

THE ESSEX AUTO GROUP SOUTHEND

GARON PARK PROJECT : FIVE-YEAR REVIEW

The Garon Park project originated in late 2004 when the Norman Garon Trust and Southend Borough Council offered the year round use of the cricket bowl to Essex County Cricket Board/Essex CCC on a long-term basis as a Centre of Cricketing Excellence for the South Essex region.

County cricket has been played in Southend since 1906 and Southchurch Park served the County magnificently throughout the 20th century. But the deteriorating state of the pavilion, the increasingly bumpy outfield (which could not be dealt with because local people demanded to use the park in the winter when remedial work was required), the lack of basic cricket facilities, such as permanent nets, and increasing vandalism and security costs meant that the park could not continue as a long-term venue for professional cricket in the 21st century. The Southchurch Park pavilion has recently been closed down on health and safety grounds, leaving Southend Cricket Club, whose home it is, with a real headache for the 2009 season.

The vision at Garon Park is to create a top-quality cricket facility for all regional development and Excellence cricket for the 600,000 people who live in the South Essex area as well as a venue for first-class cricket. The cricket centre forms just part of a 35-hectare sports and leisure complex, which is one of the largest private sector/local authority sports projects in the country, featuring golf, tennis, athletics, cricket, football, a leisure centre and, in due course, swimming, diving and a hotel complex.

The sports complex was created out of the farm owned by Norman Garon, and some land belonging to the local council in the 1990s, with the planners having the foresight to involve then Essex CCC Secretary/General Manager Peter Edwards. He specified a county-size cricket arena and wickets built for first-class cricket. This had been forgotten by the turn of the century, when local club players using the park constantly complained about the state of the pitch and the stony outfield. But when Essex Head Groundsman, Stuart Kerrison, inspected the site in mid-2004 he promised first-class cricket there the following year if he could get access to the ground by early September. Stuart backed his words with many hours of hard work and the new venue for first-class cricket was opened by Trevor Bailey on 3rd August 2005 ahead of the start of the County Championship game against Durham.

It was the first new county ground in Essex since a match was played at Harlow in 1970. Garon Park has the space to accommodate even more cricket spectators than the planned new stadium at Chelmsford and the car park is huge – probably the biggest of any cricket ground in the country.

We recognised from the start that turning Garon Park into a Centre of Cricketing Excellence of which we could be proud would be at least a 10-year project – so where are we after five years? We decided to



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concentrate on cricket facilities, rather than spectator comforts in the early years, but where was the money to come from? Essex CCC and the Essex County Cricket Board had very limited budgets. As a result, in March 2005 the charity for sport, Essex & Southend Sports Trust (EASST), launched a public appeal to involve the people of Southend and south Essex. The aim was to raise £200,000 by asking local people to make gift aid donations to the charity or to become a Garon Park Patron by committing £1,500 to the project over five years. The very first patron was then Southend Mayor, Roger Weaver, who signed a monthly standing order for £25 for five years to launch the fund. We are still welcoming new patrons – and need more – and have created a club of enthusiasts who meet at least annually to discuss progress. This year there will be a lunch at Garon Park on Friday 7th August, the third day of the LV County Championship game between Essex and Gloucestershire.

On behalf of Essex County Cricket Club, the County Cricket Board and the youngsters and club cricketers of south Essex who are now using the facilities, I would like to thank all the patrons – listed on these pages – and supporters who have made donations, for their generosity.

FESTIVAL



Various fundraising events have been held, and are close to our financial target, but we have underestimated the total funds that will eventually be required so more money is needed. Please enquire at the office in Chelmsford about making donations, or becoming a patron, or call me on 01245 360385. EASST matches all contributions to the public appeal from its own funds; when tax recoveries are taken into account this means a £25 per-month donation for five years is worth around £3,800 to the appeal.

What has been achieved so far? The cricket square originally faced east/west and we turned it round 90 degrees during the 2005/06 winter to the more normal north/south. In spring 2006 we appointed a full-time resident groundsman when Phil 'Burt' Burton joined the team. He is an Essex boy born in Ilford and his employment cost is supported by donations from EASST.

Burt and Stuart then extended the square by adding six more performance cricket strips. Norman Garon Trust contributed permanent perimeter and boundary fencing; new sight screens were purchased and 1,500 new chairs were acquired to replace the rusting seats that had served county cricket festivals in Essex for decades. Outdoor nets, funded by EASST, were opened in 2008 but the biggest transformation will be seen by those visiting the ground in 2009.

The spectator area of the cricket bowl has been reshaped by around 1500 lorry loads of earth and gravel and the Norman Garon Trust is building a storage area for ground equipment, to which is to be attached an electronic scoreboard funded by EASST. Three Southend-based Essex CCC members, Mike Bradley, who runs Claremont Nurseries in Woodham Mortimer, Maldon, plus Great Wakering farmers Pendril and Arthur Bentall have personally planted over 100 poplar Lombardy trees and many metres of laurel hedges as part of a planned

programme involving 1000 trees and hedge plants. Mike has generously supplied all the trees and hedge plants through Claremont nurseries free of charge. We hope to complete the planting programme next winter.

The Garon Park project would not have been possible without the help of Mike, Pendril, Arthur, the appeal patrons and the hundreds of others from south Essex who have contributed in so many ways. It is a real people project – not dissimilar to the building of Roots Hall football ground in the early 1950s. Many thanks to everyone, and especially Phillip Tolhurst (representing Norman Garon Trust) but there is still much to do as we complete our ten-year project to provide cricket facilities fit for the 21st century.

Peter Butler,
Chairman Essex & Southend Sports Trust and Essex AutoGroup Southend Cricket Festival Committee

LIST OF 2009 PATRONS

Essex and Southend Sports Trust (EASST) and the Essex Cricket Board would like to thank the following patrons for supporting our public appeal for funds to create a Centre of Cricketing Excellence in Southend:

Mr R T Weaver	Southend on Sea
Mr M Smith	Billericay
Mr & Mrs Suckling	Little Baddow
Mr P Lucas	Latchingdon
Mr M Raffan	Westcliff-on-Sea
Essex Boundary Club	Chelmsford
Mrs K Butler	Hadleigh
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Mr R A G Monks	Cape Elizabeth, USA
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