

Rayleigh

A small market town called Rayleigh and a small village called Weir were two areas found in the district of Thundersley which was largely rural. The many woods and commons that were widespread were subject to an event that would change the face of the area forever. That event was the building of the new road between Wanstead and Southend in the summer of 1924 that would be known as the Southend Arterial Road. Incidentally this road is claimed to be the first road in Britain to be built solely for motor vehicles.

The consequences of the new road being in situ meant that it was not long before housing, business and amenities began to appear along the route of the road and in particular in the district of Thundersley. Before the start of the Second World War, Rayleigh and Weir had both experienced an increase in growth.

Following the end of the war a new stadium was constructed south of Rayleigh on the south side of the Southend Arterial Road. The stadium built in 1948 was known as the Rayleigh Weir Stadium, this is not to be confused with the Rayleigh Greyhound Sports Stadium that existed in 1933 in O'Tooles Meadow (location believed to be by Down Hall Road).

The stadium opened to greyhound racing in March and speedway arrived on 17 July 1948, just five months later a new totalisator was brought into the track. Around the same time the management attempted to bring a football team to the stadium to play on Saturday afternoons before the dog racing.

The track had a 450 yard circumference circuit with distances of 275, 510, 725 and 960 yards but would be subject to some trials and tribulations over the subsequent years. The Director of Public Prosecutions took Francis McGreavey the builder of the stadium to court in 1949 because it was claimed that the application to construct the two grandstands had been approved in principle but later refused. However the grandstands had been erected in between which led to the prosecution. McGreavey argued that all material used was from government departments and the local authority had supported the application so he would appeal against the £2,000 fine issued. The appeal saw the fine reduced to £1,000.

Speedway also suffered during 1949 due to entertainment tax; General Manager Frank Whelan publicly slammed the authorities over the tax. Losses of £5,000 on the speedway and £6,600 on greyhound racing led to a closure for a considerable part of 1950. McGreavey with his business partner Fred Rundle filed for bankruptcy leaving the stadium without any direction. Two West Ham directors Mr & Mrs Atkinson reacted by taking up the lease afterwards.

Consistency was achieved afterwards with totalisator figures evenly matched (see figures on page 2). Racing settled into a Tuesday and Saturday night schedule, two buffet bars were available for the general public that could choose to frequent Rayleigh Stadium or the much larger Grainger Road stadium in Southend just six miles away. The circuit was all-sand by the mid-sixties and the Saturday night meeting was replaced by Friday evenings and the distances were now 290, 510, 740 & 960 yards.

The promoter was a man called Thomas Stanley and he also covered the roles of General and Racing Manager. The resident kennels were situated at the track on the south side of the stadium which backed onto woods with no dwelling in sight. The trainers attached to the track included Janet Tite, F Rayner, L Byrnes, John Edwards and Alec Taylor. There were no major open race victories of note attributed to Rayleigh trainers.

Under Stanley Rayleigh underwent a population boom in the sixties and instead of the stadium benefitting from this fact it had the reverse effect. Stanley was unwell and handed the Racing manager's reigns to Roy Vickery but by 1972 many greyhound tracks were seen as ideal spaces to be redeveloped, they were large plots in terms of acreage and planning permission seemed easy to come by. Thomas Stanley duly negotiated the sale of the stadium during 1972 leaving a death sentence over the venue. Stanley admitted that the offer for 12 acres was too good to refuse.

So it came to pass that on 8 March 1974 the last race meeting took place with the stadium being demolished and making way for a large trade & industrial park and more recently a retail park. The road that was built to run alongside the new builds was named Stadium Way and today if the stadium stood this road would run through the southerly part of it (0° 36' 20.062"E 51° 34' 28.654"N).

.....**continued**

Selected Track Records

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes
290y	Lunar Wonder	16.59	1970+	
510y	Fawn Poacher	28.70	1970+	
740y	Ewell Queen	43.00	1970+	
960y	Inexperience	57.37	1970+	