensible management is the thing - thinking more about when we do mark out."

Steering the rugby strategy is former Welsh international lock Will James, who is bringing his experience into teaching.

"Will, who was a member of the 2007 Welsh Rugby World Cup squad, playing four games for his country, joined us two years ago after retiring from professional rugby union, playing his final game for Gloucester Rugby before a packed Kingsholm Stadium after 187 appearances," Colin says.

"We are fortunate to have such a well-qualified and enthusiastic head of rugby bringing his experience into teaching. He leads the 1st XV and has had an immediate impact on the forwards."

Will also heads the sports development programme, which ties in the most promising sporting students with lectures on nutrition to practical sessions on swim fit and strength and conditioning - the new £170,000 fitness hub enabling the school to deliver bespoke training for every athlete he oversees.

With ten pitches spread across the Ram's,

Jungle and Old Grounds, rugby ranks big time at the school, with teams spanning age ranges right across the school in regular action.

Six mobile, diesel-run floodlights are used to line the Dallaglio Match Ground pitch perimeter for boys' rugby training on Thursday nights, Colin mentions. "Academic lessons usually finish at 5.20pm, so they are very useful in winter months to enable training to go ahead."

Although rugby has always been the most popular sport, football was introduced six years ago at Ampleforth College and around fifty students are in the line-up to play this year on the two pitches devoted to football plus one used for training," says Colin. "I'll be rotating one of the pitches between football and rugby, depending on the weather and the ground conditions. We have a short season as we have no full-time director of football."

Here at the College, cricket stands tall, but the girls game is just getting started although the cricket B X1 only sprang up last season, beginning the process of establishing a fresh tradition at the school.

"At this time of year [January], any maintenance done depends on the weather - conditions after heavy rain prevent us from venturing onto the pitches until water has drained away," Colin explains.

"The type of land we have is arguably our biggest issue. Maintenance early in the year is confined to work on the synthetic surfaces and the tennis courts and ensuring all our machinery is serviced and ready to go, knowing it won't be long before our thoughts are turning to cricket."

The team stripped and renovated the grass turf practice nets at the end of October before the weather turned, he says, but 2018 will witness a packed programme of action across all the squares. As well as hosting a massive fixture list including cup and a Twenty20 tournament, the team also provides for the local village to play their



home games.

"Five to six weeks of cricket events are planned for this year," says Colin, "including the County Cricket Festival, which lasts three weeks, and the Chris Brice Pro Coach programme, when the Yorkshire team descends on Ampleforth."

The advent of summer term introduces tennis and athletics, as well as cricket, onto the schedule. The eight-lane Redgra track, constructed in the 1960s, is soldiering on, along with long and triple jump, discus and javelin field sports housed within its perimeter.

All but three of Ampleforth's eighteen tarmac tennis courts alternate with netball (Christmas to Easter) then all serve a single purpose as the seasonal passion over the sport builds to Wimbledon fortnight. "A total of 150 students play tennis, so it's busy much of the time," reports Colin, who is wrestling with maintenance issues on the hard surfaces.

"Three of the courts are painted and, when we need to run the Kersten rotary sweeper/collector across them to help reduce the growth of moss and to clear fallen debris off the surface from the surrounding trees, some of the coating comes off."

The chemicals the team applies to remove moss also take their toll on the surface. "We're trying various alternatives, including a hard surface cleaner which is suitable for tarmac, concrete, asphalt, block paving and synthetics."

The former two-tone blue courts have been repainted two-tone green; "more appropriate for tennis we thought. Jet spraying may be an option, although its time consuming but seems to be the only way to ensure complete removal," adds Colin.

After recent heavy snowfall had sparked a flat-out response to clear access roads, paths and car parks, Colin is back to reflect on the team's and his own role at Ampleforth.

"Our key task is to make the most of the skills and the machinery we have to prepare the grounds to the best of our ability to make a difference for the students and the school."

"Of course, I'd liked to have worked at a Premier League ground, or spend time at a county cricket ground like many in my profession, but Ampleforth is my life and I'm having the time of my life serving the College. With twenty years' service in agriculture to impart, I'm only too delighted to be able to deliver the benefits of that experience."



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