



## Cricket Loam Explained

**So, where does cricket loam come from? Where is it sourced from, how is it harvested and what are the processes that bring the various grades of dressing to the sports market?**

(©Pitchcare: First published in Pitchcare Magazine [Issue 32 - Aug / Sep 2010](#))

To answer those questions, I met up with Simon Hedley, Business Director of Boughton Loams, at their production plant near Kettering in Northamptonshire. The company has been in existence since 1984, and has built up a good reputation for the supply of soils and loams to the sportsturf industry.

Simon joined the company in 1997 as a sales representative and, over the years, has seen his role develop to become Business Director, a position that enables him to pursue new marketing opportunities whilst, at the same time, continuing to ensure production is efficient and meeting demand across all sectors of the business.



Boughton Loam make and supply a wide range of soil based products for both the landscape and sportsturf industries, including topsoil, cricket loam, mixed topdressing and planting compost. For the purpose of this article, I will concentrate on just one area - cricket loam.

Most of the various types of soils used for making products are sourced locally. Boughton do not use any recycled soils, as they are considered to be inconsistent and not suitable for use.

Simon inspects any potential soil supplies personally, and takes a number of samples. These are then sent to Soil Science Wales Ltd., to check its quality - clay, silt and sand content, organic matter content and soil pH. A particle size analysis is also carried out to confirm soil type and check that it is not contaminated. It is at this stage that the loam is tested for its binding strength. If all the various criteria are met it will be certified for use.

Once approved, the soil is delivered to Boughton's four acre depot storage area. The holding area can hold thousands of tonnes at any one time, so guaranteeing compatibility.

Ten staff are employed at the depot. Five work on the production side, driving heavy plant to move and transport soils, operating the screening machines and bagging the finished product, whilst the other five are admin and support staff, who arrange deliveries and deal with customers.

### **So, how does a cricket loam come to market?**



The essential element of a good cricket loam is that the soil must be consistent in texture, and clay content. Once a particular batch of soil has been identified for use as a cricket loam, it goes through a series of processes to refine the product to meet its specification.

The first part of the process entails breaking down the imported soil into a malleable state. This is done by spreading the soil in layers and cultivating it until it gets to a manageable size. The soil is then run through a series of screening processes (10mm, 4mm and 3mm screens) to reduce and refine the material. The loam is then put through a soil sterilising machine and bagged.

For every tonne of clay loam produced, ten tonnes of virgin soil is put through the screening process. However, none of it is wasted, as it is used to make other Boughton products.

The machinery used in the refining process does not come cheap. The earth movers and screening machines cost tens of thousands of pounds each, with the prime soil movers costing in excess of £60,000, and the screens costing in the region of £130,000.



Last year the company produced around 90,000 bags of cricket loam material alone.

All cricket loams have their own characteristics and need to be managed in different ways and, quite often, there are other variables that affect its performance. In many cases a loam is only as good as it is managed. For many clubs, particularly at the lower levels of the game, the performance of a loam can

be compromised by lack of resources - machinery, covers, staff knowledge and time allocated to preparing wickets.

The company manufacture three specific cricket loams. The difference between them is their clay content, the higher the clay content, the larger the shrink/swell properties of the soil, coupled with its binding strength and higher bulk density.

**Boughton County** has a typical clay content above 30%, giving a firm true pitch able to last at least four days at County Cricket level, or to give a better surface to higher standard league clubs.

**Boughton Club** has a typical clay content of between 25-28%. This loam is used at clubs that need a true firm pitch, but do not have the resources to cope with the higher clay content of County Loam.

**Boughton Kettering** has a typical clay content of 24%. This loam has been the mainstay of local authority and school cricket pitches for many years. It is ideal where a pitch is required to give a good surface, whilst receiving minimal amount of preparation.

There is a tight weather window of opportunity for manufacturing loams. The digging and handling of clay soils need to be undertaken in the summer months of June, July and August when the clay soils are in a friable state and easy to work. When wet, they are almost impossible to work with.



With storage space at a premium, the loam is produced from June onwards. Late ordering of loams can mean that demand can outstrip supply in the peak month of September, this, Simon says, is why it is important that customers confirm their orders early ready to take delivery of their loam in the best of the final growing window.

Simon keeps a close eye on all stages of production, to ensure that soils are produced to order and do not spend too long in the storage area.

"The manufacture of soil products is not always a straightforward process," he says. "They must be handled with care, as they can easily be deconstructed, particularly when wet."

"The reputation of soil products can also easily be tainted when a customer has had a bad experience. Often, this is caused by the wrong product being specified or, on rare occasions, when there have been delays in delivery, usually because the order came in late."

"We have introduced a number of new initiatives and services to assist our customers, with the launch of a new brochure, new website and regular newsletters to keep them updated about products and services."

"Retaining and looking after our existing customers is key to the business" says Simon. "At the same time, we are looking to improve our efficiency, particularly in terms of maximising production. We are also looking to invest in new machinery and technologies."



"Selling soils is a very competitive market at the moment. The raw soil is in short supply due to the downturn in the building industry. Transport costs and rising energy prices also have a significant impact."

"Quality topsoil is fast becoming a much sought after commodity, however, I am confident that we, along with other BRTMA [British Rootzone and Topsoil Manufacturers] members, will continue to be able to offer a wide range of quality topsoil products because we have all invested heavily in our businesses."

"It takes nature a million years to produce 25mm of topsoil, so it is important we treat and respect this wonderful product of nature. In the end, as the saying goes, you get what you pay for. Topsoil today fetches a premium price, so it is important that we all choose and manage this commodity correctly."

A bag of cricket loam currently retails at between four and six pounds, and is often considered expensive by many groundsmen. However, when you consider what goes into producing it, and the transport costs of getting it to site, it is, in real terms, well worth the cost.

#### **Contact Boughton Loam:**

Simon Hedley

Business Director

T 01536 510515

M 07721 667399

F 01536 510691

<http://www.boughton.co.uk/>