

Bolton (Raikes Park)

Bolton was arguably the most prominent independent track in greyhound racing until its demise in 1996; the track built in 1927 during the early days of the new sport chose not to be part of the NGRC for most of its existence barring two very short spells in 1958 and 1995, despite having facilities and a reputation that could have easily seen the switch.

The track was built in the south west area of Bolton known as Burnden, just south of Croft Street and north of Raikes Lane and very close to the famous old football stadium Burnden Park constructed in 1895. The site was also the former location for the Great Lever Colliery which once again showed the hand in hand relationship of coal mining communities and greyhound racing in the north of the country.

Opening as an independent on Saturday 10 December 1927 the stadium was named Raikes Park after the nearby Raikes Hall and Farm. A stand was constructed on the west side of the stadium that faced main Tramway, terraces and kennels were built alongside Raikes Lane to the south with further terracing constructed on the east side. In 1932 the newly formed British Greyhound Tracks Control Society (BGTCS) included Bolton as one of its earliest members. The organisation was established to assist the interest of promoters of mainly northern tracks and was seen as the rival to the NGRC. When the BGTCS disbanded Bolton remained as a 'flapper'.

Just as the track was about take advantage of the boom years following the Second World War the immediate area felt the full force of the Burnden Park disaster of 1946. In the March 33 fans were crushed to death during an FA Cup quarter final in Britain's worst sporting tragedy at the time.

Not long after another incident could have resulted in disaster had the immediate area not been prepared for it. A chimney being demolished by steeplejacks fell in the wrong direction landing on a local cafe, power cables and the greyhound tracks kennels causing significant damage. Watching from the allotments south of Raikes Lane was a young boy called Fred Dibnah, so some good came of the incident because he was clearly motivated by the event driving him into the trade as a steeplejack.

In 1958 the track switched to NGRC racing for a short period of time before reverting back to independent status soon after. In the sixties the track was a 440 yard circumference with distances of 313, 535, 745 & 980 yards and raced on Wednesday & Saturday nights at 7.45pm. It was considered the premier independent at this stage and they soon introduced the independent Derby over 535 yards which was one of the biggest events in the independent calendar.

Track bookmaker Herbert Westwell was chosen to open the new £10,000 bat and club extension in 1969 as reward for his long service at the track.

In 1977 the fifty year anniversary was celebrated by the Bolton Greyhound Racing Co. Ltd by organising a special meeting in which The Jinx at 4-1 won the first race, interestingly this was a handicap race of which Bolton was associated strongly with for its seventy year existence. In the eighties Monday nights were included during summer and the track was converted to all-sand with an inside hare. Facilities included sixty kennels and three bars and a main stand.

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***The Main stand at Bolton
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In 1987 the management team of Bill Williams and Alan Bellis experienced that horrible feeling of a track being sold to developers but luckily the decision was overturned in 1990. Facing difficult times it was decided to have another go at NGRC racing and in May 1995 they tried a permit licence but on 23rd December 1996 the reprieve came to an end with the track finally closing its doors due to financial difficulties. The National Lottery was cited as one of the reasons for reduced revenue.

Peter O'Dowd the excellent Romford Racing Manager gained experience at Raikes Park which today is still largely undeveloped land between the Porsche garage on the east and the BMW garage planted on the south-east corner of what was the stadium. (2° 24' 49.161"W 53° 34' 0.906"N)