

Willenhall

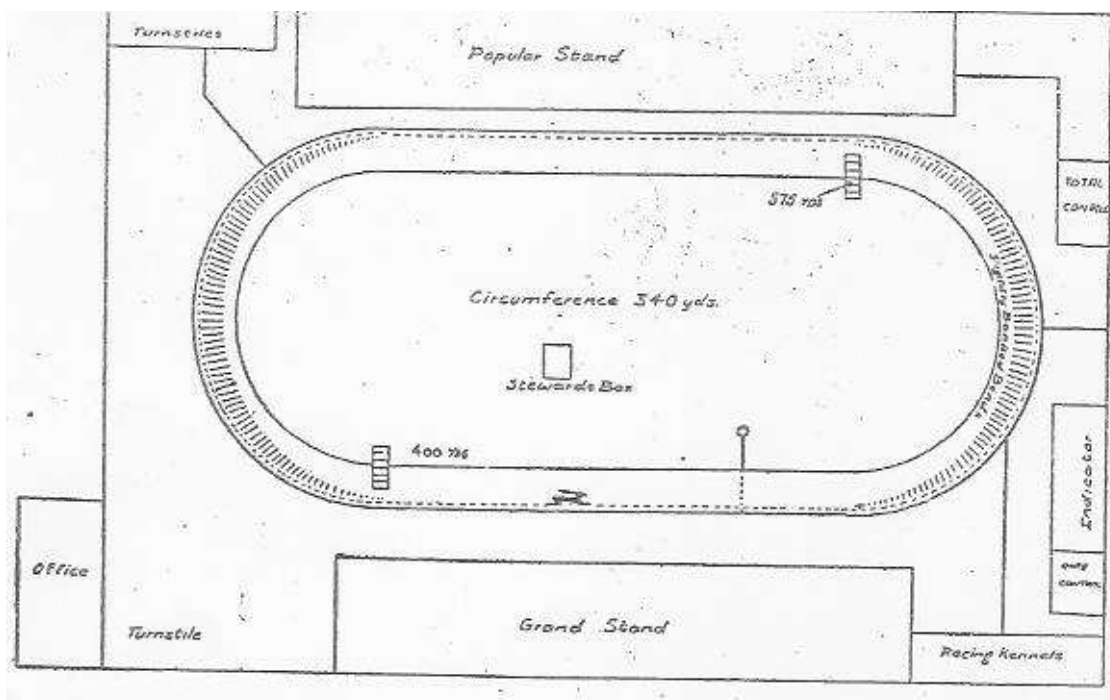
The area of Spring Bank in the West Midlands town of Willenhall was heavily populated even before the football ground was built. The stadium opened in 1905 and was located on the south side of Victoria Street and the west side of St Annes Road and north of the relatively new Temple Road and its housing. By the time Willenhall FC went into liquidation in 1930 there were plans for more housing and the Spring Bank Stadium saw extensive changes in 1932 with not only the conversion into a greyhound track taking place but housing being added along Victoria Street and a new road called Latimer Street added on the west side of the stadium.

The ground became the Willenhall Greyhound Stadium and it was now literally squeezed between housing on all four sides. The new track had been subject to protests in particular from the Willenhall Sunday School Union in March 1932 who felt that the welfare of the people of the town was at risk. Nevertheless the opening night was set for Saturday 26 March 1932 and went ahead with bookmaker-farmer Tom Webster running the venture as a flapper. The original distances of 440 & 550 yards changed to 420 & 590 yards when the lease was taken over by Truemans's Brewery.

The circuit was a tiny 340 yards in circumference so was duly described as a small sharp track most suitable for small, handy sized type of greyhound. The fact that the track was crammed in such a built up area coupled with the design of the track resulted in a reputation as a basic but cosy and friendly little stadium. Affiliation to the British Greyhound Tracks Control Society (BGTCS) was recorded before 1935.

The Midland Greyhound Racing Co Ltd stepped in to take ownership of the track choosing to be affiliated with the National Greyhound Racing Club (NGRC) from August 1935. John Wilson who was an early Racing Manager before becoming General Manager in 1938 being replaced in the graders seat by George Turnpenny. The Midland Greyhound Racing Co Ltd also owned Monmore Green which conveniently allowed the kennel strength to be housed there instead of Willenhall. The 'Outside Sumner' hare was added in 1938 with distances becoming 400 & 565 yards.

Willenhall suffered considerable disruption during the war and remained closed from 1943 to 1945 before the stadium re-opened in June 1946 before a crowd of 3,500, sixty bookmakers and the industry's peak spending period. Peter Cartwright formerly a part time steward gained a full time position with the company in 1935 and was made up to Racing Manager because Turnpenny had joined the Derby track. The company ran a policy of having joint Racing Managers due to the fact that both were expected to cover the tracks of Willenhall and Monmore, the other Racing Manager was J Bell but his responsibilities lay mainly with Monmore. John Wilson left the position of General Manager in 1949.



Cartwright introduced the Midland Two Year Old Produce Stakes and Midland Sprint Championship in the fifties before leaving to take up a position with the NGRC; Bob Harwood replaced Cartwright as Racing Manager. Following a devastating grandstand fire at sister track Monmore in 1963 the prestigious Midland Puppy Derby was held at Willenhall for the first and only time. Racing was held on Monday and Friday nights throughout the sixties at 7.30pm and despite the nature of the circuit an annual stayers event was actually inaugurated and known as the Willenhall Stayers Stakes.

Totalisators and Greyhound Holdings (TGH) purchased Willenhall and Monmore from the Midland Greyhound Racing Co Ltd in 1970 to add to existing tracks that had been bought in the sixties. THG now had Crayford and Bexleyheath, Gosforth, Leeds and Brough Park bringing the portfolio to six tracks. Four years later Ladbrokes bought out TGH and added another racetrack in the form of Perry Barr. Arthur Aldridge left the GRA to take up the position of Racing Director for Ladbrokes.

The stadium continued to trade with little incident and unfortunately little success, the resident trainers failed to pick up any success for Willenhall. However a major boost in 1978 came the way of the West Midlands track because the Racing Manager Norman Russell was able to fulfill the gap in the BAGS fixtures left by the demise of Watford.

With a lucrative BAGS contract and a strong company backing the stadium the future surely looked positive but appearances can be deceptive. Ladbrokes had plans to sell and after agreeing the sale of the site the last meeting took place on Monday 31st March 1980. Luckily many of the trainers at the time such as Paddy Hancox, Peter Billingham, John Anderson & Pat Ryan could be taken on by other Ladbrokes tracks.

A Ladbrokes spokesman attempted to justify the decision to sell the track to developers by quoting that Willenhall was not a modern greyhound stadium like Crayford and Perry Bar even stating that Perry Barr had the most modern lighting of any stadium in the country. Perry Barr was sold to developers four years later!

Incidentally Brough Park was sold in 1983, Leeds was redeveloped in 1982 and Gosforth was redeveloped in 1987. Ladbrokes had got rid of five tracks in seven years which paired with a similar GRA policy at the time could only be described as the devastating for the industry (2° 3' 3.777"W 52° 35' 26.237"N).

Selected Track Records

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes
400y	Neidins Beauty	23.40	1947+	
	Spring Shower	23.36	12.06.1948	
	Five Up	22.77	1957+	
	Sherrys Buffalo	=22.77	1970+	
565y	The Lunatic	32.87	1956	
	Dynamic	=32.87	1970+	
575y	Barnabrow	34.02	24.10.1938	
740y	Ballyherwick	44.21	1957	
	Merry Tiller	43.73	1970+	
400yH	Cranagh Tom	24.45	10.08.1938	

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