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Lymm Rugby Club - Out on a 'Lymm'!

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Ted Mitchell, the RFU's Club Facilities Technical Manager, considers the project at Lymm RFC to be a flagship scheme.

Here, our editor discusses how the project came to fruition through RFU support and grants, and not inconsiderable fundraising by the club's Development Committee and its Chairman of Grounds, Jim Knowles.

For many rugby clubs, success is not always down to the fact that the first team are doing well; it is more often how well the club is supported and financed by income earned on and off the pitch. The lifeblood of most community run rugby clubs, these days, comes from the success of their junior sections and the hard work achieved by their dedicated members, particularly the ones who take on the responsibility of running the club.

Back in the 1970s, when I started to play club rugby, most town sides would field upwards of three senior sides and a colts team (U19), with little or no youth development. How times have changed. These days, most clubs run a full youth programme with age ranges from under 8 to under 17.



On a typical Sunday morning, these clubs can expect to have in excess of 200 children taking part in training sessions or playing competitive matches, so it is vitally important that they have appropriate facilities to cope with these numbers, particularly in term of playing and training space.

One club that realised it needed to expand its facilities was Cheshire outfit, Lymm Rugby Football Club which, after many years struggling to cope using one pitch and hiring several outgrounds, finally went 'out on a Lymm', acquired additional farmland adjacent to the club, applied for planning permission to build new pitches and began a journey of securing funds from the RFU.

Lymm's first team play in National League 3 Midlands, with the 2nds, 3rds and 4ths playing in the Raging Bull North West leagues.

During a recent visit to the club, I met up with Ted Mitchell, the RFU National Facilities Manager, and Jim Knowles, the club's Chairman of Grounds and a past President and Chairman, who were keen to explain how the project came to fruition in 2010.



Ted Mitchell joined the RFU as a Funding & Facilities Manager in 2005. Prior to that, he had worked for the Football Association in a similar role. "I worked for the FA for over four years but, when an opportunity came up at the RFU, I jumped at the chance," he explains. "Football is just so big and I never felt as though I was making any difference. That may sound silly, but it really was like that. Fundamentally, rugby is a smaller sport and you can make more of a difference. Lymm RFC is probably a good example."

"At somewhere the size of Lymm [population c11,000, but within a huge catchment area] you have one rugby club, in one place. Whereas, in football, there are lots of different junior and adult teams, plus a few pub teams, and they all play here, there and everywhere. Trying to coordinate that and make a difference was difficult."

"You can instantly see the difference we can make here," he says, proudly, "not just to the rugby club, but to the community and the village, which is brilliant."

"I joined the RFU as one of four Regional Funding & Facilities Managers. It was a small team. I covered the north, Ross Baxter covered the Midlands, Dave Stubley covered the south and Rick Bruin covered London."



"I had to help the RFU identify the needs of something like 300 clubs in the north. Each club was working with the rugby development team in terms of where they wanted to go and how they wanted to grow. If there was a facility needed, then I was brought in. No two clubs are the same and, for some, it would be very detailed stuff, such as would they need to have a lease in place? Often, the land was just being used under an 'agreement' with a landlord. So, in that respect, I had to gain knowledge about leasing. For another club, it might be the technical side of things."

"Then, as part of a wider restructure of the RFU, we went from four Regional Funding & Facilities Managers on the ground to six. It wasn't a massive increase, but it did make a difference. Two national managers were appointed, myself and Ross Baxter. Ross now looks after the grants and capital side of things and I look to make sure that the funding is spent wisely in terms of quality and value for money. For example, Ross will say 'right, we want to invest £5,000 in pitches', so then it is up to me to make sure it is done in the right way, with agronomy consultants etc."



Ted goes on to explain that Lymm Rugby Club is a flagship scheme for the RFU. "It is one the RFU have been involved with for seven years. Lymm is a thriving rugby club, and has been for a number of years; lots of growth and lots of recruitment, but the problem was they were outgrowing their facility."

"As a 'one pitch' club, operating several junior and adult teams they had become, by necessity, somewhat nomadic and were having to use a number of facilities around Warrington and within the village; some quite a considerable distance away - schools, local authority pitches etc. And that had a knock-on effect. It was very difficult for players and families to come back to the club after matches. Therefore, it was affecting other things like bar takings and social events."

"We really needed to find a solution," continues Ted. "The club are very proactive and have an incredible committee and set of volunteers. They worked very hard in the background, raising funding over a number of years and, ultimately, were able to identify a number of pockets of land locally and pursued one in particular."

"The club had always had intentions of buying further land to help develop the club," explains Jim Knowles, "and had identified a couple of ten acre plots (both on adjacent fields) which the landowner was keen to sell. It was a case of working with the RFU to satisfy which one would be the best in terms of local planning restrictions and best topography for the new pitches."



"As ever, with this type of development, the first thing you have to do is get past the local authority," explains Jim. "We had to satisfy the conditions for change of use from agricultural to recreational land and, to meet the local authority planning requirement, put in a large tree belt. So, that started soon after we had acquired the land. We planted all the trees ourselves, with me overseeing the project."

"A number of the trees were provided by the Queen's Jubilee scheme, but many club members contributed to the additional cost - trees, fence posts, whatever, were provided by our members." says Jim proudly. "We also had a battle with the tree preservation people to be allowed to fell a very large beech tree. We duly got our way after proving it was not safe, especially knowing how many children could be at risk from falling branches!"

"The club had been raising money, but managed to secure the land via the help of a local businessman who donated a significant amount of money to the fund. It was then a case of getting the RFU monies to help pay for the building of the pitches," Jim explains.



"They initially came to the RFU in 2006 to talk through the plans," continues Ted, "to which we gave our full backing, and the club proceeded to purchase the land. At that stage, our only involvement was for funding and we provided the club with an interest free loan of £100,000, which they are paying back comfortably over the agreed fifteen year repayment period."

The club has been very successful in fundraising initiatives to complement external funding. The Lymm Panto, as it has become known, is a huge success and has been produced annually for the past twenty-seven years. It regularly attracts audiences of over 1,400 people over eight shows, coming from as far afield as Yorkshire, North Wales and Leicestershire, often in buses, for a laughter-fest.

The pantomime's reputation has even spread worldwide, with requests for the DVD of the performance coming in from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA, South Africa and Zimbabwe, with past scripts now being sold to other clubs to help them raise the "fund raising bar". It has become something of an institution locally, with many regulars saying it marks the start of their Christmas activities.

Lymm Rugby Club is a community-based sports club and continues to rely on funds raised from members, sponsors and the local community. The Lymm Grass Roots Sports Appeal, set up over six years ago, involved a vast array of fundraising activities, including the pantomime, and eventually enabled the club to buy the land which has been turned into four additional pitches. On a Sunday morning, literally hundreds of children, aged from five to nineteen, can be found at the club, either being coached or playing matches on the new pitches.



"Once purchased, the next thing was to sort out the land. It was really nothing more than a farmer's field; very poor quality, lots of trees and bushes and on a significant slope, so we had to turn that into pitches, and that is where the RFU became even more involved."

Ted continues: "We appointed our agronomist, John Hacker of PSD Agronomy, and he was able to work with the club and members as project manager of the scheme."

"John designed the drainage scheme and then went through the procurement of contractors etc. The other thing the RFU can then do, in terms of accredited contractors, is underpin the club, improve the enthusiasm for the project and give them the expertise. We suggested a number of contractors who had the necessary expertise, with **John Greasley Ltd** eventually being appointed. They performed a cut and fill to achieve pitch levels, along with installing a primary and secondary drainage system for both the senior pitches. Both pitches were also fenced; they have been absolutely outstanding."

The scheme was completed in the summer of 2009 and the pitches were opened in 2010. "As you can see around us, it has had a significant impact on the club," enthuses Jim Knowles. "We now have two additional full size pitches, a 'midi' pitch and a training area. We are now all based on the same site and are reaping the rewards; membership numbers have gone from being very strong to going through the roof!"



"The scheme has gone extremely well, from our point of view," says Ted, "which is as we would expect with the involvement of PSD and quality contractors. We demand very high quality pitches and the challenge for us now is to ensure that those pitches maintain that quality down the line."

"What we have also been able to do is involve the RFU's Head Groundsman, Keith Kent. He has been to the site and prepared a report for the club, so that they can use that to maintain standards and also benefit from someone working right at the top of the game. The club has really bought into that."

"We've also ensured that they have put the right amount of funding into the maintenance programme. We have the RFU pitch improvement partnerships, which is, effectively, an aeration solution. The RFU have fifteen tractors and heave action Soil Relievers that are available for hire, sited at various clubs around the country. Lymm's local one is based at nearby Warrington RFC."

Jim and the grounds team make use of the Soil Reliever two or three times a year to tie in with Keith's maintenance plan. "The beauty of the scheme is that it is really down to the club and their drive and commitment to it," says Ted. "It's RFU capital investment and expertise up front, but the crucial thing is that, long term, it's about making sure the pitches are high quality and support the club in player recruitment and



retention."

"Lymm has become a somewhat iconic club now, and I remember it being rather amusing," recalls Ted. "It was the first big loan that I wanted to sanction, and I had to officially present it to the trustees. So, I am at the Navy Club in London with the trustees and they asked how the club were going to repay the loan. I stood up and said, "they are going to have a pantomime". I got some strange looks I can tell you. Obviously, I went on to explain their other fundraising efforts and it all stacked up; it worked out really well. So much so, we managed to agree a £100,000 interest free loan for the club. Along with the additional money raised by the club, we finally got the £200,000 to fund the building of the new pitches."

As for maintenance, Jim oversees all the pitch maintenance work, utilising a volunteer workforce made up from club members who give their time freely.

The club has invested in containers to store the groundcare equipment.



Now, as the Mini, Junior and Colts section has grown - players now number over 400 which, together with parents and siblings, senior players and social members, creates a rugby membership well in excess of 1,000 - so has the need for the redevelopment of the clubhouse. The Lymm Grass Roots Clubhouse Appeal has, therefore, been launched and the 2013 Lymm Panto, 'Scrooged!', was the first fundraiser of the new campaign.

Overall, it has been a fantastic project, with winners all round. It has given the club the opportunity to grow successfully on many fronts and become sustainable in terms of player development and income generation.

There is still a lot to do. The club are keen to improve the old first team pitch and, eventually, install new floodlights, along with an artificial training pitch, both of which will enhance the earning potential from hiring out the facilities.

All in all, the future looks bright for Lymm RFC.



Ted Mitchell explains how other rugby clubs can gain access to RFU funding

"We have a very open and transparent process. It is very simply managed on a county basis by constituent bodies who make decisions on an annual basis. It is constantly reviewed throughout that twelve months via a county facilities plan. That achieves two things; one, it keeps and up-to-date audit of facilities to keep things going forward. So, for example, to keep things moving forward, a club may say they need a set of floodlights. So the facilities plan will incorporate that. Then the second part is to prioritise for funding and support and, again, that is done in a very transparent and clear way."

Firstly, a club needs to contact their rugby development officer; all their details are on the RFU website. Depending on what the initial enquiry is, he'll point them in the right direction. If it's a relatively well advanced project, they may need technical or funding support, and this would involve the facilities manager. If it were more fundamental issues, it would be the rugby development officer.

During all the steps through the process there is support available. Whether it is simply to support the head groundsman, or it ends up requiring our agronomist, floodlighting contractor, architect or someone to speak to about leasing, we will somehow help them through that."

"There are two funding streams available; one is through the Rugby Football Foundation. They provide small grants up to £5,000, but also significant interest free loans up to £100,000. And that amounts to £1m a year available in interest free loans."

"The second funding scheme is our capital investment programme, which is where you would see the larger grants being identified and invested.

At the minute that is funded through the RFU themselves and it comes under the World Cup lead up and legacy programme. Through that programme, there are capital grants available for a range of facilities; pitches - both natural and artificial turf, changing rooms, training areas, lights, social spaces and so on. These grants are up to £100,000 so, typically, what you may see in any scheme would be a mix of a loans from the RFU, a capital grant and some club fundraising."

"Whether it is a relatively small £5,000 grant or a larger £100,000 requirement, the RFU has a very simple way for clubs to get funding delivered."

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