

Leicester (Blackbird Road)

The city of Leicester and in particular the county of Leicestershire has been an absolute hotbed for greyhound racing. It was arguably as popular in this area as any other in the country throughout the industry's history. It all started during the birth year of 1927 when the GRA had an interest in 19 new tracks and Leicester was one of those. It was located north of the central part of Leicester off the Blackbird Road; the exact site today would be where Somerset Avenue meets Parker Drive.

Another track to the south on the Aylestone Road had opened on 24th September 1927 as work progressed in constructing a greyhound circuit at the Blackbird Road site. In addition the nearby town of Coalville opened a track on 15th October 1927.

It was not long before Leicester had three tracks as the stadium was ready for racing in early 1928 and had an opening night on Saturday 26th May. Six heats of the Quorn Open sweepstakes and a hurdle race made up the seven race card.

11,000 (including the Mayor Alderman J. Thomas) attended to see the Barley Leader become the first ever winner over 525 yards at odds of 4-7f. Trainers King, Hulme, Glover and Barton all picked up winners on that first night at the venue that was known as 'The Stadium'.

Speedway quickly followed at a cost of £30,000 to put the dirt track inside the greyhound circuit and the future looked rosy for the city. The track had been built in an area where there was little else but countryside with the exception of a railway line and some housing on Blackbird Road. It was not until later that the surrounding view changed when the Wildt Mellor Bromley Hosiery & engineering Works was constructed next door. Even then the area still looked starkly different to the mass of housing experienced just a few decades later.

The Leicester track at Blackbird Road soon became popular and this may have been one of the reasons for the closure of the rival Aylestone Road track believed to be around 1929. Despite the early success a horrific accident took place on 31st December 1929 during a trial session. Three boys had climbed into the small shed that housed the hare mechanisms and were playing when the bogie that carried the hare struck them. One boy George Reader aged 11 was killed and his 12 year old brother Alfred died in hospital several days later.

The track would move on from the tragedy and under the ownership of Leicester Stadium Ltd it would easily reach totalisator turnover of £1 million after the war, the 1946 figure hit a hugely impressive £1,605,830. Although this stadium based in Leicester would command the lion's share of trade it did not stop Coalville, Syston (which opened in 1931) and Hinckley (which opened in 1936) from being very successful too. In fact yet another track was to open in 1946, this time in the town of nearby Melton Mowbray. There were now five tracks in or around Leicester.

The stadium was bought by the Sanderson's (Alan and Hilda) owners of the two Coventry stadiums (Lythalls and Brandon) in 1950 which resulted in a new company name for all of the tracks. The name was Midland Sports and Charles Ochiltree was to be the General Manager (Ochiltree had some shares in the company) as well as Managing Director at Lythalls Lane. B D O'Leary was Racing Manager and would oversee the two nights racing on Thursday and Saturday evenings at 7.00pm. The hare by now was an Inside Sumner with a track circumference of 467 yards. Facilities included a small self-service restaurant, three buffet bars and three licenced bars.

In 1959 Harold Richards (later to become a stipendiary steward) replaced O'Leary as Racing Manager before he moved onto Gloucester. Dan McCormick was brought in taking up roles at both tracks until 1967 when former Knowle and current Oxford trainer John Rowe secured the Racing Managers position (father of Bob Rowe).

Resident trainers in 1965 consisted of Peverell, McNally, Wales and Lea.

Geoff DeMulder joined the track as a trainer and had success in 1967 winning the Derby Consolation with Daybreak Again and Speedway made a return in 1968 after many years in the wilderness and the Midland Grand Prix was inaugurated at the track. As the decade drew to a close both the Syston and Melton Mowbray flapping tracks closed their doors to the public.

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Leicester
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Very little open race success came the way of the stadium trainers and as the seventies passed the facilities and building became very tired. In 1973 George McKay who had been a Racing Manager at Leicester passed away after a life in greyhound racing. In 1979 Mick Wheble formerly of Harringay and Catford was named Racing Manager at the ageing track and would also take on duties at the Brandon stadium in Coventry.

In November 1983 it was announced that Midland Sports Stadiums Ltd had accepted a conditional offer for the Blackbird Road Stadium. The deal would signal and end for the greyhounds, speedway and stock cars at the venue although the buyers had not been disclosed. It was not hard to guess however following a previous failed bid from Barratts Homes in 1978 that it was the same company that had dealt the death blow. Mick Wheble left for Northern Sports and Oxford soon after.

It turned out that it was indeed Barratts and those same old words (sung by Charles Ochiltree on this occasion) stating 'It is a business decision' fell on deaf ears as many lost the opportunity to attend their passion. The last meeting took place on 15th September 1984 with a greyhound called Spinning Top providing the last winner for the punters.

Leicester once a greyhound stronghold then lost nearby Coalville in 1990 and Hinckley in 2006 resulting in a once vibrant industry in the area gone for good.

Site today – (1° 8' 44.020"W 52° 39' 13.669"N).

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Selected Track Records

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes
310y	The Glen Abbey		03.03.1961	
	Cold Keg	16.98	1970+	
	Cash For Harry	16.97	31.05.1971	
400y	Prince Fallock	22.09	16.07.1964	
	Black Walk	21.93	17.09.1966	
460y	Landings Hero	25.55	13.08.1970	
525y	Troytown Playmate	29.13	19.04.1961	
	Black Walk	28.85	29.09.1966	
700y	Breachs Blizzard	39.48	08.09.1966	
750y	Bright And Bouncing	43.50	02.10.1941	
275m	Miss Caesar	16.04	1979+	
425m	Jet Control	28.35	1978+	
485???	Rikasso Mick		1983	
650m	Owners Guide	38.98	1979+	
708m	Ka Boom	43.13	1977+	

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