

Wimbledon

In the south of London just north of Plough Lane is the Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium, this is not to be confused with the Plough Lane football stadium west of the River Wandle that was built in 1912 and was home to Wimbledon FC until 1998 when it was closed and was eventually demolished.

The greyhound stadium was constructed east of the River Wandle on a section of land that was notoriously difficult to build on due to the fact that it was marsh land and was prone to flooding. The only buildings near this plot of land were a chamois leather mills, a large sewage works and the Plough public house. Slightly to the east was Summerstown Road which held the only housing in the immediate area.

Despite the difficult plot this did not deter South London Greyhound Racecourses Ltd who went ahead with plans to build a large stadium ready for 1928. However financial difficulties looked likely to halt the project until a consortium headed by Bill 'WJ' Cearns whose firm had been responsible for the building stepped in with a large sum of money and saved the project.

Opening night was 19th May 1928 with the first race being won by a greyhound called Ballindura trained by Harry Leader. The Burhill kennels in Walton-on-Thames would become renowned within the industry housing the hounds for Wimbledon and initially looked after by Stanley Biss, Harry Leader and Ken Appleton. Paddy McEllistram and a Norfolk farmer and breeder of greyhounds Sidney Orton would both soon join the kennels.

Wimbledon would always be at the forefront when it came to new ideas and progress, they were the first track to introduce weighing scales in 1929 at their kennels so that the racing public could be issued with the greyhounds weights before racing. The same year Harry Leader returned to Ireland and was replaced by Sidney Orton, the Puppy Derby, International, Wimbledon Gold Cup and Wimbledon Spring Stakes were all inaugurated.

In December 1929 Arundel Kempton purchased Mick The Miller for an incredible £2,000 as a present for his wife placing him with Sidney Orton. The track had already been in the centre of the Mick The Miller story when the champion took up residence at the kennels of Paddy McEllistram during the duration of the Derby. Now he returned to the Burhill kennels with Micks previous owner Father Brophy going back to Ireland considerably richer after the sale whilst Mick Horan returned an angry man after failing to be consulted about the sale.

Con Stevens was to be the first Racing Manager and he was instrumental in bringing the first classic race to Wimbledon in the form of the Laurels in 1930. This event would be targeted by all of the sports major names and was seen as one of the major targets behind the Derby.

Mick The Miller duly claimed his second Derby crown in 1930 propelling himself the sport and Wimbledon into fame and fortune whilst trainers Stanley Biss and Ken Appleton left Wimbledon for West Ham. Orton's next star was Brilliant Bob winner of two classics and a Derby finalist in 1934 but was just one of a host of stars that would originate from the Burhill kennels over the coming years. Joe Harmon arrived from White City in 1934 and instantly steered Curleys Fancy II to the Derby final, a feat that was repeated the following year but by another Wimbledon trainer Jerry Hannafin.

Paddy Fortune a new trainer at Wimbledon claimed a second Derby victory for the track in 1939 after the greyhound Highland Rum took the spoils.

During the war the stadium suffered bomb damage but the public were lucky enough to still experience some of the best greyhounds in training. However not all would be a hit as proven by the legendary Irish dog Tanist who was put with Paddy McEllistram with the connections hoping that he would win a Derby but he found it hard to cope with the sharp turns at Wimbledon and failed to win a single race by the end of June 1940. In contrast the wonderful Ballynennan Moon became a Wimbledon hound after Billy Quinn negotiated a sale to Mrs Cearns, wife of the managing director of Wimbledon Stadium and duly won everything in his path. In 1942 alone after a winter rest he took the Walthamstow Stakes and Wimbledon Spring Cup before embarking on forty wins seven second places from 48 races. It was a year's racing the like of which had never been seen before and distances were no handicap winning everything, from 400yds to 525yds. After finishing first fourteen times in succession, he seemed certain to beat Mick the Miller's 19 straight wins but, in the fifteenth race, he was beaten a neck by Laughing Lackey. Sidney Orton must have been honoured to have trained the greatest two greyhounds to grace the sport in its first twenty years.

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With most of the classic races being suspended the principal London races remaining on the open race calendar were the Cambridgeshire at West Ham, Wimbledon Spring Cup, Wimbledon Gold Cup, Wembley Gold Cup and Two Year Old Produce Stakes also at Wimbledon, the latter had been introduced in 1935. Another event the Key had started in 1936.

Remarkably the next greyhound to light up the sport would be yet another Wimbledon runner, this time it was a new puppy called Ballyhennessy Seal who first came to the scene in 1943 as a Catford hound. Towards the end of 1943 Con Stevens, came up with a special invitation race for puppy champions. The invitees included Puppy derby winner Allardstown Playboy; Dark Tiger, the Trafalgar Cup winner; Erlegh Hero, winner of the British Produce Stakes, Model Dasher, the Midland Puppy Derby winner, and Fawn Cherry, winner of the Irish Puppy Derby and Ballyhennessy Seal. 'The Seal' bolted out the traps and led all the way to win by one and a half lengths in 28.99sec.

In 1944 Ballyhennessy Seal moved from his Catford base to Wimbledon and placed in the care of Stan Martin. Martin had joined the Wimbledon training ranks following the death of Joe Harmon in 1942. Martin guided Ballyhennessy Seal to Derby success number three for Wimbledon in 1945.

After the war because business was so good the Wimbledon management was able to construct a new grandstand in place of the war damaged section of the stadium. They also introduced new perforated tote tickets following continual losses on forged tote tickets every Saturday to the tune of £1,000.

In 1949 the Wimbledon Two Year Old Produce Stakes got underway with the 36 runner event rewarding the winner with a first prize of £900, a remarkable prize at the time which was won by on June 22nd by Huntlawrigg trained by Jerry Hannafin. Ballymac Ball was the next to step up and win the Derby for Wimbledon, the brindle dog claimed the 1950 event for Stan Martin a year after setting Wimbledon alight with his Laurels performance. Something new to greyhound racing in 1950 was the Instaprint photo timer that was tested at Wimbledon and given the seal of approval to use throughout Britain and weighing scales became mandatory at all tracks.

Con Stevens continued to remain at the helm throughout the fifties overseeing the success of the track, a fifth Derby title came the way of the track in 1957 after Dennis Hannafin brother of Jerry sealed the competition win with Ford Spartan. However the following year was a sad one following the news that Paddy Fortune had passed away, his kennels would be taken over by George Waterman. Within a few months the great Sidney Orton retired and his son Clare Orton took up his position at Wimbledon. Clare had been a trainer in his own right for nearly ten years. Another trainer to join the ranks in the early sixties was Phil Rees Sr. following the retirement of Dennis Hannafin.

After a relatively quiet period for Wimbledon they decided to rebrand the 'The Greyhound Express Merit Puppy Championship' in 1963 with more prize money, it would be called the 'Juvenile'. The event had started in 1957. George Waterman started the early part of 1964 in impressive style winning the Gold Collar with Mighty Wind. Other success came his way after claiming the Pall Mall, Cloth of Gold, Coronation Cup and Springbok but then it came as a major shock to everyone when he passed away. Wimbledon would appoint Nora Gleeson to fill the gap left at the Burhill kennels range. The successful three times Derby winning trainer Paddy McEvoy joined the track in the late sixties.

Towards the end of 1969 the possibility of the stadium being redeveloped reared its ugly head only to be pushed back down again when the GRA bought a major part of Wimbledon after a prolonged battle foiling any other takeover bids. Unfortunately it must not have been a comfort to anyone at the time because the GRA Property Trust was buying and selling stadiums at a faster pace than Mick the Miller.

Early worries settled down following investment from the GRA including the prestigious Laurels carrying a whopping £2,000 prize in 1970. Just one year later this was increased to a staggering £5,000. In 1972 the GRA fast losing its status as greyhound racings most respected company due to the fact that they were actively buying tracks to sell for development sealed the deal that brought Wimbledon fully under the GRA banner.

Two famous Wimbledon trainers retired in 1974, Paddy McEllistrim and Stan Martin both chose to call it a day; they were replaced by Paddy's daughter Norah and Sam Sykes a former head lad to Clare Orton. Con Stevens resigned from the board of directors at Wimbledon bringing to an end his 46 years of association with the track.

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Wimbledon as ever was on the forefront of introducing new technology and systems, this time in 1976 it was sectional timing and they were one of the first tracks to widely use the system of grading in classes. In the same year Mutts Silver won the Derby when trained by Phil Rees Sr. In 1978 Rees Sr. retired handing the kennels to Philip Rees Jr.

The sport still wept for the demise of White City with many still shaken by the catastrophe that had befallen the sport. Attention had turned towards the Derby with a surge of support asking for Wembley to be given the premier race. Wembley no doubt would jump at the chance and of course had the facilities and famous name to host the sports showpiece. Everybody could talk and suggest all they liked but it was all inconsequential because GRA would laugh at any suggestions that their competition would be given to a non GRA track. Harringay was ruled out, there were worrying and continual rumours that the old stadium could be sold next due to the fact that the site was valued at £1 million per acre. Wimbledon was therefore the choice and they would host the big one as well as getting the Springbok. Bob Rowe the Chief Racing Manager for the GRA was also the Racing Manager at Wimbledon when the track was handed the Greyhound Derby in 1985 following the closure of White City. Tom Foster and David Kinchett would join Wimbledon from White City.



**Leading bookmaker Tony Morris on the rails.
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The first Derby at Wimbledon was held over a new distance of 480 metres and ended with a seventh success for the track, Pagan Swallow surprised many because he had principally ran in graded races. However it was a moment of history as the Rees family became the second father and son to each win the Derby. The supporting card helped make the night memorable as Ballyregan Bob and Scurlogue Champ strolled to twelve and ten length victories respectively. Many may have thought that Wimbledon would scoop up most Derby competitions in the future but it was not to be.

Arthur Hitch joined the team of trainers in 1987 when Slough closed and then following the closure of Harringay the prestigious Oaks for bitches was switched to Wimbledon.

Three years later in 1990 a greyhound called Druids Johnno was given to H.R.H Prince Edward, the half share of the black dog had been given to the Prince by Patsy Byrne during a charity meeting at Canterbury. The scene was set for a royal win and the press of course seemed to believe it was a formality. As it turned out there was a competitive competition in store and the fairy-tale win for Druids Johnno did not materialise. Byrne would join Wimbledon as a trainer in 1991 and sponsor the long running International in the process. This appointment brought about the last (at present) Derby triumph for the track. Ballinderry Ash took the 1991 version bringing the total to eight just one behind Wembley. To this day they are still one behind.



Bob Rowe (centre), Alan Fearn (NGRC left) and Fred Underhill (NGRC) conduct the Derby Draw
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In 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 claimed to have spent £10 million improvements on their six tracks (Wembley, Wimbledon, Catford, Belle Vue, Hall Green and Portsmouth) over the past five years. One year Simon Harris became Racing Manager arriving from Hall Green, Bob Rowe remained based at Wimbledon in his role of Chief Racing Manager of the GRA.

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In 1996 the Intertrack betting service was introduced for the first time enabling race-goers at other tracks around the country to view the racing and place bets direct into the Wimbledon tote. In 1998 the Laurels switched to Belle Vue, the once great race was now a shadow of its origins. Sky gave the industry a boost in 1999 as they increased their TV coverage to show major events on Tuesday nights starting with Wimbledon including the Springbok final. The GRA switched the Grand National to Wimbledon from Hall Green meaning that the racing calendars three major hurdle events would now all be held at Wimbledon.

The mighty Rapid Ranger completed two Derby successes in 2001 emulating Mick The Miller and Patricias Hope before both Seamus Cahill and Bernie Doyle joined Wimbledon from Catford and Reading respectively in 2002. Catford closed in 2003 resulting in three new trainers, John Simpson, Tony Taylor and John Walsh. Luckily Catford Racing Manager Derek Hope had a job to go to at Wimbledon because Simon Harris had left for Coventry.

In 2003 Wimbledon underwent £70,000 track improvements following criticism the previous year when Allen Gift had won the Derby, consequently the 680m trip changes to 688m and the 868m changed to 872m. The following year Tommy Foster announced his retirement from Wimbledon.

Sadly by 2006 and despite the closures of Wembley and White City the stadium was losing its status as a major track in terms of prize money, attendances and many other things. Tracks such as Romford, Monmore and Hove were now much more enticing propositions than the once great stadium. The New Year brought the loss of Seamus Cahill and Paul Garland as both moved to Walthamstow. In the summer another body blow was struck as Ray Peacock and John Walsh both left for Romford and Harlow respectively. Wimbledon had lost four trainers in one year so planned to take on Jason Foster from Oxford and Paul Donovan would join from Reading towards the end of the year.

Luckily everyone's attention had been drawn towards the one and only Westmead Hawk, the great champion won the 2005 & 2006 Greyhound Derby writing his place in history

2007 was a strange year; it started with a massive blow amongst the trainer ranks at Wimbledon when trainer Ray Peacock died in unusual circumstances after crashing in his car and then apparently falling from a bridge. Soon after Wimbledon Racing Manager Derek Hope left to join William Hill and was replaced by Gary Matthews. In 2008 Richard Rees, son of Philip Rees Jr became a third generation trainer at Wimbledon; Philip Rees Jr. retired due to ill health followed by Tony Morris who stood for the last time at Wimbledon. The best know track bookmaker in the industry had been a bookmaker since the age of 14 after following his father at Crayford. Illness had brought the decision on to call it a day. Sadly Rees Jr. would pass away in 2010.

In 2010 Wimbledon underwent major changes in time for the Derby, the grandstand was switched to the far side of the stadium and the physical make-up of the track altered meaning new track records would be set. It was a shame because it would have been interesting to see when Greenane Squires record would have been broken.

During 2012 the GRA came to the brink of disaster, it was even worse than the scenario way back in 1976 when they needed a scheme of arrangement to survive. The company owned by Risk Capital had a bank debt of £49m, the amount that Risk borrowed from the bank IBRC (Irish Bank Resolution Corporation) to buy GRA. All of the on-going profits made at the five tracks went to service the interest on the debt only. It then emerged that a partner in the original GRA takeover with Risk was a company called Galliard Homes. This came to light after plans were drawn up by them to build houses on Wimbledon and Oxford to reduce the debt. Paschal Taggart owner of Shelbourne Park also released plans to buy Wimbledon and make it a super stadium; the ambitious plans totalled a £20 million investment. This was followed by GRA supporting plans to let AFC Wimbledon rebuild a football stadium with housing in place of the greyhound track. The demise of the once great company that introduced racing to Britain seemed nearer. The classic races held by the GRA continued to slide down the prize money list and they even released the Grand National out of their control allowing Sittingbourne to have it, the stadium which bizarrely enough was controlled by Roger Cearns grandson of WJ Cearns the founder of Wimbledon. This probably led to Norah McEllistrim leaving for Hove; the McEllistrim family had ties with the track dating back to 1929. Tony Taylor then joined Sittingbourne, Bob Rowe took switched to Belle Vue as the Racing Manager and the Oaks would soon be on the way to the Manchester track as well highlighting the desperate state of the GRA flagship.

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With the future of the stadium still undecided a boost was received at the very end of 2014 because the track secured a BAGS contract from 2015 raising hopes for a long term future. The arrival of the BAGS racing caused problems with the runner strength, with extra greyhounds needed the track was not helped by the loss of George Andreas and Tony Collett as they both returned to Sittingbourne to train. Away from the problems at least the 2015 William Hill Derby brought a boost by offering the richest prize ever seen in Britain and Ireland; the £250,000 on offer went to Rio Quattro.

During December 2015 the Merton council passed the AFC Wimbledon plans for a new football stadium meaning that help was now needed from London mayor Boris Johnson. Clive Feltham revealed that the lease would end in July after just two years which pushed the death of greyhound racing in London ever nearer. Many were now praying for a miracle.

Selected Track Records (Pre-Metric)

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes
275y	Lone Keel	15.24	18.05.1938	
440y	Wily Captain	24.95	29.07.1936	
	Chi Chi's Joker	24.82	01.05.1968	
	Beef Cutlet	28.47	02.09.1932	Laurels final
500y	Ballyhennessy Sandhills	28.08	07.1938	National record
	Ballymac Ball	28.03	08.1949	Laurels heats
	Ballymac Ball	27.99	08.1949	Laurels semi-finals
	Ford Spartan	27.89	23.08.1957	Laurels final
	Mile Bush Pride	??	04.08.1959	
	Clonalvy Pride	=27.66	18.08.1961	Laurels final
	Venture Again	27.61	04.08.1965	
	Shady Parachute	27.57	13.09.1968	
	Moordyke Spot	27.57	29.07.1970	
550y	Mick The Miller	31.72	31.08.1929	Match v Back Isle
700y	Grosvenor Edwin	40.58	1950+	
	Hurry On Cleo	39.58	18.07.1958	
	Dolores Rocket	39.58	26.07.1971	
725y	Robeen Printer	41.51	28.04.1945	
880y	Boothroyden Larry	51.18	26.08.1964	
	Greenville Fauna	51.04	1970+	
	Following Day	50.70	16.08.1970	
940y	Meteoric	54.13	26.08.1964	
1140y	Curraheen Bride	67.86	16.08.1963	
	Bushane Star	66.86	08.08.1969	
440yH	Juvenile Classic	31.40	01.07.1938	
500yH	Sprightly Peter	28.88	1950+	
	Dunmore Viking	??	26.08.1959	
	Change That	??	13.05.1960	
	Ballinatona Special	28.37	12.05.1961	
700yH	Markhams Brandy	41.84	1950+	
	January Prince	41.36	25.07.1961	
	Prince Cheetah	41.36	18.08.1961	
	Quadrant King	??	23.08.1961	

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

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Selected Track Records (Post-Metric)

Distance	Name	Time	Date	Notes	
252m	Travara Rock	15.15	12.12.1980		
	Dysert Moth	15.08	10.12.1982		
	Barbaran	15.18	05.05.1984		
	Slipaway Jaydee	14.95	16.03.1994		
256m	Setemup Joe	15.24	11.11.2003		
	Drominboy Jet	15.24*	29.10.2005	St Leger heats *Split	
	Thai Girl	15.23	18.03.2008		
	Fifis Rocket	15.14	02.03.2010		
272m	Wheres The Limo	16.23	11.05.1991		
	Dynamic Fair	16.11	28.06.1997		
273m	Officer Donagh	16.21	18.05.2010		
	Jimmy Lollie	15.95	29.05.2010		
	Jimmy Lollie	15.85	29.06.2010		
	Skate On	15.82	31.05.2014		
276m	Jans Rainbow	16.61	21.12.2006		
	Lunar Vacation	16.26	07.07.2007		
412m	Barbaran	24.96	30.05.1985		
	Ballinahow Blue	24.89	27.12.1984		
	Mr Plum	24.89	23.06.1987		
	Spiral Manor	24.89	25.06.1987		
460m	Flying Pursuit	27.60	12.10.1979	Puppy Derby heats	
	Flying Pursuit	27.58	02.05.1980	Laurels heats	
	Ramblers Jet	27.52	27.05.1980		
	Duke of Hazard	27.??	05.1982	Laurels heats	
	Kybo	27.48	08.12.1984		
	Fearless Action	27.47	1986+		
	Sams Bridge	27.44	12.03.1988		
	Double Bid	27.33	25.06.1988		
	Droopys Shearer	27.32	17.06.2003		
	Zigzag Dutchy	27.32	02.07.2005		
	Lenson Bolt	27.30	27.10.2009		
	Yahoo Jamie	27.29	15.12.2009		
	Ardbeg Kate	27.29	15.12.2009		
480m	Lloydsboro Flash	28.71	21.05.1985	Derby heats	
	Fearless Champ	28.66	21.05.1985	Derby heats	
	Morans Beef	28.60	25.05.1985	Derby heats	
	Fearless Action	28.51	29.05.1986	Derby heats	
	Lodge Prince	28.34	29.05.1986	Derby heats	
	Greenane Squire	28.21	12.07.1994		
	Eye Eye Pickle	28.48	29.04.2010	*New track – Derby heats	
480m*	Aero Ardiles	28.38	29.04.2010	Derby heats	
	Bandicoot Tipoki	28.26	29.04.2010	Derby heats	
	Toomaline Jack	28.25	15.05.2010	Derby heats	
	Droopys Harvey	28.22	27.05.2011		
	Razldazl Jayfkay	28.22	28.05.2011	Derby third round	
	Taylors Sky	28.21	31.05.2011	Derby quarter-finals	
	Taylors Sky	28.21	04.06.2011	Derby semi-finals	
	Taylors Sky	28.17	11.06.2011	Derby final	
	Razldazl Jayfkay	28.08	05.05.2012	Derby heats	
	Fiery Splendour	28.06	03.05.2014	Derby heats	
	Eden The Kid	27.95	30.05.2015	Derby heats	
	660m	Jingling Star	40.61	27.07.1980	
		Astrosyn Doll	40.48	30.09.1983	
Ballyregan Bob		40.35	23.11.1985		
Ballyregan Bob		40.15	19.04.1986		

	First Defence	40.12	08.03.1994	
668m	Baran Zulu	40.98	29.08.2003	
	Special Trick	40.82	13.03.2004	WJ Cearns Memorial
	Black Pear	40.51	20.07.2004	
	Black Pear	40.52	02.07.2005	
	Dazzle Special	40.45	15.12.2009	
680m	Geinis Champion	41.73	24.06.1995	
687m	Corrig Vieri	42.09	29.06.2010	
	Corrig Vieri	41.97	03.08.2010	
	Droopys Bradley	41.89	19.10.2010	St Leger semi-finals
	Droopys Bradley	41.48	26.10.2010	St Leger final
	Farloe Tango	41.40	12.11.2013	St Leger final
	Romantic Rambo	41.24	31.05.2014	
	Racenight Jenny	41.19	01.11.2014	
	Millwards Teddy	41.13	27.06.2015	Derby final night
688m	Shelbourne Star	41.83	05.06.2004	
	Caloona Striker	41.77	25.06.2006	
820m	Star Decision	51.48	28.07.1984	
	Role of Fame	51.26	27.06.1987	
	Exile Energy	51.20	1989+	
	Sail On Valerie	51.16	30.12.1989	
	Chestnut Beauty	51.16	21.04.1993	
868m	Princess Glin	54.76	14.09.1980	
	Sandy Lane	54.11	06.05.1983	
872m	Ericas Equity	55.47	28.06.2003	
	Ericas Equity	54.30	09.09.2003	
	Greenacre Lin	54.26	02.05.2005	
	Spiridon Louis	54.22	07.06.2007	
892m	Zenas Angel	56.19	14.11.2009	
894m	Taylor's Riviera	55.53	29.06.2010	
1068m	Lynns Pride	70.72	28.03.1980	
	Shropshire Lass	68.55	08.02.1990	
1080m	Somer Lovin	69.64	07.07.2007	
412mH	Outcast Jet	26.19	1987+	
	Exchange Beamish	25.85	14.04.1984	
	Pantile	25.38	05.08.1989	
460mH	Dine Out	28.29	12.12.1980	
	Lilabeth	28.15	22.10.1985	
	Emerald Trail	28.13	1989+	
	Unbelievable	28.00	22.06.1991	Champion Hurdle Final
	Arfur Daley	27.80	20.03.1993	Springbok final
480mH	Men Of Hope	29.18	29.05.2010	Champion Hurdle Final
	Toomaline Jack	28.96	18.06.2010	Grand National heats
660mH	Laurdella Wizard	42.33	01.09.1980	
	Longcross Bruce	41.52	06.08.1982	
	Gold Splash	41.15	02.08.1994	
668mH	Sizzlers Bossman	41.68	02.07.2005	

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