

Catford

One of the biggest stadiums built in 1932 was Catford Greyhound Stadium built on Southern Railway land between two commuter lines; the stadium was the brainchild of the founders Charles Benstead and Frank Sutton. The entrance was on Adenmore Road, West of Doggett Road.

At its inaugural meeting on Saturday 30 July 1932 a huge crowd witnessed a seven card race of events comprising four or five runners. Mick the Miller was paraded around the track prior to the fourth race, to the delight of the crowd. The first racing manager was Lt. Col. A J Vernon and there were no less than eighty bookmakers. A kennel complex was constructed at Layham's Farm, Keston, near Biggin Hill and six trainers were appointed. In common with all the other fourteen tracks operating in London business boomed and continued to do so until the outbreak of World War 2.

The track would always be described as a tight 369 yard circumference circuit which probably accounts for the lack of major open race success, the greyhounds were much better suited for sprinting rather than the standard distances run by many of the top tracks. Catford was very keen to promote hurdle racing and remained one of the strongest hurdling tracks in the country. The hare was an 'Outside Breco Silent' before being switched to the conventional 'Outside McKee'.

Buses originally dropped patrons off just outside the main gates and on entering the track one would go past the tote facilities and South bank enclosure and then be presented with two forecourts. The West forecourt had a covered grandstand with tote facilities with the judges box directly opposite the winning line. Behind this was the race day kennels. The East forecourt offered a larger covered grandstand on the back straight. The track could also be accessed from behind this grandstand because there were two bridges going across the Southern Railway line. To use the bridges to the track you had to pay an entrance fee at the turnstiles wonderfully situated on the other side of the railway line to the stadium itself meaning the bridges were actually part of the stadium. Finally opposite the main entrance on bends 3&4 was the famous tote board nestled between the uncovered north bank enclosure.

In 1932 trainer Jock Hutchinson left Catford to be replaced by 1931 Derby winning owner Mr H Hammond, early trainers at the track were Claude Champion, Albert Bedford, Harry Woolner, Dal Hawkesley and Ernie Pratt.

A major event was introduced in 1933 which would gain classic status, the newly inaugurated Gold Collar offered £1,000 prize money, a substantial amount only surpassed by the Derby itself. Therefore connections of the country's top greyhounds would plan for the race to be their first target of the year. The Derby champion Wild Woolley became the first ever winner in 1933.

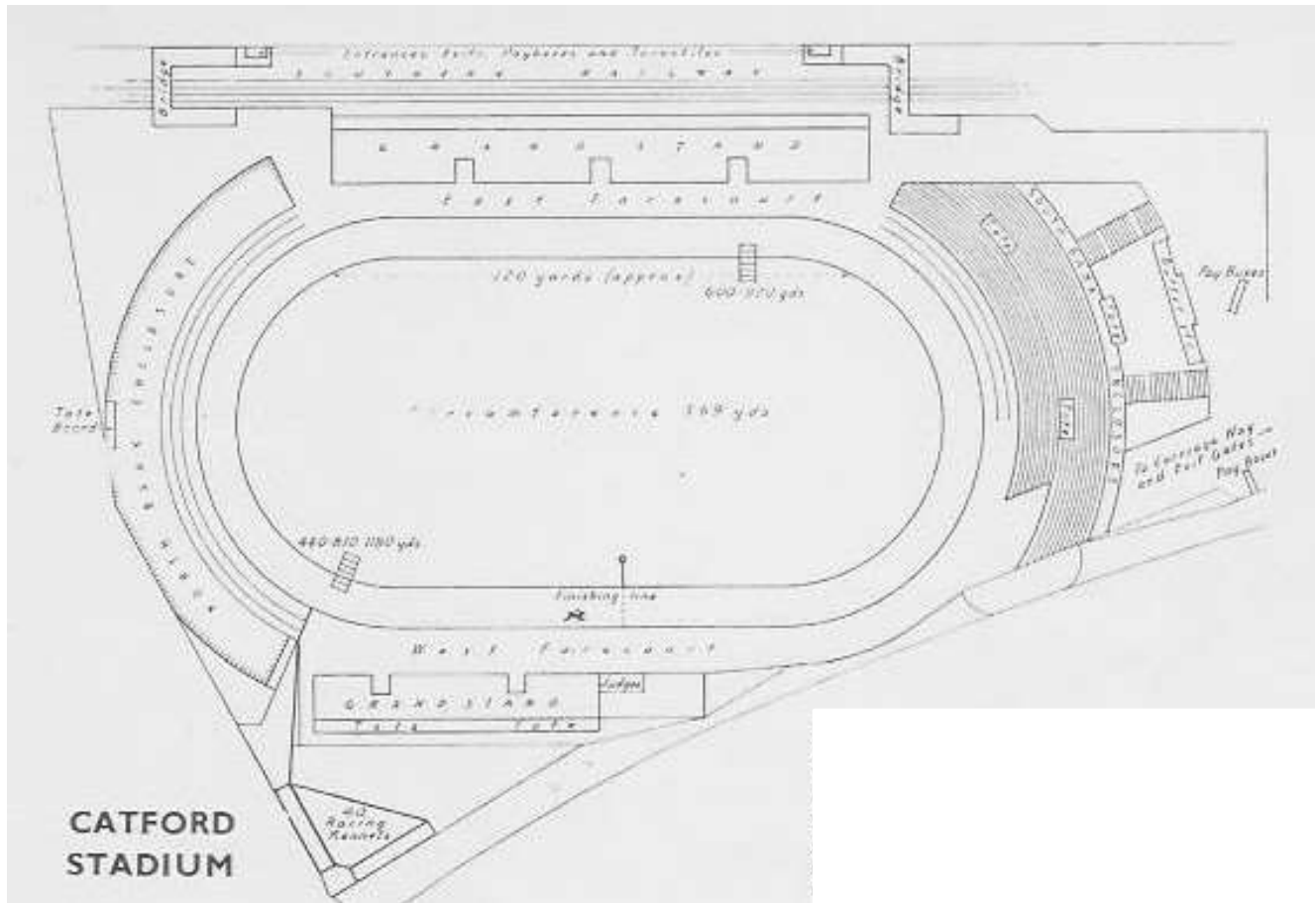
Another event called the Catford British Breeders Produce Stakes would be introduced and would become very popular with the event being run twice during many years. However it was the Gold Collar which claimed the public's attention and pre-war winners included the likes of Davesland, Bosham, Fine Jubilee and Junior Classic. The Cobb marathon Bowl was introduced in 1942 sponsored by brewer Rupert Cobb and became a significant test for the leading staying stars, this race would continue until 1975.

Pre-war major open race successes came for Claude Champion's Jacks Joke after winning the 1935 Scurry Gold Cup, Jesmond Cutlet (1937 Scottish Derby) trained by Hawkesley and C Askeys 1943 Scottish Derby champion Bilting Hawk.

Tote turnover after the war was very impressive with the track was making a fortune and it was the seventh best track in London and Britain just ahead of West Ham.

In 1943 a new puppy called Ballyhennessy Seal came to the scene, whelped in April 1942, by Lone Seal out of Canadian Glory, he arrived at Catford for his owners who each paid £50 for the puppy. Within two weeks of his arrival he won the 18th Rochester Stakes, his first race in England. The greyhound had left the Catford kennels by 1944 but returned to win the Gold Collar. The classic race continued to host some of the greatest names the sport has ever witnessed, following Ballyhennessy Seal to glory was Trevs Perfection (1947) and Local Interprize (1948 & 1949). The 1947 event was sensational because Mondays News met Trevs Perfection in the semi-finals and broke the track record before losing to Trevs Perfection in the final.

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On September 20 1946 an express train from Victoria to Ramsgate derailed and five of the ten coaches fell down the 20 foot embankment landing in the stadium car park. The stadium employees were first on the scene and remarkably only one person died as a result of the crash.

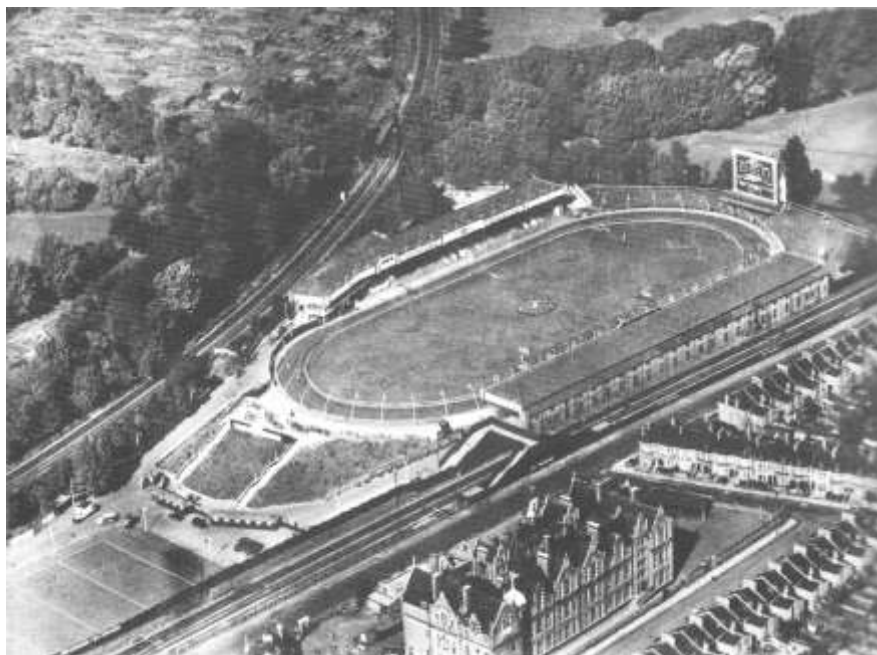
There was sad news in 1952 when the well-respected Managing Director of Catford Frank Sutton passed away. Sutton had introduced the British Breeders Produce Stakes. John Sutton would eventually take over from his father and take over the family business. Although still very young John had great flair and introduced the very first Jackpot Pool in 1961, later to be copied by horse racing. It was a huge success and brought many people back through the turnstiles.

In 1954 the Dave Barker trainer Ardskeagh Ville was the first and only hound from Catford to make the Derby final, the same greyhound would win the Gold Collar. In 1959 John Sutton filled in as Assistant Racing Manager to R F Hammond after the existing assistant left. A major race winner of note was Robert Linneys Greyhound Consolation and Scurry winner Chance Me Paddy in 1955. Charles Benstead sold his share in the company in 1959 to Harold Clifton.

By 1963 the GRA had arrived on the scene and purchased the track, not only did they keep John Sutton in place but within two years he had become the Managing Director of GRA. The GRA introduced under track heating systems at a few of their track s including Catford. Electric cables were basically sewn into the track by the tractor and a team of workers about eight inches under the turf. Catford would continue to use under track systems replacing electric cables with water pipes until the late 1980's.

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Racing continued mainly on Thursday and Saturday nights and the restaurant increased in size as facilities improved and totalled six buffet bars and three licensed bars. Janice Thistleton claimed the Oaks crown for Catford in 1967 with Solerina during a period of little other major open race success. AW (Jack) Smith won three Gold Collars but aside from this there was little else and Catford on the whole did not compete with its bigger London neighbours.



Aerial view of Catford in the sixties.
Copyright – GRA Ltd

GRA's Charlton finished racing during 1971 resulting in the Greenwich Cup and Ben Truman Stakes finding a new home at Catford. One year later the track was the first London stadium to start eight dog racing; the circuit was substantially altered with steep banking on the bends. The idea had cost the GRA quite a lot of money but public acceptance never came through, probably because picking the winners had become harder. The fact that greyhounds would get into more trouble throughout races did not help and that in turn would increase injuries. It seemed an odd decision to pick Catford for the experiment which would finish by the end of the year although further attempts would take place at later dates.

During the seventies trainers at the track would include Mike Smith, John Horsfall, and late in the decade Paddy Milligan. Jim Layton became Racing Manager in 1974 before leaving for Oxford in 1978. Roy Dwight was brought in as Assistant Racing Manager in 1981, he was the cousin of Reg Dwight (Sir Elton John) and famously scored and then broke his leg in the 1959 FA Cup Final for Nottingham Forest against Luton. Mick Smith would arrive from Nottingham in the mid-eighties and take over the helm as Racing Manager. He would be joined by Peter Regan after the closure of Slough in 1987; Regan would be the joint Racing Manager but sadly passed away whilst in this role.

The legendary Scurlogue Champ set three track records over marathon distances of 718 & 888 metres from 1984-1986 and in 1987 the Scurry Gold Cup became another major event to be held at the track, the classic race arrived from Harringay after the GRA closed yet another stadium. Harringay trainer Ray Peacock joined Catford as a consequence.

Tragically two racegoers were killed in 1990 when a car crashed through the Catford stadium gates into the car park. Two years later the incredible hurdler Kildare Slippy set a new track record over 385m hurdles of 23.73sec, considerably faster than the winner of the Scurry Gold Cup on the flat that year. Mick Smith left for Wimbledon and then Wembley being replaced by Jim Snowden. The Cesarewitch was switched to from Belle Vue to Catford in 1995 and this resulted in the prize money taking a significant drop from £10,000 to £5,000.

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The next few years saw a hive of activity, David Mullins and Peter Rich both had short spells as trainers at Catford before Hackney trainer John Simpson a former Spurs footballer and first time trainer Seamus Cahill joined the track in 1997. The following year Ken Tester and Terry Atkins were new trainers at the track following the fall of the mighty Wembley. Racing Manager Jim Snowden left to be General Manager at Portsmouth replaced by Assistant Phil Donaldson.

In 2000 Racing Manager Phil Donaldson left on the evening of the last Catford Cesarewitch before it was given to Oxford, Donaldson went to pursue a career in journalism with the Racing Post. Catford Assistant Derek Hope took over and Wayne Wilson joined as a trainer. Just one year later trainer Maxine Locke joined and leading owner Len Ponder moved all of his greyhounds from Peacock to Cahill who would then join Wimbledon in 2002.

In 2003 greyhound racing suffered a massive blow with yet another stadium owned by GRA being closed. Catford had opened in 1932 and was a hugely popular stadium. After years of rumours of Catford's demise, it had finally happened and closed overnight without warning to the shock of many despite the fact that plans for redevelopment had been spotted by eagle eyed internet surfers. The dreaded day was on the 5th November as news spread that the BAGS meeting the day before would be the last ever. Derek Hope, the Racing Manager at the end and Bob Rowe, the GRA's Senior Racing Manager, had stayed to watch the final race. It was, according to Derek, something Bob never did, always leaving before the end to avoid the heavy south London rush hour traffic. More than 70 years of history went up in smoke when the track's owners, the GRA, decided that it could no longer sustain financial losses. Staff, trainers and bookmakers were left high and dry. Bookmaker John Humphreys had stood in the main ring since 1966. He had sponsored the Gold Collar, for 18 years from 1979. Derek Hope would replace the departing Simon Harris at Wimbledon.

Trainers scurried for new tracks, John Simpson, Maxine Locke, Tony Taylor and John Walsh moved to Plough Lane, Taylor had held a contract at Catford since 1991. Crayford took up the services of Keston-based Steve Gammon and Sittingbourne took on Sonja Spiers and Kevin Connor and Mark Lavender ended up at Portsmouth and Jason Foster at Oxford.

The stadium caught fire after closure and was demolished, along with the famous scoreboard (0° 1' 27.880"W 51° 26' 57.080"N).



Catford following closure in 2003 (Source – Wikipedia)

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Selected Track Records

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes
420y	Cheathas Artist	23.88	25.09.1971	
440y	South Tipperary	27.92	30.07.1932	
	Jazz First	26.18	05.08.1932	
	Wild Woolley	25.95	06.05.1933	Gold Collar heats
	Jack's Joke	25.95	14.06.1935	
	Fine Jubilee	25.82	26.05.1936	Gold Collar heats
	Fine Jubilee	25.42	25.05.1937	
	Mondays News	25.41	31.05.1947	Gold Collar semi-finals
	Hectic Birthday	=25.41	31.05.1952	Gold Collar final
	Polonius	25.40	16.03.1953	
	Rusty Chain	25.26	19.05.1956	
	Dangerous Customer	=25.26	05.07.1958	
	Shanes Rocket	=25.26	1970+	
570y	Im Dogmatic	32.99	15.04.1963	
600y	Shadowlands Delight	35.20	1950+	
610y	The Phoenix	35.08	06.01.1972	
620y	Music Guest	35.98	04.07.1964	
	Discretions	35.83	1970+	
700y	May Hasty	40.03	1950+	
745y	Gorey Hill	44.97	03.07.1965	
	Suir Peggy	44.43	1970+	
790y	Breachs Buzzard	45.91	18.12.1971	
810y	Ilene Darling	53.70	31.01.1933	
	Drintyre	51.46	07.03.1933	
	Extra Smart	51.27	17.06.1933	
	Master Ralph	50.90	07.08.1933	
	Dapifir	50.35	29.03.1934	
	Real Busy	50.04	12.07.1934	
	English Warrior	49.10	16.08.1934	
	Alvaston Lulu Belle	48.58	21.07.1945	
	Tia Tina	48.48	27.09.1958	
	Rapid Prospect	48.44	04.07.1959	
	Im Dogmatic	48.40	16.05.1964	
940y	Chi Chi	58.10	10.03.1962	
970y	Budget Surplus	58.87	1963+	
978y	Real Darkie	58.87	11.12.1971	
1156y	Spots of Luck	70.94	25.09.1971	
1180y	Trev's Carriers	79.80	23.01.1945	
	Western Dasher	74.42	1950+	
	Lankey Lena	72.70	04.07.1959	
	Faema Zora	72.31	1970+	
420yH	Sherrys Prince	24.39	02.11.1971	
440yH	Bright Board	26.19	1950+	
	Maggie From Cork	25.83	07.07.1962	
600yH	Derryboy Jubilee	36.31	1950+	
610yH	Sherrys Prince	35.75	05.02.1972	
620yH	Knockshe Prince	37.93	13.02.1965	
222m	Blinding Service	13.73	1988+	
	Kiltown Prior	13.68	1989+	
	Im From Tallow	13.56	1990+	
385m	One To Note	23.54	11.05.1985	
	I'm Gone	23.54	18.07.1987	
	Farncombe Black	23.42	1988+	
	Bolt Home	23.35	1989+	
	Union Decree	23.20	04.07.1998	Scurry Cup semi-final
517m	Hello Blackie	32.03	1989+	
555m	Westmead Champ	34.65	1976+	
	Track Man	34.47	22.09.1984	
	Rio Shadow	34.41	09.05.1998	Greenwich Cup semi-final

718m	Scurlogue Champ	45.58	20.10.1984	
850m	Proud To Run	55.25	1989+	
888m	Pitmans Brief	58.47	1976+	
	Scurlogue Champ	58.00	05.06.1985	
	Scurlogue Champ	57.60	19.06.1986	
1050m	Cregagh Prince	69.93	25.04.1987	
385mH	Ballaugh Echo	24.17	19.06.1986	
	Parktown Ranger	24.03	1988+	
	Pantile	23.85	1989+	
	Kildare Slippy	23.73	18.05.1991	
517mH	Breeks Rocket	33.23	1990+	
555mH	Autumn River	35.72	1977+	
	Off You Sail	35.35	18.07.1987	
	Freewheel Kylo	35.34	1994+	
	El Tenor	35.15	27.05.1999	
718mH	Kanturk Cannon	48.43	02.05.2002	

+ Date when record was held, not necessarily the year it was set.