

Bournemouth (Victoria Park)

The short life of greyhound racing in Bournemouth still has a story of real interest to tell. It all started in 1928 but to set the scene we need to go back to just after the First World War when the airfield used by the Royal Air Force was converted into Ensbury Park Racecourse by the Bournemouth Racecourse Syndicate Ltd. The large horse racing course stretched 88 acres from Hillview Road to the east and south, Headswell Avenue to the west, and to the north was the cottages and fields south of the villages of Kinson and Ensbury.

The horse racing got underway in April 1925 holding National Hunt meetings before unbelievably flying meetings took place from April 1926. These featured aero planes racing around the course. The Ensbury Park Greyhound Racing Company Ltd headed by Racing Manager Reg Hermon introduced greyhound racing to the course in 1927 after a lease was secured and after cancelling the first two meetings on Boxing Day and the 31st December due to snow they opened on the new greyhound track on 07 January 1928. The greyhound racing only lasted nine meetings due to the fact that the National Hunt Committee banned greyhound racing in February after quoting concerns over possible horse racing fixtures being affected. The last greyhound race was on 18 February, the racecourse company went bust in June 1928.

This is the point at which we finally get to racing at Victoria Park in Bournemouth, it was decided that there was a future in Bournemouth for greyhound racing so they built a circuit around Victoria Park. Victoria Park was an existing football ground between Eldon Road to the north and Namu Road to the south and was home to Bournemouth F.C (Not AFC Bournemouth!).

The first meeting took place on Saturday 23 June 1928 with a six race card forming the entertainment; however both hurdle races were declared void due to greyhounds fighting which was a common occurrence in the early days of oval racing. The press blamed one of the spoilt races on a large bird because it was reported as flying in front of the faces of the greyhounds upsetting them. The first ever winner was Miss F Milburn's Cabaret over 525 yards in a time of 38.30 at odds of 7-4 on. The attendance was large and one of the stewards was Lord Robert Edward Innes-Kerr, husband of the famous actress of the time Jose Collins who christened the dummy hare.

This first meeting was under NGRC rules but it was also stated that nine previous meetings were held by the company. These meetings mentioned are believed to relate to the nine held previously at Ensbury Park. This is backed up by the fact that the Racing Manager at Victoria Park was the same Reg Hermon.

The incidents reported on the first night had already been linked to Bournemouth's bad luck with greyhound racing following the Ensbury Park episode and the curse continued with the stadium closing following the end of the promotion there (date unknown) but the company are said to have gone bankrupt.

By 1932 Southern Greyhound Racing Promotions Ltd had purchased the stadium and spent £5,000 transforming the facilities in an attempt to turn the tide of fortune. The company had owned Southampton which opened in 1928 so previous experience of running a track was an advantage. The Director of Racing was T Bradbury-Pratt and the chairman was Ronald Prideaux (one of the original Southampton directors).

Eight thousand people packed into the stadium to witness the reopening on Monday 1 Aug 1932; the racing behind the new mechanical hare (patented by Bournemouth's own Mr Mitchell) was a success and the kennel sweepstake over 400 yards was won by Mount Fergus, despite finishing second in his earlier heat on the same night. The racing schedule was set for every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday with no bookmakers allowed on course, all bets were tote only.

Bournemouth's curse surfaced one more time when in 1934 the stadium was closed to greyhound racing. The final meeting on 29 Sep was the last time that the Bournemouth public would see greyhounds speeding around a track. The council purchased the stadium for £4,500 in 1944 leasing it back to the football club with both club and ground still remaining today. (1° 53' 12.333"W 50° 44' 49.315"N)