

## West Ham

A sports ground was built for the workers of the custom house belonging to the Royal Victoria Dock. The custom house had been in use since 1855 and the sports ground was constructed in a rural area near Plaiston Marsh, east of Canning Town just after the turn of the century. Plans for a gigantic stadium were unveiled in the late twenties and work began on the structure where the sports ground was situated.

The stadium would be designed by Archibald Leitch, responsible for most of the major football stadia at the time including Anfield and Highbury. There was a magnificent two tier stand accommodating a remarkable 80,000 spectators with a smaller stand able to hold a further 20,000 bringing the capacity for the stadium up to 100,000.

The stadium would be called West Ham, unrelated to the football team and the track itself was the largest in Great Britain with a circumference of 562 yards and 123 yard straights. The standard trip of 550 yards was did not even require a greyhound to complete lap. The track was lit by 70 x 750 watt lamps and used a special monorail train weighing 500lbs to carry the hare. There was also a very unusual design regarding the track surface which used turf laid on wooden foundation which had been raised twelve inches above ground level which would consequently result in a very fast track. It was described as a well-sprung dance floor matted with a special fibrous substance.

Even the kennels were constructed to a grand scale with five of the six ranges of kennels (totalling over 200) within the two acres of the stadium grounds. Opening night was 4<sup>th</sup> August 1928.

The stadium management brought in a race called the Cesarewitch which gained classic status; the race started over the distance of 600 yards but would become a competition to test the super stayers of the marathon variety. The first winner in 1928 was Dicks Son from White City.

Speedway became prominent at the stadium and from 1929 the Hammers rode every season with the exception of the wartime break. A football team called the Thames Association FC actually created history by recording the lowest football league attendance of 469 on 6 December 1930. Could you imagine 469 people in a 100,000 stadium? Not surprisingly the team folded soon after. The stadium also hosted baseball (30's & 40's) and stock car racing (50's & 60's).

The main activity however remained greyhound racing and the track soon became very successful despite not quite reaching the achievements of the likes of Wembley and White City. Two trainers would be responsible for most of the early rewards, they were Ken Appleton and Stanley Biss, both whom had owned greyhounds on Wembley's opening night and subsequently taken out trainers licences at Wimbledon before joining West Ham. Biss trained the great bitch Bradshaw Fold when she finished runner up to Mick The Miller in the 1930 Greyhound Derby final. Two weeks after this final Mick The Miller was aimed at the Cesarewitch and trounced his rivals by seven lengths in his heat early in the afternoon and, on the evening of the same day, took the £200 final by four lengths from defending champion Five of Hearts.

West Ham won the Derby in 1931 with the Wally Green trained Seldom Led and one year later Future Cutlet recorded a second successive Cesarewitch victory defeating a strong field including Seldom Led and set a new world record of 33.78sec in his semi-final.

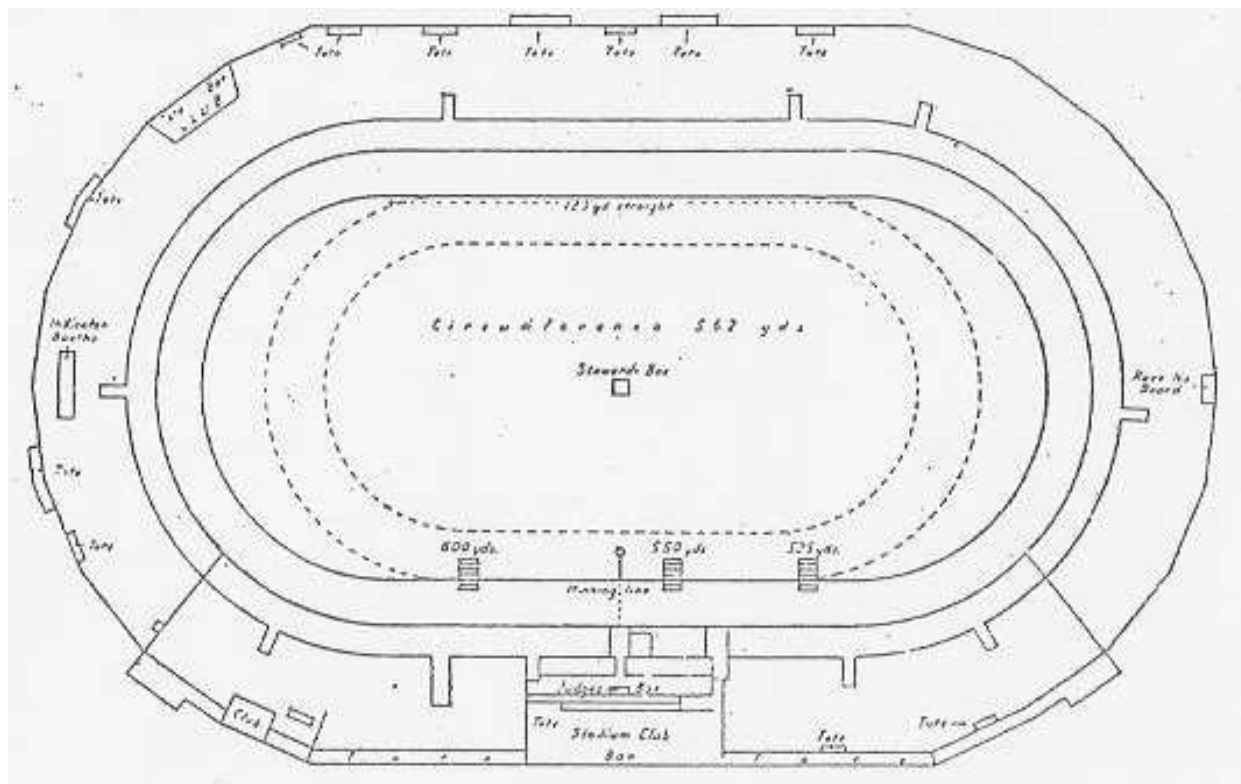
In 1936 Shove Halfpenny lit up the early part of the year producing great runs to take the West Ham Spring Cup and then stormed around the West Ham circuit during the Cesarewitch winning every round and breaking the track record to get to the final but lost to Ataxy in the decider. The same year West Ham introduced the Cambridgeshire which would stand as the tracks second major competition, the first running was won by home runner Master Hector trained by Johnny Bullock.

The first occasion of a West Ham Cesarewitch winner was in 1937 when Jesmond Cutlet handled by Dal Hawkesley claimed the race.

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The Second World War forced the racing to be suspended on more than one occasion and the Canning Town area suffered awful bombing damage due to the fact that the docks were seen as a primary target. The stadium was lucky to miss the destruction that many buildings suffered in the immediate area but business was of course affected with continual closures until 1946. In fact the West Ham operation was largely moved to Dagenham from March 1944 until 1946.

The fact that West Ham had closed during a large part of the war meant that their trainers had to find regular venues and unfortunately as a result the great Stanley Biss did not return deciding to stay at Clapton. This left Ken Appleton, Johnny Bullock and Dal Hawkesley as the main trainers leading the way for West Ham. Director of Racing was Captain W J Neilson and the Racing Manager was A W H Watson during the fabulous fifties.



**Above- The huge circuit that was West Ham.**

Ken Appleton passed away in 1960 and his West Ham kennels were taken over by his son Kenric 'Ken' Appleton Jr. In addition Tom Johnston senior retired in 1962 and his son Tom Johnston Jr. took over his range at West Ham and soon achieved great success which led to being the industry's trainer of the year in 1963.

In 1966 the GRA bought an interest in the West Ham site and two years later Stamford Bridge trainer Sid Mann switched his runners to West Ham following the closure of the track. During the same year the GRA decided to move all of the greyhounds out of the Clapton and West Ham kennels and put them in their training establishment at Hook kennels, Northaw. The Northaw kennels would now house all trainers from Harringay, White City, Clapton and West Ham which brought the estate under considerable pressure. This move looked worrying, now that the kennels had been sold some wise souls rumoured that plans were in place for Clapton and West Ham stadiums to be sold.

Dal Hawkesley retired in 1966 and as a result the track appointed his on Peter who was training in his own right at Romford. Peter would only represent West Ham for four years moving to Harringay in 1970 to replace Wilf France. Hawkesleys head kennelhand Ted Parker was promoted to trainer at West Ham who also appointed Colin West as another trainer. Self-service tote machines were also trialled by the company.

Sherrys Prince arguably the greatest hurdler to have lived was trained by West ham trainers during his first two Grand National wins in 1970 and 1971; they were John Shevlin and Colin West respectively.

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Towards the end of 1971 an announcement made by Newham Council was made that West Ham would be sold for re-development leaving uncertainty for one of the sports big tracks. It survived until May 26<sup>th</sup> 1972 which still came as a shock because many had hoped that it could somehow get a reprieve. The stadium which was capable of holding over 100,000 spectators and held the prestigious Cesarewitch was no more.

The Cesarewitch was transferred to GRA sister track Belle Vue and the Cambridgeshire was sent to White City. Trainers Colin West, Ted Parker, Sidney Mann and Kenric Appleton all joined other GRA tracks. The speedway team was evicted and the stadium closed its doors.

The stadium sold for a reputed £475,000 would be solely housing which would increase the ever growing population further east as the residential housing continued to travel east turning the area from once rural to a maze of dwellings. The council named the roads where the stadium once stood after speedway riders such as Jack Young and Bluey Wilkinson (0° 2' 6.636"E 51° 30' 52.686"N).

### Selected Track Records

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes
400y	Brilliant Bob	22.11	06.08.1934	
	Cooks Sandhills	21.91	19.09.1942	
	Wireless Time	21.91	27.12.1943	
500y	Come on Wonder	30.17	1970+	
525y	Brilliant Bob	29.61	20.10.1934	
	Selsey Cutlet	29.26	01.04.1940	
550y	Maidens Boy	31.36	27.10.1930	
	Cottage Luck	30.87	22.08.1942	
	Drumgoon Boy	30.53	1949+	
	Hash Up	30.25	29.10.1965	
	Come On Wonder	30.17	1972+	
600y	Mick The Miller	34.06	30.06.1930	National Rec/Cesarewitch first rd
	Mick The Miller	34.01	09.07.1930	National Rec / Cesarewitch semis
	Future Cutlet	33.??	07.1931	Cesarewitch Heats
	Future Cutlet	33.78	07.1932	World & National Record Cesarewitch semi-finals
	Ataxy	33.50	16.10.1935	
	Shove Halfpenny	33.??	11.1936	Cesarewitch semi-finals
	Magourna Reject	33.24	16.10.1953	Cesarewitch Final
	Gulf Of Darien	32.99	14.10.1955	Cesarewitch Final
	Faite Mal	32.96	23.09.1964	
	Cals Pick	32.72	1970+	
700y	Bradshaw Fold	40.04	31.03.1930	
	Lilacs Luck	39.88	24.07.1946	
	Don't Divulge	38.72	05.1959	
	Park Nightingale	38.96	27.08.1965	Changed to outside hare
	Westmead Villa	=38.96	1972+	
880y	Whipped Cream	51.79	31.08.1931	
	Joystick	50.01	24.07.1964	
	Spotted Nice	49.55	1970+	
1000y	Loughnagare	61.16	20.12.1930	
1112y	Lucky Fire	64.85	1972+	
550yH	Juvenile Classic	31.40	10.11.1938	
	Captain Digger	31.21	20.08.1954	
	Indoor Sport	31.26	04.10.1963	
	No Chips	31.00	1970+	
	Sherrys Prince	30.89	1972+	
600yH	The Longfellow II	34.94	30.09.1933	

+ Date when record was held, not necessarily