

Wembley

Apart from the obvious fame and significance of Wembley Stadium not many know the curious beginnings of arguably the world's most famous stadium. A rail man called Sir Edward Watkin was keen to improve the Metropolitan railway and built the new Wembley Park station that served his amusement park in 1894. The construction of Watkin's tower was also started which was intended to be taller than the Eiffel Tower. Problems followed after the bottom 47 metres section had been finished which would eventually result in the liquidation of the company building it and then its destruction by dynamite in 1907. Wembley Park remained a popular area and after the First World War the site was chosen for the British Empire Exhibition of 1924.

Work began on the British Empire Exhibition Stadium on top of the Watkin's Tower foundations and the stadium was first opened to the public on 28 April 1923 when it hosted the FA Cup final between Bolton Wanderers and West Ham United. It had been built at the cost of £750,000 by Sir Robert McAlpine and designed by John Simpson, Maxwell Ayrton and Owen Williams with the plan to demolish it after the exhibition.

As everyone knows the stadium was not demolished and this was because a man called Arthur Elvin stepped in and saved it despite the stadium being in liquidation. Elvin had originally won the contract to demolish the site for new owner James White but offered to purchase the stadium and put down a deposit. Following White's death the stadium was in the hands of the receivers who then sold it to Elvin who was instrumental in then setting up a new company that purchased the assets whilst he became the Managing Director.

It was greyhound racing that saved this iconic venue bringing in much needed revenue. The only existing income was the FA Cup final which failed to cover any significant percentage of the running costs. On a very cold night the greyhounds arrived on 10th December 1927. 70,000 people witnessed the first ever winner called Spin claim the Empire Stakes over 525 yards. The Director of Racing and Racing Manager was Captain Arthur Brice, he was well known as the judge for the Waterloo Cup, the Blue Riband of coursing.

The following year in 1928 Wembley introduced the St Leger race which would be one of the most prominent competitions in the calendar ranking only lower than the Derby itself. The first ever running in 1928 was won by local hound Burletta trained by Alf Mulliner.

As a greyhound track Wembley would be unrivalled in major open race success becoming totally dominant over decades of racing. Despite this it strangely never became the home of greyhound racing; this honour went to White City and after that closed it switched to Walthamstow. However the trainers and owners loved the track which answers the question as to why they had so much success.

Even in those early days of greyhound racing, Wembley events attracted all of the greatest hounds, following on from the St Leger was the Coronation Stakes in 1928 for bitches only, the Trafalgar Cup which started in 1929 and was as significant an event for puppies as the Puppy Derby. The Wembley Gold Cup was set up in 1929, the Wembley Spring Cup in 1930 and the Wembley Summer Cup in 1937. The first major Wembley victories came courtesy of 1928 winners Burletta and the Grand National champion Cormorant trained by Sidney Probert.

Mick the Miller won the 1930 Wembley Spring Stakes defeating a greyhound called Swashbuckler by a short head, Swashbuckler had won by 20 lengths in a race on opening night and held five track records over all distances in 1928-1929. Mick successfully defended his title in 1931 culminating in a track record performance in the final and then claimed the St Leger later in the year. Future Cutlet arrived on the track in 1931; he had come over from Ireland after being purchased for £600 by W.A. Evershed to race at Wembley Stadium. The Probert trained brindle dog would bring Wembley their first taste of success regarding the lifting the Derby trophy which would become common place in the future for Wembley.

Arthur Doc Callanan joined the Wembley training ranks in 1931 joining a select band of trainers in Alf Mulliner, Thomas Cudmore, Bob Burls, Sidney Probert and Jim Syder Sr.

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In 1933 there was a little story involving Wembley that showed how important routine was for some of the racing greyhounds. Abbig was a consistent loser at Wembley until Doc Callanan whilst played his gramophone records near the kennels one day noticed Abbig liked them. He won that night so the Callanan ensured the routine stayed. Abbig won seventeen times that year becoming the 1933 leading greyhound at Wembley. The story had a sad ending when a kennel lad tripped, dropped and broke all the records and Abbig never won again.

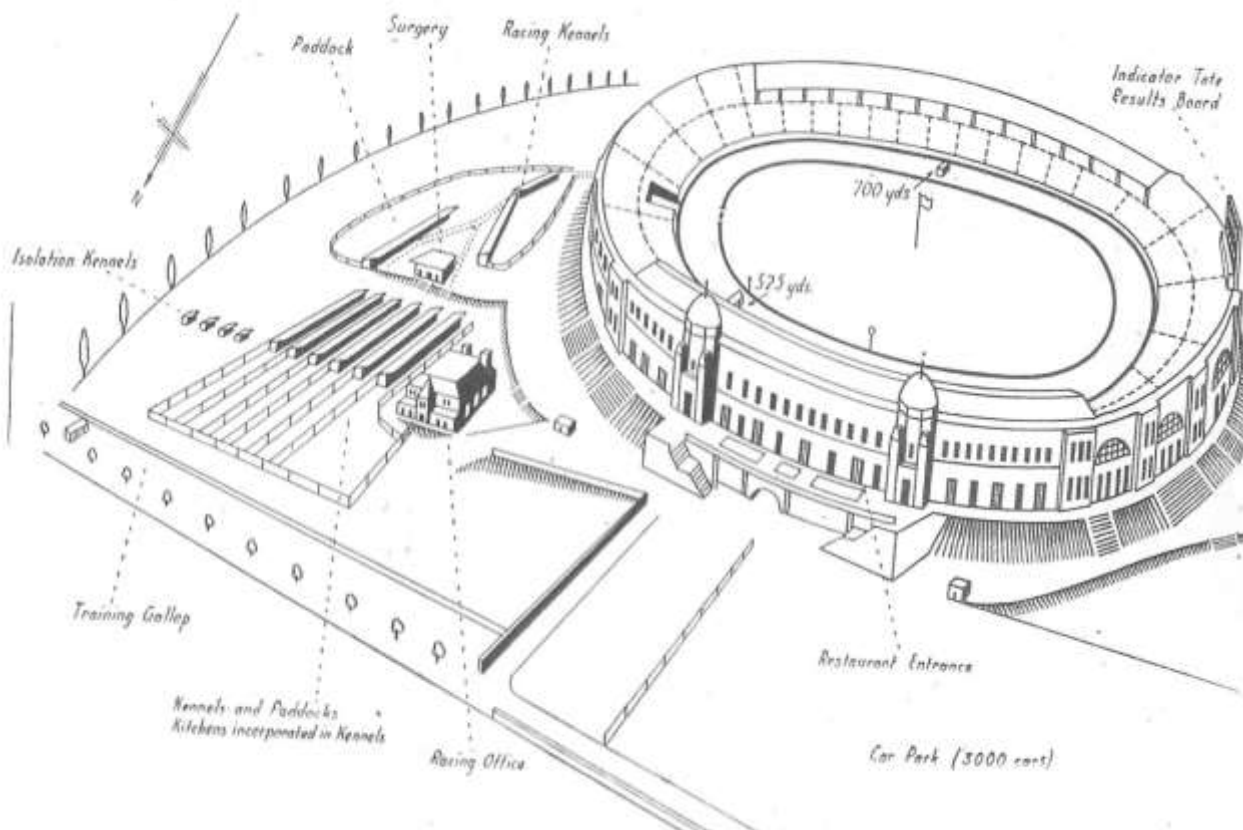
In 1934 Arthur J Elvin owner of Wembley built the Empire Pool (Wembley Arena) to introduce ice hockey, ice shows, tennis and boxing. The main stadium was known as the Empire Stadium by now.

As the Second World War fast approached London trainers had begun to monopolise the sports main races and some names were building a fine reputation as trainers. Wembley in particular had experienced great rewards from the kennels of Jim Syder Sr. and were about to embark on a remarkable run following the appointments of two trainers. Harry 'Jack' Harvey arrived in 1936 and Leslie Reynolds three years later in 1939. To list the significant winners that they trained would fill the next dozen pages so these winners can be found amongst the definitive lists of major race winners on the website. It is sufficient to say that the pair was the most successful in the industry for nearly thirty years.

During the war Ballynennan Moon twice won the Wembley Summer Cup and he was followed by another superstar Ballyhennessy Seal who also secured two major Wembley events. In 1946 Bah's Choice an English-bred greyhound trained by Bob Burls clocked 29.04sec to set a new 525yds world and track record at Wembley and made headlines in the sporting press. In the race he defeated Magic Bohemian by an impressive six lengths.

Wembley under the leadership of Arthur Elvin announced gigantic profits in 1947 of £610,000 of which £343,000 was taken by the government in tax.

The track characteristics were described as a fast galloping track 463 yards in circumference with long straights and easy turns, it was also noted that the track was always beautifully kept and well turfed but the course was too rigorous for the small dog. An Inside MacWhirter Trackless hare was used and the Kennel facilities were unrivalled as show below.



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During 1952 the track underwent changes, the circumference was shortened to 435 metres and the Inside MacWhirter Trackless was replaced by an Outside McKee Scott hare. Three of the most well-known owners the sport has seen all ran their greyhounds at Wembley. The trio of George Flintham, Noel Purvis and Norman Dupont owned a host of stars throughout the years.

In 1953 30,000 people turned up at Wembley to watch the final of the St Leger with Magourna Reject, also seen by several million on television. By 1954 Wembley's domination of competitions had culminated in having five of the six finalists in the Derby final, Pauls Fun provided Reynolds with a fifth Derby success. John Jolliffe had taken over as Racing Manager in the late forties and he would bring in Jack Tetlow as his deputy a few years later.

The end of an era was signalled when in 1957 Sir Arthur Elvin MBE passed away, the Wembley supremo had turned demolition plans for the Exhibition Stadium into one of the most famous sporting stadiums in the world.

After the wonderful Derby performance in June 1958, Pigalle Wonder cruised to victory in the Pall Mall at Harringay, and then recorded 28.78sec at Wembley, this time stood for almost twenty years until the distance was changed to metres. In 1961 the Derby final had an unusual look about it and that was the absence of a Wembley hound, they had dominated the competition since 1947, the last time the final failed to feature in the decider.

Jim Syder Jr retired and then the legendary Leslie Reynolds passed away leaving a legacy of an incredible achievement of winning five Derby's. Wembley moved on by appointing Jack Kinsley and Jimmy Rimmer. Tom Johnston senior also retired in 1962 and his son Tom Johnston Jr. took over his range at West Ham before joining Wembley a few years later.

In 1966 the government struck a major blow to racing yet again after the on course betting tax was extended to all greyhound tracks. The industry decided to put up a fight and pump extra funds into prize money. Catford significantly increased the prize money for the Gold Collar and Wembley followed suit with the St Leger. 1966 was of course the World Cup winning year for the England football team and a controversial moment in greyhound racing history was made when Wembley refused to cancel the greyhound racing scheduled resulting in the Uruguay versus France match having to be played at White City.

Into 1968 and John Jolliffe Racing Manager at Wembley retired after a 37 year career that started as Dundee RM, then Aberdeen and Arms Park, Cardiff before his Wembley appointment. Also retiring was the well respected Wembley trainer Ronnie Melville replaced by the previously mentioned Tom Johnston Jr.

In 1973 the Wembley kennels were demolished to make way for another venture, this would leave some of the sport's most famous trainers without a home. The legendary Jack Harvey who had won more major races than you count, Bob Burls a trainer since the sports first days and Jack Kinsley were all forced into early retirement. Using the contract trainer system replacements included John Coleman who left Romford and Wally Ginzel. This also signalled the end for Jack Tetlow the Racing Manager who was replaced by Ron Fraser. Tetlow ended a 43 year association with the stadium.

Westpark Mustard trained by Tom Johnston Jr. embarked on her record run in 1974 providing more glory for Wembley. After sixteen successive wins she would race and win four times at Wembley to break Mick the Millers record. The crowds flocked to the Empire Stadium to watch the bitch write a piece of history.

In 1978 after a decade at Brighton, Peter Shotton took the role of head of racing at Wembley followed by his assistant Jim Cremin. The Blue Riband was introduced in 1981 which replaced the long running Spring Cup which had been one of the first major competitions in the greyhound racing calendar.

Wembley was very lucky indeed to host the only ever meeting between Ballyregan Bob and Scurlogue Champ, the invitation race was very special because Bob was attempting to equal the Westpark Mustard record and had chosen to take on the only other greyhound that was a household name. Sadly Scurlogue Champ failed to finish after pulling up lame leaving Ballyregan Bob to equal that record and annihilate the field. A future BBC TV trophy winner Glenowen Queen trailed in 11¾ behind in second place.

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The Greyhound Racing Association was taken over by Wembley plc in 1987 in a £68.5 million merger, meaning that the Wembley greyhound operation now came entirely under the GRA banner as well. This would not have a bearing on the Derby because it had already been agreed that Wimbledon would remain as host. John Rowley was the Wembley Racing Manager during this period assisted by Peter Miller. Trainers attached at this time were Ted Dickson, Pam Heasman, Adam Jackson, Wally Ginzel, John Honeysett, Tom Johnston Jr. & Hazel Walden.

By 1992 GRA parent company Wembley plc announced losses of £8m despite a £13m profit in its UK operation. Strange figures considering the boom of the late eighties, they also claimed they had spent £10 million on improvements on their six tracks (Wembley, Wimbledon, Catford, Belle Vue, Hall Green and Portsmouth) over the past five years. Naturally financial difficulties followed having to service a £130 million debt. The Wembley plc American greyhound operation saw profits fall from £5.9 to £3.3 million. The British tracks were faring better making a £2.1 million profit but that made little difference to the overall debt problems.

Mick Smith became the Racing Manager during a very difficult spell that would lead to devastating news in 1998 when the announcement was made that Wembley was going. The track survived until December with the last race being held on Friday 18th December. A twist of fate resulted in a no race on that final night after a hare failure just like 71 years previous when on the opening night in 1927 the same happened.

If you knew the true history of the great Empire stadium that included that night when England won the World Cup in 1966 you would know that none of it would have taken place but for the greyhound racing and Arthur Elvin. The Empire Stadium was demolished in 2003 and the new modern stadium replaced it. The famous Twin Towers were lost which upset many.

The new stadium cost £798 million and featured a 134 metre high arch, it has very good viewing and a partially retractable roof, easy to get into and easy to get out of which is very good bearing in mind it can cater for 90,000. However the décor is best described as concrete and the catering and retail mirrors the awful modern day large stadia model with no character whatsoever (0° 16' 46.784"W 51° 33' 19.956"N),



Charles Chandler Jr. pictured at Wembley
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Pre-Metric Selected Track Records

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes
525y	Mick The Miller	30.04	23.03.1931	Spring Cup Final
	Miss Beau	??	08.1945+	
	Bah's Choice	29.04	22.04.1946	World & National Record
	Pigalle Wonder	28.78	26.05.1958	
700y	Model Dasher	39.73	09.09.1944	National Record
	Dante II	39.72	05.1947	St Leger semi-finals
	Dante II	39.70	01.06.1947	St Leger Final
	Clonalvy Pride	39.64	06.06.1961	
	Lucky Hi There	39.28	15.06.1964	Gold Cup Final
725y	Lucky Arrow II	41.19	30.08.1965	
880y	Chieftains Envoy	51.24	08.03.1965	
	Ballyhandy Cedar		21.03.1966	
	Miss Taft	50.78	17.07.1967	
900y	Hillstride	51.93	11.05.1964	
	Poor Mick	51.84	29.07.1968	
990y	Gananocque Ranger	58.32	29.05.1939	National Record
	Canada's Glory	58.20	18.09.1948	
	The Popular Streak	57.87	18.05.1959	
	Chantilly Lace	=57.87	16.05.1960	
525yH	Dark General	30.09	20.05.1946	National Record
	Ballinatona Special	30.10	04.09.1961	
	Sherrys Prince	29.81	20.10.1969	
700yH	Saucy Lad	40.85	01.08.1960	

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Selected Post-Metric Track Records

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes
275m	Bray Vale	16.22	08.06.1979	
	Celtic Mythology	16.09	18.11.1983	
	Often Hungry	16.06	13.08.1986	
	Flashy Rocket	15.99	17.10.1988	
490m	Myroyal	29.01	03.09.1979	
	Glen Miner	28.98	05.02.1982	
	Fearless Champ	28.89	11.04.1986	
	Gino	28.82	22.04.1988	
	Yes Speedy	28.82	1989+	
	Phantom Flash	28.79	01.10.1990	
	Certain Way	28.76	14.02.1992	
	655m	Tartan Khan	39.45*	01.09.1975
Cullane Again		39.56	23.08.1982	
Track Man		39.56	24.08.1984	
Black Earl		39.73	19.05.1980	
Ballyregan Bob		39.46	23.08.1985	St Leger Second Round
Chicita Banana		39.51	05.05.1989	
Spring Rose		39.29	05.10.1996	St Leger Final
710m	Roystons Supreme	43.40	03.09.1979	
	Try Travelscene	42.90	21.05.1982	
	Ballyregan Bob	42.63	11.12.1985	John Power Showdown
845m	Dunworkin	52.59	24.11.1975	
850m	Jolly United	53.13	01.01.1980	
	Pineapple Choice	52.53	26.07.1982	
925m	My Tootsie	58.03	1987+	
490mH	Westlands Steve	29.83	09.01.1981	
6flights	Castlelyons Cash	29.70	28.04.1986	
490mH	Gizmo Pasha	30.05	1989+	
5flights	Ballinlough Hill	29.88	08.01.1992	
655mH	Trixies Snipe	41.60	02.09.1983	
	Ellas Ivy	40.99	14.08.1987	

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