

Blackpool (Squires Gate)

Greyhound racing in Squires Gate, Blackpool only lasted four years and the history of the track is almost forgotten amidst the constant changing faces of the area of the time.

The area in question transformed in such a short time that the timeline is not easily remembered. The story starts with the ancient Layton Hall mentioned in the Domesday Book. Layton Hall was in the village of Layton east of Blackpool and in 1865 a racecourse was constructed in the grounds. This racecourse was relocated in 1911 to a large acreage of land south of Blackpool and north of St Anne's-on Sea. It was called the Clifton Park racecourse and was expected to provide Blackpool with horse racing for the foreseeable future.

The land east of the Kirkham, Lytham and Blackpool coast railway line was being used as an airfield known as the Squires Gate airfield for public entertainment because by now Blackpool was expanding at a phenomenal rate as it became a holiday resort. Money was ploughed into constructing the racecourse with an impressive grandstand situated on the south side of Squires Gate Lane and 144 stables boxes located south by the Blackpool golf links. However the planned future for the racecourse was cut short because the overspending on constructing the course and high prize money married with the struggle to attract good fields saw a reduction in attendances. Receivers were appointed as the company went into liquidation and before any rescue attempt could be made the King's Lancashire Military had requisitioned the site in 1916 to use as a convalescent hospital for the First World War wounded.

In 1919 the hospital closed and the racecourse was once again used for flying, the adjoining huts were demolished to make way for the aerodrome but the grandstand and stables remained. The grandstand continued to serve as a rehabilitation centre until 1924 when it was given to the Lancashire school of aviation. This is the point that we at last come to greyhound racing because in late 1932 a five month project had been planned by the Blackpool Greyhound and Racecourse Ltd Company after they purchased a small portion of the 140 acres of land near the grandstand. At the same time the aerodrome was purchased by the West Coast Aero Club hoping to provide a service to the Isle of Man.

The stands that made up the outside part of the grandstand required a considerable amount of effort to bring them back to life, the grass course long neglected required just as much manpower to transform it into an oval course and sporting arena. The new Stadium Club and adjoining Aero Club and was equipped with offices, lounges and refreshment facilities and a Union Jack flew on the observation tower when the first meeting came to life.

Extraordinarily the course also included a rare 500 yard straight fronting the grandstand; it was outside of the oval track and would have resembled the Towcester set up of today. Racing got underway on 7 April 1933 featuring a mind blowing £500 prize handicap competition over 550 yards, (some of the classics offered less). Chairman of the company Col. C.J.M.Thornhill accompanied by H Leo Craven Sr. & Jr. began the formalities and a large crowd then witnessed Curious Mickey take the first race honours in 30.72secs. The second race a heat of the handicap competition featured the London dog Ocean Brawn who remarkably arrived by aeroplane the previous day but to the public's disappointment he was well beaten. The first ever 500 yard straight race on the same evening was won by Heswall Warrior in 27.57sec. The famous Beef Cutlet set a world record time for 500 yards on the straight some time later recording 26.13sec.

With such a set up what could go wrong? The answer was quite simple although this was the first case of stadium being called a double track and facilities were first class, two things were to their disadvantage. The first was the fact that oval track was so far away from the grandstand and public viewing, the 500 yard straight actually hindered matters. However the Blackpool public would have accepted this to see their favourite sport if there wasn't another track just around the corner. To make matters worse Blackpool (St Anne's) had been established for six years before Squires Gate and once a punter takes a home history has shown they don't like to leave it.

The greyhound racing failed and ended in 1937 around the same time that the West Coast Aero Club thrived; in fact the club bought more land on the Clifton Estate to expand. At the outbreak of World War Two the Air Ministry gained control of the site before becoming a commercial airport.

The exact site of the grandstand would have been the car parking for the hotel and terminal and for the track it would have been the main terminal itself. (53°46'41.3"N 3°02'29.8"W)