Date: **10/02/2022**
Interviewer: **Di**
Interviewee: **Jack**

Jack is the Grounds Maintenance Operative for *i*dverde. He goes into detail as to what he does in his role, and also talks about the changes to come in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in the next 10 years.

Interviewer
This is Di interviewing Jack at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park on the 10th of February 2022. Hi Jack, so what's your role at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park?

Interviewee
I'm the Grounds Maintenance Operative for *i*dverde.

Interviewer
And *i*dverde are…?

Interviewee
A green space company managing all sorts of different parks and open green spaces across Europe I think.

Interviewer
Yep, and on the Park, which sorts of spaces do you manage?

Interviewee
I work on the North side of the Park, there's lots of plant beds, wooded areas, meadows, that kind of thing.

Interviewer
What did you say, meadows…?

Interviewee
Yep meadows, lawns, flower beds, anything like that.

Interviewer
So anything in the North Park mainly, do you go to the South Park?

Interviewee
Now and again if there's a sort of big job on, we'll sort of all come together, the different teams, and we'll all help one another out. Normally the cut-downs around this time of year.

Interviewer
Cut-downs, where you change everything because it's winter?

Interviewee
Yeah, we chop stuff down, all the dead plants down. That happens every year, same time every year, chop it all down. We might move stuff around, but mostly chop it down, mulch the beds, and that's the sort of big jobs that we normally work together, but most of the time now I'm in the North Park.

Interviewer
When did you first come to the Park? How long have you been here?

Interviewee
So, it will be four years this month, February 2018 I started at the Olympic Park.

Interviewer
I think you mentioned before when we were chatting about college?

Interviewee
Yep, so I started here as an apprentice, a Level Two Horticultural apprentice with *i*dverde, and that course ran for two years. I finished that, and now I'm studying with an external college and working at the Park part time.

Interviewer
Are you studying anything particular?

Interviewee
Countryside conservation and…. yeah, countryside conservation!

Interviewer
Countryside is very broad… any particular aspects?

Interviewee
So well, yeah, that's the thing - It is quite broad! [laughs] managing the countryside, managing different ecosystems and habitats and the role, different sort of parts of the industry have in managing the countryside, charities, volunteering groups, companies, the Government, that kind of thing, just to see how we interact with the broader environment and how we benefit from it and how it benefits from our management.

Interviewer
So when you manage the environment on the Park, are you involved in any of the biodiversity, or is it just the planting?

Interviewee
So I like to be involved in it, yeah, I go out of my way to get involved with it and I can, we have a biodiversity manager. He's responsible for overseeing the Biodiversity Action Plan, which I think is reviewed every couple of years. He's there to ensure that that gets carried out, and the Park is managed so it benefits, sort of, ecology as much as it can, and I do like to be involved in that in any

way, whether it's working with volunteers, or just sort of doing little things in the garden, like the beds and whatever. I like to leave a bit of litter over the, leaf litter over the winter just so it's something for insects.

Interviewee
Have you been involved in the bee hotels I've seen in the Park?

Interviewee
Yep, I helped to build them with a charity called Men in Sheds I think it's called, yeah, I helped build them all. I didn't plant these ones, but I planted other ones around London.

Interviewer
Brilliant! So how did you feel when you first came to the Park? What was your first impression?

Interviewee
It was big! I didn't realise how big it was. I'd never been to the Park before my first day here, and yeah, I was impressed. It's a big, big old Park, and I was started to, to also learn my apprenticeship. Yeah, I liked it.

Interviewer
Do you think it's like any of the other parks in London, or has it got something special about it?

Interviewee
It's definitely got something special about it. When I think of other parks in London it's normally broad, open fields and sort of avenues and trees, sort of like Victoria Park. There's a couple of plant beds here and there but there's no, it's like an open park and I suppose that's what it was originally for, a big open space for London, but this Park, it's always something different wherever you go. Difference between the North Park and the South Park is quite something as well. You've got the North Park where it looks like the English countryside, kind of rolling hills that, and the swales that kind of cut the hills and it's very nice. Then you come to South Park and it mixes that kind of urban aspect with a planted area, and it looks really nice all throughout the year, different beds for different continents, I think it's really nice.

Interviewer
You mentioned a swale, now I know what that is, but for the benefit of the recording can you kind of describe what swale is?

Interviewee
I'll try! A swale is sort of like a ditch, for want of a better word, is a kind of an area to allow runoff into the River Lea, and that helps with urban drainage. Big problem with cities with their drainage, because we've got all hard surfaces everywhere, the water just runs off and causes flooding, but these swales allow water to collect into almost like a little miniature valley and it helps it run off into the River Lea, in a more, sort of, environmentally friendly way, without causing flooding and that kind of thing and it's also brilliant for biodiversity because it's like an overgrown area. Often it's between the lawns on the Park,

and the meadows so it's like a wet, it's almost like a little wet-ish habitat, and it supports all kinds of different insects and different types of wetland plants almost as far as I know, as far as flowers.

Interviewer
That's what I thought it was! OK, so I've noticed one in the London Blossom Garden. Were you to do with the London Blossom Garden at all, which is in the North Park?

Interviewee
Yep, so I recently helped with planting the perennials that are in the London Blossom Garden now. I often help with the maintenance of the garden, sort of cutting down the dead stuff from over winter and mowing the lawns. Yeah, the swale there, before the garden was made, it was a little bit bigger. Now, I think, yeah, it's a big swale there and that supports all kinds of different invertebrates and plants.

Interviewer
I mean, I've mentioned the London Blossom Garden, you obviously help to maintain it, again, for the record, and can you describe what that is and what your role has been in creating that?

Interviewee
So the London Blossom Garden, as far as I'm aware of is, there's signposts around explaining it, but as far as I'm aware it was to commemorate those who passed from COVID to as a, sort of, reflection garden, yeah, it's a place to reflect. It's called the Blossom Garden because it has cherry blossoms in there. Yes, they're like a circle, there are different, there's rings of these cherry trees around. When they bloom once they're fully established, they'll create quite peaceful, kind of, serene sort of like an escape from, kind of, hustle and bustle of a massive city and somewhere to go and be quiet reflect on what's been an odd couple of years.

Interviewer
Can you say a bit about what the planting is in that? I think you were talking about grasses, a kind of flower, a yellow flower?

Interviewee
Yeah, so we've got a Miscanthus, are the large grasses that are on the hill on one side of the garden. They're these big ornamental grasses. They have, like, a green, and they've got a silver tint to it, so they go like goldeny orange colour in the winter, and it looked really nice, and there's dozens, and I think there's a few 100 of them across the hill, and scattered in there are daffodils and they'll come up right after these Miscanthus are cut down, and you've got this big display of yellow, and further into the summer the Goldenrods and the Rudbeckia start to flower and so it's a big bright display of yellow and when the sun hits it, it's like a big golden explosion, it's lovely.

Interviewer
Am I right that the planting is designed to be sequential?

Interviewee
Yes, so it's, it's a continuous display, almost, throughout the year, it's always something new. It's not just the one flower, and then it's dead, and then you have to wait until next year to see it, they happen sort of one after the other, and kind of merge in with the flowering seasons for those plants so there's always a display of something there.

Interviewer
And is that correct throughout the Park?

Interviewee
Yes it is, you can walk from one end of the Park to the other, if you go through a few, every few weeks throughout the year, you will notice a change constantly, and it is quite something to see because it is always, the Park is always showing its best self. It's always showing off like a peacock, it's always there, like a lovely, nice display.

Interviewer
How does that make you feel? Because you've got a smile which they can't see!

Interviewee
[laughs] Proud to be honest! East London isn't exactly, it hasn't really had a brilliant reputation for a while for a mix of different reasons and so for the Olympic Games to be held in East London is a point of pride, and for the Park to continue to be a place for, not only East Londoners, but the whole of London, the whole of anyone really, to come to and enjoy 10 years down the line, I think is something that we should all be proud of.

Interviewer
Yeah, because we're coming up to the 10 year anniversary and we have the Great British Garden which was there during the Games, and then we have the planting along Tessa Jowell Boulevard. Have you been involved in any of that or is the North Park mainly?

Interviewee
So I'm part of the North Park team, so that's not within my area. I have been down to the Great British Garden, which is also a nice little kind of get-away, similar to the London Blossom Garden, sort of tucked away, the sort of shadow of the London Stadium, and you don't realise you're looking at this massive Stadium, absolutely huge, and right at the bottom of it, you've got this lovely little garden, but something like the English countryside like you'd expect to walk into a Lord or something like that looking at his garden, but no, it's a lovely little corner but no, I'm not directly involved in it, no.

Interviewer
What's your favorite bit of the Park?

Interviewee
For me, it's behind The Timber Lodge Café on the North Park, the little garden back there, I spend a lot of time back there. We recently built this hazel fence and it gives it a very, like, a rustic look and these

little pockets of the Park, I think they're really nice because as they've built housing on the Park as was planned, you get this little, kind of things that you don't think are in the middle of a big city it's like a little slice of the countryside almost in the middle of a city of 10 million people with somewhere to be quiet in and sort of enjoy. See it all grow, yes it's nice.

Interviewer
So what was the hazel fence for?

Interviewee
Originally it was my idea, because I was sort of annoyed with kids, running on the bulbs and destroying all the plants so I asked if I could build this fence on a pathway to stop people running through the beds, and that was the idea of it, but it looks really nice, and it's commented on a lot like "that's a nice little addition" and once it's sort of summertime, that the hazel plants nearby, sort of overhang and it looks like you're walking through some woodland grove or something like that, it's very nice.

Interviewer
Have got any other ideas or things you'd like to do, any you can share?

Interviewee
Yeah, plenty, but I've been told to reel it in a little bit [laughs] I'm quite fond of the idea of deadwood habitat, and encouraging deadwood, I think a lot of people might seal up a woodland and think they've got to clean all that sort of dead stuff out but it's brilliant for invertebrates and substituent fungi rely on these deadwood, which is, it rots down naturally. If it wasn't for these natural processes, we'd be up to our ears in dead plant stuff, but I like building these dead hedges and if you go down to the Wetlands on the North Park, there are a few in there, kind of tucked away on the banks and they have, I think we've seen snakes in there, one of our colleagues saw a snake in there, which was quite a surprise and I wasn't expecting that, but we've seen birds fly in there and use the thatch, the sort of dense grass and moss material that I put in there using that for their nests up in the trees over above. So it's sort of like a natural B&Q kind of thing [laughs] it's like a resource that the local wildlife can use!

Interviewer
Brilliant. Are you involved in the management of Wetlands at all?

Interviewee
So, not directly again, it's not, because the team I work on is a horticulture team, but because of my kind of, like-of being involved in any kind of habitat management, I do often ask 'can I be involved in that' and have been involved in clearing out excess vegetation which threatens Wetland habitat, so we don't get involved in managing it, it looks like we're hacking into pieces, but we'll benefit in the long run. We are looking after it, yeah, I have been involved in that kind of stuff, yeah.

Interviewer
So where would you like to, sort of, see *your* part in the Park progress, do you think?

Interviewee
I'd like to be more involved in the small pockets and wooded areas we have. I think there's a lot of potential in there, for like, a more comprehensive management plan and I'd like to be involved in that, but that, that'd be down to my managers not me!

Interviewer
Just interesting, yeah…

Interviewee
Yeah, woodlands are an important habitat so I think “why not make the most out of what we've got?”

Interviewer
And do you work with volunteers at all?

Interviewee
Yes I do. Our Volunteer Manager used to be the Team Leader for the North Park and it was me talking with him that kind of got me into the conservation, and I often find myself working with him, helping him run the volunteer events and that's not just in the Park, it's all over London, but yeah, when they’re here on the Park, it's normally him in the office telling my manager “I want Jack to come and help me for the volunteers today” so I’m lucky in that respect.

Interviewer
Brilliant so how have you seen the Park evolving, and what are the main, kind of, changes you've seen? Did you say you'd been here four years, what changes have you seen in that time?

Interviewee
So I don't really know, to be honest. I think for me, if it's changing, I think I wouldn't notice it because I'd expect it to change. You can't have something stay the same forever and ever, so it's all like, growing up, you don't realise you're growing up until like, you make an effort to look back and when it’s happening around you, it's kind of a, I hadn't really noticed it. I don't know if I'm not paying attention or, or I haven't been here enough, but I think the building of, more building on the Park, I'm not, I'll say I'm not really fond of, I think more green space is better but if it’s part of the Park’s legacy is to build housing then I suppose that's good, say, to build more greenbelt round London, so use what we have.

Interviewer
Have you seen a lot of local people using the Park?

Interviewee
Yes, even, today's not exactly the nicest days, it's not anything like yesterday when it was raining, but still people come through the Park, tonnes and tonnes of joggers, dog walkers, families, all the schools that come through here, there's loads of schools around the Park and they're always through here enjoying one part of it or another, which is nice to see is everyone using it which is good.

Interviewer
I haven't asked you if you're local?

Interviewee
I am yeah, I live in Hackney, yeah, so I am yeah.

Interviewer
Do you have any funny, curious stories or anything that you can talk about it that has happened to you that will be interesting?

Interviewee
It's fun working on the, where The London Blossom Garden is now, that hill we'd be up there quite a lot throughout the summer weeding it, and it was always fun to watch people go heal over head as they're walking down the hill [laughs] that's always a good laugh. Working with the team, we all get along and it's really nice. It's always back and forth jokes and it's the same with the manager, it's the same with all the other people that work on the Park, it's nice to, it's just nice to be here. Everything's nice. It's, that's the best thing about working here, it's with the people making it one good thing.

Interviewer
When people come to the Park, they always say how clean and tidy it is, do you have anything to do with that, because obviously it's open 24/7?

Interviewee
Yep, so yeah as the Grounds Maintenance we're responsible for keeping it clean and tidy and that's just not plants, it's the litter on the Park and we spend a few hours, all of us, every morning litter picking, changing all the bins out, a guy comes around on the bin lorry, empty and all the big bins around the Park, a lot of effort goes into keeping it clean. It's picking up stuff that isn't very nice and carrying bags that smell of things you'd rather not know what was in there, and that kind of thing so it is a big part of the Park, but it's keeping it clean and it's a big part of our job as a support.

Interviewer
And do you think people know that and appreciate that?

Interviewee
I think people notice it without a doubt. London's a big city of a lot of people. You go to loads of different parks, no, I'm not going to start attacking different parks [laughs] but they're big parks and they're hard to keep clean with thousands of people walking through it every day, so people have noticed. I have had people come up to me, commenting on "you do a good job, it looks nice" and these are people you see day in, day out. It's not just like a random person coming through for the first time and last time, it's people that you see all the time, and you say "hello" to them, and "good morning" and that, and they say, "well, the Park looks nice", and it gives you a sort of pride because you know you're doing a good job.

Interviewer
How do you think Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park compares to other Olympic Parks in the world?

Interviewee
So I haven't actually been to any other Olympic Park sadly, however, from what I've seen, reading about them in the news, they always seem to sort of, be left by the wayside a lot of them. I think the whole selling point of London hosting the 2012 Summer Olympics, was that it's a Park for the future, it's not just that event that, splash all this money, on this big event and then leave it to ruins, it's like a big project to keep something going for a long time, and it's done a bloody good job of it I think!

Interviewer
Are there any bits of the Park that surprise you?

Interviewee
The river, yes looking at the river, it's, I think it's quite, especially in the summer, when you stand on one of the bridges on North Park, looking towards Hackney Marshes, which is just further up, and you see these big, giant reed beds and all the different birds you see in there, I think I didn't realise how big the River Lea was, when I think of a river, I think of a little stream, I don't think of this great big thing, but the river surprised me because it's quite beautiful, quite majestic looking at it.

Interviewer
So obviously, we're sort of 10 years on from the Olympics, it'd be interesting to know what you think it's going to be like 20 years or so, in the next 10 years. Do you think you would still be using it? What are you most looking forward to?

Interviewee
I think I'd still be using it, definitely, yeah, I think, I'm sure I'll be telling grandchildren some years down the line "I used to work there as a gardener there" and I hope they, people, generations down the line get to enjoy it as I have and as other people have, in these past 10 years. It will change I think, hopefully, and I'm sure for the good. It's going pretty strong the past 10 years, so, and that's not because it's kept the same, it's because it's evolved, it's welcomed in different events are still hosted here as well. There's always some sort of event going on, so it's always, it's being used, which is good, it's not left to ruins, t's constantly being used, which is what it should be for.

Interviewer
Are there any other comments you'd like to make, or things about how it makes you feel or…?

Interviewee
Nothing in particular, just that I like working at the Park, and I'm proud that I do work here, and I'll always boast about it, I'm sure [laughs] that I was a gardener here.

Interviewer
And that's not a bad thing to be able to say!

Interviewee
Yeah, I don't think so, no!

Interviewer
Thank you very much Jack, it’s been really good chatting to you, thank you.

Interviewee
No problem, my pleasure. Thank you.