

Rochester & Chatham

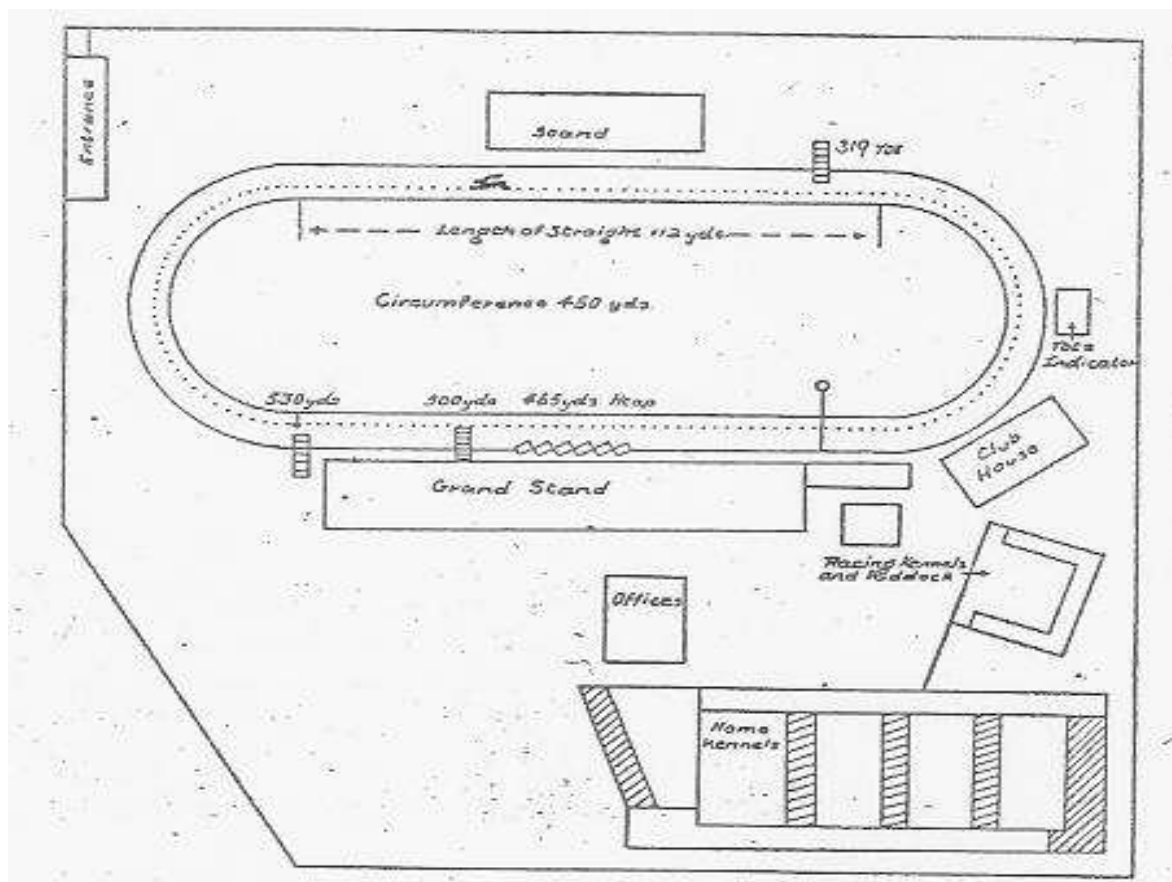
The Rochester and Chatham Sports Stadium first hosted greyhound racing on 1st June 1936. The stadium had been constructed in a rural area of Kent right next door to a large wood called Warren Wood and it was unusual during this era for greyhound tracks to be situated outside of the main cities or towns. Luckily a relatively new main road had also been built called the City Way and this led directly passed the stadium. When it opened in 1936 it became the 55th NGRC licensed track that year and reward quickly came after a greyhound called Safe Rock won the prestigious Pall Mall for new Rochester trainer Fred Wilson.

Rochester and Chatham as it was known at the time had a course circumference of 455 yards and was described as a good sized course with long straights but fairly difficult turns proving difficult for wide runners. A good run-in to the finish behind an 'Outside Sumner' hare resulted in distances of 275, 525, 480 & 700 yards.

Amenities provided by Greater London Stadium (Successors) Ltd included two grandstands (one on the home straight that included a club and another on the back straight, a snack bar on the fourth bend, a stand on the first bend and a tote indicator between the third and fourth bends.

Racing still took place during the war years in the summer daylight hours and in 1943 Ballyhennessy Seal, whelped in April 1942 by Lone Seal out of Canadian Glory arrived at Catford for his owners who each paid £50 for the puppy. Within two weeks of his arrival he won the 18th Rochester Stakes, his first race in England. In the same year Margaret Hyland became one of the few female trainers to hold a licence and duly joined the Rochester training ranks.

The stadium remained one of the smaller tracks especially for one so close to London but the business of greyhound racing was fruitful after the war with totalisator turnover peaking in 1946 of £1,282,828, one year later it was still a healthy £828,613.



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As the years progressed the landscape changed and began to see the additions of various buildings slowly ruining the surrounding rural setting. The fifties saw a racing schedule of Monday, Wednesday and Saturday evenings overseen by Racing Manager W D West before he was replaced by W R Catt.

The sixties were more eventful for the track starting with a change of name from Rochester and Chatham to just Rochester. Disaster struck at the beginning of the decade after a kennel block at the Stadium caught fire resulting in the horrific death of 24 greyhounds trained by Reg Morley. Morley and his head lad Mr Morton attempted to rescue them and both suffered injuries. Morley was brought out unconscious.

Rochester had little open race success and could not even offer the industry a significant competition living a quiet existence throughout the rest of the sixties. The three track trainers were Margaret Hyland, Frank Melville and Bill Moreton. In 1971 Melville moved to join Harringay and would experience considerable open race success. His replacement was Jimmy Keane. Des Nicholls was Racing Manager for a while before becoming Racing Manager at Romford in 1976 to be replaced by Kevin Barry a former GRA kennel manager at the Naas breeding kennels.

The arrival of John Gibbons as an attached trainer finally brought some fame with the Thanet Gold Cup being won by Lively March in 1977 followed by competition wins for Columns Corner (1978 Scottish St Leger) and Flying Pursuit (1979 Sovereign Stakes).

The final two years of life at Rochester ended in ignominy, first an attempted coup and then a shock closure. The coup in 1978 was reported by John McCririck who took the lead story in covering the Rochester greyhound coup. The track had decided to hold a dual distance event with heats over 277 metres and a final over 901 metres, unusual competitions were seen as an interesting way of presenting racing by several management teams. Two greyhounds trained by Jack Purvis both won sprint heats, Leysdown Pleasure at 33-1 and Leysdown Fun at 4-1. They had been backed off course by five South London men winning a reputed £350,000. Fun was withdrawn from the 901 metre final and Pleasure finished last, not staying the distance.

BOLA advised its members to withhold payment and the Big Four Bookmakers refused to pay out. The NGRC held an inquiry and found no evidence of rule breaking. The police submitted a report to the DPP (Director of Public Prosecutions) who also took no action. It appeared that a legitimate coup had been staged and a protest resulted where 800 betting shop offices had their locks super-glued for not paying out. It was not until 1985 that a judge agreed that bookmakers were not liable to pay out

The shock closure was just one year later in 1979, rumours had surfaced that Rochester was going to close and Racing Manager Kevin Barry had attempted to get information from one of the directors Mr Michael Rice and company secretary Mrs Webber without success. Eventually on a Friday morning he was told that the company's shares had been sold and a twelve month contract of greyhound racing had been signed. Then without warning on the Monday morning he was informed that racing had finished with immediate effect as the site had been sold to developers. This news stunned the trainers, staff and public and the legendary Con Stevens was seen in a bad light due to the fact that as company chairman he did not let anyone know what was being planned. The last meeting took place on 6th October.

Today the area once a thriving greyhound track and arguably even more important a large wood was all turned into a housing estate. On a map today the stadium would have been found on Cloisterham Road and Jiniwin Road (0° 30' 25.248"E 51° 21' 35.900"N).

Selected Track Records

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes
480y	Lazy Loafer	27.50	29.09.1945	National Record
	Riverdale Heiress	27.52	25.07.1956	
	Crocket Man	27.48	01.09.1969	
	Ramblers Jet		1981+	
525y	Captain Bones	29.97	05.09.1960	
	Russian Tip	29.72	26.05.1969	
700y	Walk On By	41.25	14.09.1964	
	Arklite	40.53	29.07.1967	
757y	Doon Monarch	44.44	18.12.1971	

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