



## The Last Days of London's Dog-Racing Scene

Mark Wilding, Photos: Jake Lewis

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The closure of last dog-track in London could be the death of the sport in the capital.



On a Saturday evening in September, no one is paying much attention to the two wooden boards mounted next to the bar at Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium. Nevertheless, the 86 names listed here provide an insight into English dog racing's long and illustrious history. The winners date back to 1927, when Entry Badge won the inaugural Greyhound Derby over 500m in a time of 29.01 seconds. The race was held at White City for 58 years, until the stadium was sold and the derby moved to Wimbledon dog track on Plough Lane. The annual highlight of the dog racing calendar has been held at Wimbledon ever since.

It now looks all but certain that the derby will be seeking another new home. AFC Wimbledon has submitted plans to demolish the dog track to make way for a 20,000-seat football stadium and more than 600 homes. Last month, London mayor Sadiq Khan overturned a decision by his predecessor Boris Johnson to call-in the planning application for his own consideration and instead said it will be left to Merton Council to decide. Having already granted permission last December, the council will formally approve the plans again on 15th September. If the plans go ahead, and the derby needs a new home, it won't find one with a London postcode. Greyhound tracks in the capital have been steadily closing since the 1960s. Wimbledon is the only one left.





At the stadium, there is a mixture of sadness and resignation about the dog track's fate. George Reed has been a bookmaker for 45 years, and runs one of three remaining pitches on the outside terraces. Every Saturday, he and his brother Ron handle a stream of bets while adjusting the odds they still write up by hand. "Let's face it, we're in a dying game," he says. The next pitch along has been run by John Heywood for 35 years. During that time, he's seen numerous stadiums close down. "They have all gone so a handful of people can make a lot of money," he says. "If this track is closed there will never ever be greyhound racing in London again because the land is too valuable."



There is also anger, much of it directed at Khan. When Johnson called in the planning application, it offered a sliver of hope that the football club's proposals would be rejected. Khan's decision to hand power back to Merton Council took the racing community by surprise, not least because he had previously **raised concerns** about AFC Wimbledon's plans during his time as MP for nearby Tooting. It also seemed to contradict a key manifesto pledge to set a 50 percent target for affordable housing in all new developments. Of 602 homes proposed on the stadium site, just 9.6 percent will be affordable. "I've emailed the mayor," says Keith Hardiman, a trainer who's been watching the dogs at Wimbledon for 63 years. "I told him what I think: Your new name is Billy Liar."





Over the years, there have been more than 30 greyhound stadiums operating in London. Since the 1960s, their numbers have been in gradual decline. The legalisation of betting shops in 1961 played a significant part in driving this trend. But the Greyhound Board of Great Britain says races still attracts around two million spectators every year, making the sport roughly equivalent in popularity to rugby league. The board points to another major factor behind tracks closing: rising land values. Wandsworth Stadium closed in 1966 to make way for a shopping centre. Stamford Bridge was lost to football in 1968. White City closed in 1984 to be replaced by the BBC TV Centre. Several stadiums sites have been used for housing.

It is ironic that if Wimbledon greyhound track should close, it will do so to make way for AFC Wimbledon – a club born out of a similar tale of sporting misfortune. In 1991, the Taylor Report meant that one-time FA Cup winning Wimbledon FC was forced to leave its stadium on Plough Lane. The Premier League club's ground-share with Crystal Palace was meant to be temporary, but the club never returned and in 2003 moved to Milton Keynes and became the MK Dons, or "the Franchise" as it is known by Wimbledon fans. In the wake of this unpopular decision, AFC Wimbledon was launched by fans and has enjoyed a meteoric rise. The club achieved league status in just nine years from its inception. After a victorious play-off campaign last year, it now plays in the League One. All the while playing from a sub-5,000-capacity ground in



It is a tale so remarkable that it is set to be **turned into a Hollywood film**. But, at the dog track, there is little romanticism about the club's story. Greyhound trainer Brian Nicholls takes issue with any notion that the football club is returning home. "If you've never been here, you can't come home, can you?" he says, pointing to the fact that AFC Wimbledon has no history of playing at Plough Lane. For Nicholls, a fairytale ending for the football club would come at a huge cost. "I've been coming here since I was seven years old," he says. "I'm now 73." He describes the loss of the greyhound stadium as "like putting a knife through somebody's heart".

Since 2012, when AFC Wimbledon announced its intention to move to Plough Lane, rival proposals for a new greyhound stadium have been floated by Irish businessman Paschal Taggart. The plans gave hope to those who want to see a future for the dogs in Wimbledon, but there has been little visible progress. Stephen Alambritis, leader at Merton Council, says the council has received no other applications for the Plough Lane site. "That doesn't mean to say we want to lose greyhound racing from Wimbledon," he says, "but [the AFC Wimbledon proposal] is the only show in town at the moment."





There is still one last chance for greyhound racing to keep its Wimbledon home. Wandsworth Council, which neighbours Merton and is a long-time opponent of the football stadium plans, has called on the government to step in. Last month, Wandsworth's planning chairman Sarah McDermott said: "Given the very public announcements of support from those in very senior positions at Merton, I'm afraid we have no confidence in its ability to fulfill its obligations as an impartial and objective planning authority." A government spokesman said the project was being considered for "call-in" but a decision is yet to be made.

Before the races start, I find Tony Loveridge standing alone, smoking a cigar in the drizzle. Now 75, Loveridge has been involved in greyhound racing for 46 years. "I'll tell you a story," he says, when I ask about the development plans. "I was at Reading for 27 years. That closed. I went down to Portsmouth and that closed. I ended up in Oxford and that closed." For a time, Loveridge raced dogs at Henlow, before taking a break from the scene. A few months ago, he began racing dogs again at Wimbledon. Faced with the prospect of moving on once more, I ask if he's hopeful about the track's future. "Whatever will be will be," he replies. "We can't do anything about it, can we?"

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