

GOING TO THE DOGS – AN ORAL HISTORY OF WIMBLEDON STADIUM

INTERVIEWEE : Alan Clarke

DATE OF BIRTH : 1951

PARENTS' OCCUPATIONS : Newsagents; Father also Accountant

Interview location : AFC Wimbledon, Cherry Red Records Stadium, Plough Lane, Wimbledon on 1st February 2024

Interviewer : Wallace Li **Summariser : Howard Judd**

Born in Willesden, Alan Clarke moved to Wimbledon in 1970 when his Father bought a newsagents shop. Dad suggested that they buy a greyhound. Alan was a punter, but also owned a few greyhounds with his family.

There was always a big crowd and a good atmosphere in the 1970's, with races held every Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. The family would close their shop at 7pm and be at the stadium in time for the first race at 7.45. You could buy a lovely mixed grill, and there was also a very popular jacket potato stall. Everyone knew each other. Alan brought his first girlfriend on their first date to Wimbledon and she had a bet on a dog simply because she liked the name, 'Santa Boysy'. He made so many friends over the years, and even held both his 50th and 60th birthday parties at the stadium.

The place held so many good, funny and even some sad memories... In 1971, Dad won the International race with a dog called 'Eion's Punter'! Alan's Mum would never watch the races but would go for the presentations, along with Dad, who always insisted on wearing a pink tie, even if it didn't match his shirt!

Dad once bought three pups for £700, but they were all rubbish and came last so one of them was sent up North to race in the "flapping" scene (unofficial dog racing). Then the new owner asked, "Have you got another one?" The dog was called Tudor Dan and he was ungradable because he was so good. The owner used to ask the dog, "Do you want to race this weekend?", and if he got off the sofa then they would go racing and he would win!

Alan knew one man who won £2,500 on the pools, so he bought two greyhounds with his winnings, but both of them broke a leg.

Back in the old days, the stadium was packed on both sides, the “posh” side with a restaurant and the cheap side with the public bar. That is where the true dog people went. The crowds were mainly working-class folk, and not that many from ethnic minorities. Alan never met anyone he didn’t like and always felt genuinely pleased for people whose dog won. The place was always full of amazing characters, such as Fred, who never spoke, just sat there and betted.

The make-up of the crowds changed, and numbers dwindled, as older spectators died and a lot of youngsters weren’t interested. Whereas couples always used to own the dogs, more and more became owned by syndicates and they weren’t as knowledgeable as the previous types of owners. They started to cater for different clientele, people who had no idea about dog racing but just wanted a night out. Wimbledon Stadium became like watching a sinking ship, with no investment and the GRA (Greyhound Racing Association) wouldn’t help, so it got very run down. Alan sadly cannot see a future for dog racing in about 10 years’ time.

The stadium was like a second home to Alan, it was a place to have a great night out, the good times far outweighed the bad, and he always felt very happy there.