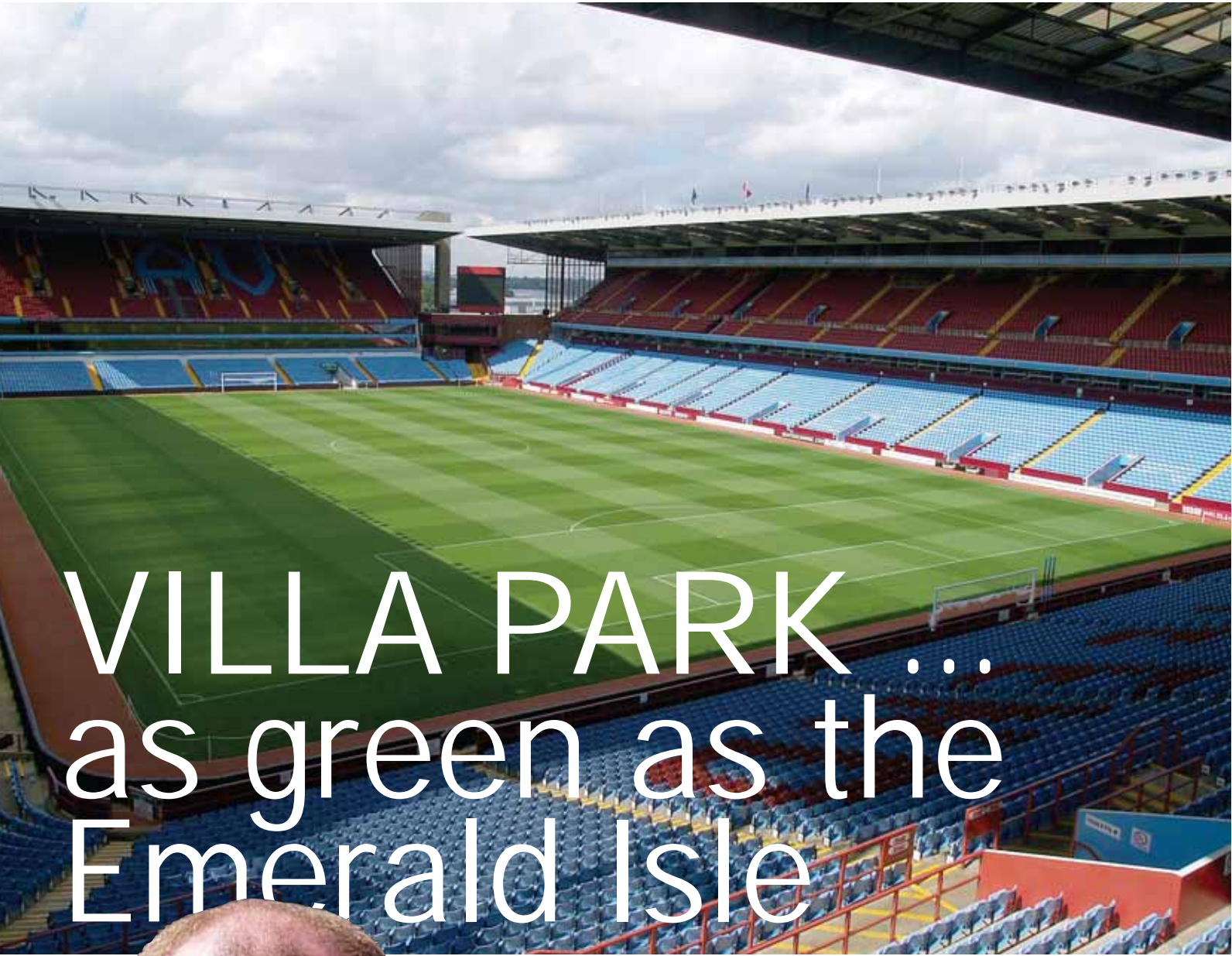
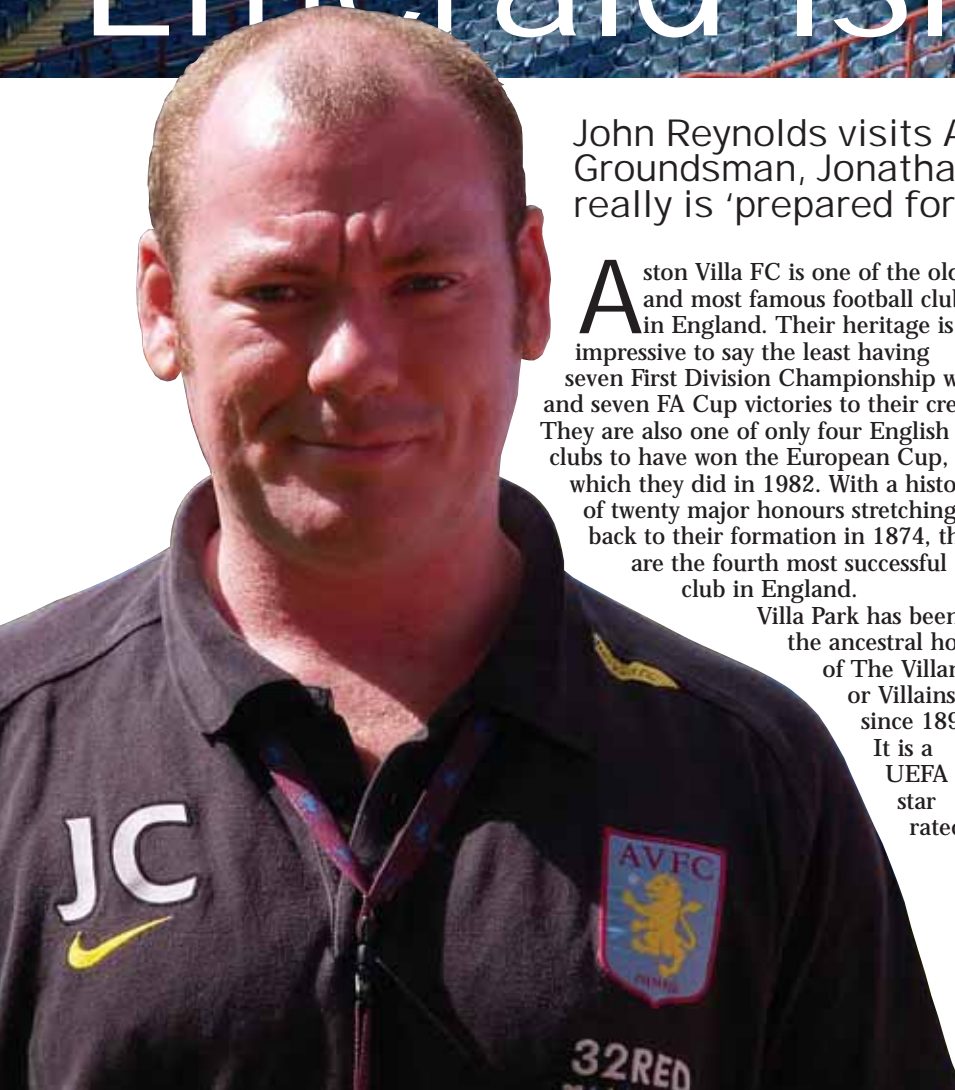


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VILLA PARK ... as green as the Emerald Isle



John Reynolds visits Aston Villa's Irish Head Groundsman, Jonathan Calderwood, to find out if he really is 'prepared for the new season'

Aston Villa FC is one of the oldest and most famous football clubs in England. Their heritage is impressive to say the least having seven First Division Championship wins and seven FA Cup victories to their credit. They are also one of only four English clubs to have won the European Cup, which they did in 1982. With a history of twenty major honours stretching back to their formation in 1874, they are the fourth most successful club in England.

Villa Park has been the ancestral home of The Villans or Villains since 1897. It is a UEFA 4 star rated

stadium and is not only the largest football stadium in the Midlands, but the eighth largest in England. There are plans afoot to extend the North Stand which, when completed, will give a crowd capacity of approximately 51,000.

August 2006 saw some radical changes when the club was acquired by Randy Lerner after paying £62.6 million for 59.69% of the shares, making him the majority shareholder. By September, Lerner had taken full control with 89.69% of the shareholding. The following day executive Chairman Doug Ellis and his board resigned. They were replaced by a brand new board headed by Lerner. This followed released figures showing that Villa had lost £8.2 million before tax in Ellis's last year in charge compared with a £3 million profit the previous year.

The charismatic and hugely popular (with Villa fans) Martin O'Neill also took over as Aston Villa's manager in 2006. The current squad is made up of more than 50% of British born players and, after a year of team consolidation and tactical improvement in 2008, have now returned

to elite status with qualification for the UEFA Cup after a victory over Odense BK at Villa Park on 26th July.

Another addition to the Villa team in 2006 was Jonathan Calderwood, who was appointed Head Groundsman at the stadium. Jonathan had actually worked at the club since 2002, but as Contracts Manager with the contracting company then responsible for maintaining Villa Park. His position also took in maintenance of Tranmere Rovers and Wolves where he was voted Groundsman Of The Year in 2003. Prior to that, he spent three years as Deputy Head Groundsman at Wembley Stadium.

A former Myerscough College student between 1994 and 1997, Jonathan originally hails from Clough, Nr Ballymena, Belfast, in Northern Ireland where he worked as a groundsman at Glentoran FC after leaving school in 1994.

The pitch at Villa Park is built to Desso specification and was installed in 2006 as a replacement for the previous Desso Grass Master, which had been in place since 1996. The original pitch was one of the first of this specification to be used in the UK and the rootzone then used was of very fine particle size which, unfortunately, compacted very readily. "There wasn't anything wrong with the old pitch in terms of wear and tear," says Jonathan, "but the severe soil compaction meant that replacement was the only option. The new version uses a coarse, virtually pure, sand rootzone and required an intensive trace element package application every four weeks for the first two years to build up nutrient values in the inert rootzone material as supplied."

Jonathan is a big fan of the Desso system, but is keen to stress that good maintenance practices are essential to get the best out of it. "It's like owning a Ferrari, you have to be able to afford to fuel and service it otherwise it is soon running off tune and won't perform at peak

levels" he says.

The end of season renovation begins with stripping out all of the natural grass species. This generally requires approximately eight passes to avoid disturbing and damaging the precious Desso synthetic fibres, which are intentionally left in place. "We bring in contractors to do the specialist work as they have the correct specifically designed machinery. You don't want to use anything too brutal or the fibre strands will be ripped out, we trust the guys and leave it to them in theory, however, in practice, I always make sure I'm here to oversee every operation" says Jonathan laughing.

The Desso pitch at Villa consists of over 20million artificial grass fibres which are injected to 20cm depth. This still only represents 3% of the total grass area, so that 97% of the turf will be natural species, but three times more durable than 100% grass.

After the natural Perennial Ryegrass and old topdressing has been removed from the surface and hauled away by trailer, the pitch is re-dressed with 80 tonnes of pure Mansfield Sand. This is followed by Verti-Draining and then drag brushing to incorporate the sand into the newly created holes. An 8:12:8 pre-seed fertiliser is then applied together with a calcium based PH correction formulation to maintain levels at 6.5.

The next process is overseeding with a 100% perennial rye mix using a dimple seeder sowing in three directions. Jonathan doesn't like to see the seed establishing in rows and feels it looks unsightly. "The ideal scenario would be to use a dimple seeder in conjunction with a disc seeder to get maximum even establishment" he says. After four days mowing commences at 35mm cutting height and an application of granular 12:0:12 is applied, as nutrients leach quite readily in the predominantly sand rootzone.

A week later the grounds staff are applying a slow release 19:5:18 to boost establishment and encourage



The old grass and topdressing is stripped out in eight passes



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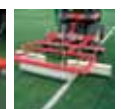
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Sand is dragmatted into vertidrain holes

Progress was almost jeopardised by a severe attack of nematodes three weeks after seeding

tillering as much as possible. The fertiliser regime is fairly intense throughout the pre-season period with applications of a conventional 12:0:12 every 14-21 days depending on growth levels, plus further doses of 19:5:18 every eight weeks. In addition, a bio-stimulant liquid is sprayed onto the pitch, also at eight week intervals. To balance fertility, Jonathan uses a trace element package every four months customised to suit soil analysis results.

From pitch renovation to start of the new playing season is approximately eight weeks, and this year progress was almost jeopardised by a severe attack of nematodes three weeks after seeding. "We noticed the grass was suddenly yellowing and discovered a really bad infestation was rapidly taking hold" says Jonathan. "The nematodes were within the roots and shoots of the grass doing a lot of damage and we were really panicking until we managed to apply a recommended concoction to control the situation."

Once the season is underway the

mowing height is gradually lowered and the fertiliser programme changes to applications of conventional 7:0:14 every 14-21 days and a 15:0:29 slow release formulation every eight weeks.

The club have invested in Stadium Grow Lighting apparatus costing around £250,000, which allows good turf growth conditions and makes overseeding possible in the winter months. This is used from mid October until March or April depending on conditions.

The only disease problems encountered have been Leaf Spot, which is treated with a suitable fungicide as soon as it appears and with occasional insurance sprays in highly susceptible periods.

Winter overseeding usually takes place in mid October and Mid March along with continuous and ongoing attention to any divots.

The 2007-2008 season saw forty-three games played at Villa Park including reserve games. The stadium staff of three, including Jonathan, is boosted during match days by five part time groundsmen to cope with half time repairs as



After dragmatted the pitch is overseeded in three directions

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“It brings a tingle of pride to my spine when the team run out onto the pitch and it looks fabulous”

well as erecting and dismantling practice goals. “I am very lucky to have such a great couple of lads working with me at the stadium.” says Jonathan. “My Assistant Head Groundsman, Paul Mytton, and Karl Prescott are great guys and work extremely hard to maintain the very high standards demanded and expected at Villa. We are very proud to be part of such a fantastic club with a brilliant history and heritage. It really brings a tingle of pride to my spine when the team run out onto the pitch and it looks fabulous.”

I have to agree, and ‘fabulous’ was certainly the word to describe the pitch during my visit to photograph the stadium and interview Jonathan. The tightly packed and intensely green, healthy dense sward was an absolute picture to behold. From my photographic vantage point high up in the famous Holte End stand it was an utterly breathtaking and awe inspiring view through my wide angle lens!

The club owns around £500,000 in grass machinery, including that

used at the recently fully commissioned training ground at Bodymoore Heath which, incidently, Jonathan also has overall responsibility for following recent promotion.

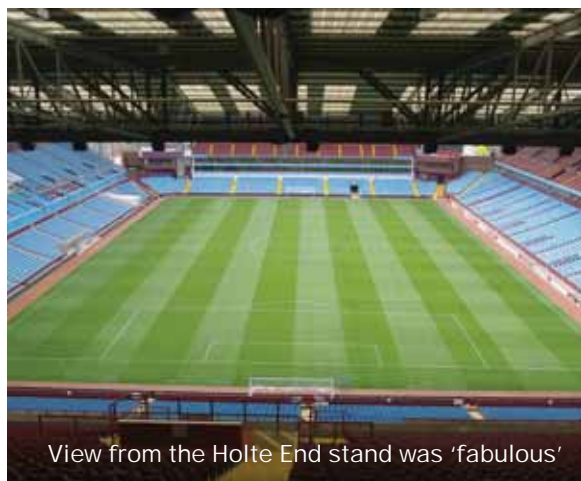
“I do miss my family in Ireland” Jonathan confesses. “However, I have made a wonderful life here in England and could never regret my decision to leave now.”

Married to an English girl, Joanna, and with twenty month old boy and girl twins, Jonathan has much to be justifiably pleased about and was naturally welcomed into her Villa mad family instantly.

He commutes daily from home at Perton, near Wolverhampton and enjoys the occasional game of golf when spare time allows.

Speaking about his time at Villa, Jonathan recalls a conversation with previous Chairman Doug Ellis. “Give us a pitch we can all be proud of at Villa” said Ellis. “I will do just that” replied Jonathan. I believe he has kept his word.

My thanks to all at Aston Villa for their kind hospitality during my visit.



View from the Holte End stand was ‘fabulous’



Villa v Odense on 26th July

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