

## Walthamstow

Walthamstow was the most famous greyhound track of the modern era taking over as the sports premier track when White City closed its doors in 1984. Opening in 1931 it slowly grew in size and prestige over the decades becoming an iconic venue.

It all started after a man called William Chandler decided to build on an existing flapping track called the Crooked Billet. Chandler and his family would secure the futures of many generations of the Chandler family by investing in the project.

The area off the Chingford Road was basically all rural before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the only sports ground of note in the immediate vicinity was the Myrtle Grove Athletic Ground. However in the early part of century another sports ground was constructed next door to the Myrtle Grove ground on the north side. This ground was used by the Walthamstow Grange Football Club believed to be from 1908 and was reported to have had two spectator stands. By the time the sport of oval track greyhound racing arrived in 1926 the area had begun to experience the building of houses and dwellings and roads to the north and south of the ground called Rushcroft Road and Empress Avenue. By 1929 the ground hosted greyhound racing for the first time and was known as the Crooked Billet Greyhound and whippet track. There are references that the ground was disused and was a rubbish dump but this conflicts with the football teams historical results and the fact that there was a flapping track on site.

In 1931 Chandler a bookmaker by trade had turned his attention to this small flapping track and made the decision to invest in a new stadium. It cost him £24,000 to buy the site that also took in a large chunk of the Myrtle Grove Athletic Ground as well as the existing track and ground. The famous art deco parapet entrance was built in 1932 and the equally famous clock tower and totalisator board was designed by Thomas Edge of Woolwich. Chandler also had shares in the Hackney Wick track by this time.

After the initial successes a grand official opening was planned on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1933, amongst the visitors on that first night was the aviator Amy Johnson. The Racing Manager was a man called Harry Briggs.

It is also believed that from 1931 to 1943 the stadium underwent three major rebuilds as Chandler strived for his vision to be realised. The kennels and paddock were situated between the third and fourth bends with a veterinary room and trainers room at either end. Between the first and second bends was the Senior Club sandwiched by two single decker stands. The back straight only offered a large covered stand but the home straight was bursting with facilities, another Senior Club was located under the upstairs ballroom with a dance band. There were two tea rooms and a wet and dry bar and all of this was within the main grandstand and there were no less than sixteen small tote buildings. Membership was two guineas per annum.

The track itself was 440 yards in circumference and was described as the slowest and possibly the most difficult course in London. The hare was an Inside Sumner and there was an Artesian well near the fourth bend used for watering the track.

Despite all of these excellent features it was not until 13 January 1938 that the track first raced under NGRC rules. The track trainers soon gained notoriety with W Lacey steering two hounds through to the Derby semi-finals in 1940. One year later Walthamstow introduced the 'Test' which quickly became a significant event and was held through the war years because it was so popular. The local area around this time had changed beyond recognition with many populated streets now seen, a far cry from just twenty years previous.

The trainers and greyhounds of Walthamstow were situated in a much nicer rural area to the north called 'The Limes' in Sewardstone Road not far from Epping Forest.

Walthamstow were unusual in the fact that they hired quite a few female trainers which was very much against the norm. It is not known why the track hired so many (possibly something to do with Frances Chandler's influence), the wife of Williams son Charles. Frances would be one of the sport's biggest owners throughout the late forties and fifties. Women trainers employed during the period mentioned included Mrs F Deathbridge, Meg Fairbrass, Miss J Griffiths and Mrs B Lark. Noreen Collin and Miss K Sanderson would also be Stow trainers from 1950.

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The money offered at Walthamstow in prize money was some of the best in the country allowing the owners and trainers to compete at a high level. The 1951 Grand Prix with a huge prize of £750 saw top hounds break the track record four times before Rushton Smutty ran out the winner.

In 1952 Walthamstow built the iconic neon lighting greyhound sign to commemorate the 1952 Coronation, the same year the land which housed the Salisbury hall Manor House was purchased by Chandler, demolished and used as the car park for the stadium. The Manor house once owned by Henry VIII and used by the home guard in the war had become dilapidated.

Tom 'Paddy' Reilly and Dave Geggus became two very prominent trainers for Walthamstow, their appointments resulted in countless victories in competitions and appearances in Derby finals. Reilly replaced Noreen Collin who relinquished her position in 1953. In 1956 the Reilly trained Duet Leader finished Derby runner-up. A third trainer called Barney O'Connor joined the track after a long-standing invitation from Chandler, O'Connor from County Galway finally accepted and the trio earned considerable glory for the Stow. The other track trainers at the time were Jack Durkin, Kevin O'Neil and Reg 'String' Marsh.

In 1961 GRA introduced under track heating systems and this was adopted by Walthamstow who would continue to the system replacing electric cables with water pipes until the late 1980's.

Speedway and stock cars both had short appearances at the Stow, stock cars from 1962-1968 and Speedway 1934 and 1949-1951 and in 1965 chromatography (a drug testing unit) was first used at Walthamstow in their purpose built lab. The summer of 68 resulted in the bends being sanded and banked which meant the track instantly ran much faster than when all-grass.

Walthamstow moved up to third place in the tote takings table behind the GRA pair of Harringay and flagship track White City and the trainers won countless trophies with the exception of the big one (The Derby). More improvements were added in 1969 & 1971 with the addition of a new stand with a luxurious restaurant. They even built an escalator at one of the enclosure entrances.

Westpark Mustard claimed win number 15 at Walthamstow during her 1974 record and Reilly finished runner up in the Derby final with Bally Lander.

1976 & 1977 proved to be definitive years for Walthamstow, in 1976 Charles Chandler Sr. and his brother Victor Chandler both passed away leaving the family in limbo and leading into 1977 anything looked possible with the future of the company.



Walthamstow  
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Walthamstow had built up a fine reputation and was seen as one of the best tracks in the country but suddenly its short term future was unknown. Brothers Charles Chandler Sr. and Victor Chandler had passed away leaving the track to be run by new chairman Charles Chandler Jr. and new MD Percy Chandler. Victor Chandler Jr (the one we see on TV today!) inherited the 20% stake in the track from his father but wanted to sell his share due to the fact that his side of the family was in the bookmaking business. GRA held a third share in the track and had to sell to alleviate their debts. Suddenly it became apparent that an interested party could acquire a 52% stake and have the controlling interest, it led to a clamouring from major players looking to buy the giant. Coral were leading the chase from of course Ladbrokes. Thankfully the Chandler family rallied round, Charles, Percy and Frances (wife of Charles Sr.) spent over £400,000 to withstand the attempts from Coral and Ladbrokes and buy the track outright.

With the disaster averted the London track was cementing its place as one of Britain's top tracks. Two Grand Prix honours went to Paradise Spectre, a black dog won in 1977 & 1978.

Walthamstow Racing Manager Ray Spalding left to be replaced by Tony Smith in 1983, the Assistant RM Chris Page who had only started six months previous found himself with a new boss. As the Charley Chan's nightclub was being built under the famous clock tower totalisator board in 1984 the Stow was elevated to the top of the tracks tree following the industry's worst moment (the White City closure). Some cheer came for greyhound fans though following the breakthrough of Ballyregan Bob and Scurlogue Champ. Bob went unbeaten through the Test. A new generation of trainer had started; Jim Sherry, Dick Hawkes and Kenny Linzell would all bring silverware to the track. However there was still no Derby victory and the tracks first victory nearly never happened.

In 1986 Gary Baggs was one of the best trainers in the country and was set to join Oxford and had started trialing in but Racing Manager Tony Smith in true 'Godfather' fashion made an offer he could not refuse. Less than a year later Baggs trained Signal Spark to the 1987 Derby crown. The Stow had also introduced a fourth major event called the Arc in 1987.

Sad news reached the track that Barney O'Connor had passed away in 1988 and further trainer appointments included Ernie Gaskin Sr. in 1988 and John Coleman in 1989.

The late eighties was a period when greyhound racing experienced a mini boom, attendances and tote turnover were going up meeting by meeting and at last the promoters were getting some reward after some tough years. Walthamstow the leading track in Britain announced that 1988 tote turnover figures were £16,355,089 and that early in 1989 they produced one meeting turnover of £173,000 on the night of the Pepsi Cola marathon final.

Chris Page took over the Walthamstow hot seat from departing Racing Manager Tony Smith but vowed to continue to bring in the best trainers as Smith had started to do. A second Derby triumph now arrived, this time Slippy Blue surprised most when lifting the 1990 trophy for Kenny Linzell. However Linzell left in 1992 deciding that Walthamstow's policy of recruiting the best was not the best for him. He left following the appointment of the might Linda Mullins. Mullins would win the trainers championship at the Stow in 1993 and would embark on an almighty quest for trophies. The Mullins camp won so many over the forthcoming years that it was rumoured they had depleted the world silver deposits.

Walthamstow earned their first BAGS contract in 1994 which resulted in some criticism because some questioned why a track like Walthamstow needed such things. John Coleman sealed the trainer's championship and Spring Rose twice broke the track record twice on her way to a sensational winning campaign in the Grand Prix.

The Sporting Life closed in May 1998 after a merger with the Racing Post, it was the end of an era and many in the sport were devastated at the loss of a quality newspaper that had served greyhound racing for many years led by their editor Bob Betts. The Racing Post would try to heal some of the wounds left by the disappearance of the Sporting Life by sponsoring a new festival of racing at Walthamstow.

Yet another top trainer arrived in 1999 in the form of Linda Jones and one year later the track consolidated its position by announcing a new £10,000 prize for the Grand Prix. The same year Linda Mullins earned a fifth consecutive trainers title which prompted her to retire at the very top. Mullins had made the announcement towards the end of the year and would switch the licence to son John.

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Three times champion trainer Ernie Gaskin Sr. retired in 2005 and the kennels would be taken over by his son Ernest Gaskin Jr. Walthamstow experienced another major change as Mark Wallis took over the Linda Jones range and contract. Linda was a two times champion trainer and had amassed 13 Category One successes before deciding to retire due to ill health. Her daughter Sarah and partner Mark Wallis were now the driving force behind the Imperial Kennels.

Everyone that had been involved in greyhound racing since the eighties still remembered the day White City closed and a whole new generation of greyhound fans were about to experience the same scenario once again. White City had been the premier track until its closure in 1984 but Walthamstow had stepped up and become the home of greyhound racing in Britain since. It had overshadowed Wimbledon and Wembley and the name Walthamstow was always associated with greyhounds.

Then the unimaginable happened when the shareholders sold up and the track closed in August 2008, despite assurances from the owners in December 2007 that no deal had been made to sell the track. The directors of Walthamstow Stadium Limited agreed to the sale of the Company's freehold property to a development consortium led by Yoo Capital and K W Linfoot plc. Formal contracts were exchanged. The final race was held on Saturday 16 August at 11pm, the winner being trap two 'Mountjoy Diamond'. Racing Manager Chris Page and the trainers expressed their shock and disbelief that the premier venue was to be no more.

The only remaining part of the stadium is to be the iconic entrance (a listed building) and London was left with just one track centrally. The saga of appeals and plans to re-open failed to materialise and new owners London & Quadrant released plans to build 294 homes on the site. The car park area opposite the stadium is to be developed as a Bus Depot & Learning Centre.

Actual stadium location (0° 0' 51.217"W 51° 36' 12.646"N).

### **Selected Track Records (Pre-Metric)**

<b>Distance</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Notes</b>
500y	Ballyhennessy Seal	28.59	1944+	Circuit Final
	Shaggy Lass	28.55	13.12.1945	
525y	Ballynennan Moon	29.79	21.11.1942	
	Ballyoulster Deemster	29.76	10.1951	Grand Prix heats
	Rushton Smutty	29.74	10.1951	Grand Prix heats
	Olivers Lad	29.73	10.1951	Grand Prix second round
	Rushton Smutty	29.70	10.1951	Grand Prix semi-finals
	Drina	28.99	23.01.1962	
	Some Cheatha	28.95	09.1968	
700y	Say Little	28.83	1972+	
	Stylish Nancy	40.92	29.11.1945	
	Kilbelin Dancer	40.81	1948+	
	The Fixer	40.09	04.08.1962	
	Switch Hitter	40.05	08.1968	
	Hong Kong Bay	39.91	09.1968	
	Cash For Dan	39.88	1970+	
	Breachs Buzzard	39.78	1971+	
880y	Bedford		16.04.1966	
	Hiver Whitenose	52.54	1968+	
	Hiver Whitenose	52.13	1968+	
	Todos Liza	51.58	07.10.1968	Test heats
525yH	Frating Dan	31.01	10.04.1943	
	Baytown Blackbird	30.52	1946+	
700yH	Lisnalong Hero	30.06	01.05.1965	
	Dogstown Queen	41.33	28.08.1965	

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

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### Selected Track Records (Post-Metric)

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes
235m	Barbaran	14.23	16.04.1983	
	Often Hungry	14.23	12.11.1987	
	Ard Boxer	14.23	12.03.1988	
	Farncombe Black	14.16	25.08.1988	
	Horseshoe Ping	14.14	16.09.2006	
	Horseshoe Ping	14.14	17.11.2007	
415m	Roseville Fergie	25.06	18.08.1987	
	Close Enough	25.03	19.06.1990	
	Roslo Speedy	24.99	09.07.1994	
	Kilmacsimon Wave	24.88	14.09.1995	
430m	Thank You Madam	25.71	20.08.2005	
	Milldean Flash	25.70	16.08.2008	
435m	Glover Hill Boy	25.97	01.08.1996	
	Union Decree	25.71	19.11.1998	
475m	Blissful Hero	28.72	1978+	
	Deel Joker	28.54	18.07.1981	
	Foretop	28.45	09.07.1988	
	Connells Cross	28.55	09.07.1994	
	Star of Tyrone	28.49	19.03.1995	
	Westmead Chick	28.49	11.06.1995	
	Pennys Worth	28.42	19.02.2005	Arc second round
	Jazz Hurricane	28.42	20.01.2007	
	Barnfield On Air	28.15	04.09.2007	
	640m	Paradise Spectre	39.50	10.1977+
Ballyregan Bob		39.40	28.05.1985	Test heats
Westmead Call		39.30	06.08.1987	
Waltham Abbey		39.18	03.08.1989	
Silver Glow		39.41	31.05.1994	
Spring Rose		39.05	05.10.1996	Grand Prix Final
Palace Issue		39.00	23.11.1999	
Never Can Tell		39.47	30.04.2005	
Star of Dromin		39.43	16.06.2005	
Star of Dromin		39.24	09.07.2005	
Fear Robben		39.21	16.09.2006	
Spiridon Louis		39.19	07.08.2008	
Butterbridge Ali		39.16	16.08.2008	
820m	Sail On Valerie	51.24	1989+	
	Clonbrin Basket	51.21	19.07.1990	
	Smart Decision	51.59	09.07.1994	
	Long Island Jim	51.50	02.11.1995	
835m	Star of Dromin	52.65	20.08.2005	
	Star of Dromin	52.46	06.04.2006	
	Bubbly Kate	52.19	04.09.2007	
840m	Redwood Sara	52.12	07.08.1997	
880m	Yankees Shadow	55.99	11.10.1986	
	Lilac Wonder	55.62	01.08.1991	
	Clonbrin Basket	55.30	12.10.1991	
	Decoy Lnyx	55.65	08.10.1994	
	Star of Dromin	55.78	15.10.2005	
	Ebony Ocean	55.53	04.09.2007	
	1045m	Silver Mask	67.37	09.06.1987
Wheres Dunait		68.61	05.30.1994	
Smart Decision		68.00	12.08.1995	
Handy Score		67.90	19.11.1998	
Betathan Pebbles		67.50	15.10.2005	

475mH	Thanet Queen	28.89	30.07.1981	
	Never A Smile	29.79	23.02.1991	
	Herbie Lambug	29.70	13.04.1991	
	Unbelievable	29.37	17.04.1991	
	Deerpark Jim	29.12	13.07.1991	
	Heavenly Dream	28.96	19.05.1994	
	Glown Fox	28.92	06.06.1997	
	Blue Meadow Lad	28.75	30.05.2005	
640mH	Fotospur Champ	40.18	12.10.1991	
	Freewheel Kylo	40.49	08.10.1994	
	Heros Morsel	40.44	08.03.1997	
	El Tenor	40.39	09.03.1999	
	Fallowfield	40.61	02.04.2005	
	Killeen Tom	40.31	30.04.2005	
	Sizzlers Bossman	40.27	09.06.2005	
	Sizzlers Bossman	39.78	09.07.2005	

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