

14/02/2024 Jonathan Buckley

Amanda Ainsworth

*Interviewed by Grace for the WiSH / Digital Works Going to the Dogs Oral History Project
2nd February 2024 at the AFC Wimbledon's Cherry Records Stadium, Plough Lane, London SW17.*

Born 1964 Fareham Hampshire. Mother book keeper, Father merchant navy

First memory: Vague, go to the football and then go and watch greyhounds between age of 7-13, a big family thing, noise, dogs racing. Family from Tooting and Southfields. Family would decide to have a night together. After football with Uncle.

Real involvement began when got involved with welfare. Atmosphere: buzzing and excited when dogs would be coming out to the traps. Bigger on Derby nights – big roar and trumpets. Normal race night subdued; still bit of tension waiting for dogs to come out. Stadium: 90s big and loud but it did start to decline when they moved away from main stadium. Tired echoey during the week but still atmosphere on big race night.

People: more men but there started to be groups of people. Older generation. But up in the restaurant on big nights dicky bows and posh frocks. Most of the women you would see were working with dogs and in the restaurants. Mostly middle-aged men. But you did get stag and hen does at the weekends.

Typical night I would be meeting a trainer who wanted to rehome a dog or fund-raising. Sitting have a drink and watching. Go to the first bend to watch race. Check out the Welfare shop. Apart from the big nights coming with friends for a night out. Not a big gambler ... not a lot of success – liked a name or trainer but never really looked at the form.

Had a dog in a Derby final that won. Got caught up in the whole celebration, quite surreal, good friends and good company. Coming with young dog that was so excited about being in this atmosphere. Once the dog finishes you walk around the track. and a Derby winner could win £100,000. The Derby winning dog is the ultimate thing ... like an Olympic medal. Euphoria, got swept up in it.

Characters: Pat Bannister set up the Retired Greyhound Trust. Devoted to welfare and got kennels in Hersham. She talked to everyone and so passionate about the dogs; hounds had a life after racing. So many people and dogs owe her. General manager Bob Rowe, general manager very supportive of the welfare.

Wimbledon was different: size and big grandstand and restaurant. Had a bit of South London character about it. Seemed very professional compared to some of the smaller ones like Portsmouth where you could talk to the dogs walking through the crowd. Quite connected but big. Once it got the Derby it became the bigger track and one where you could do fundraising events here. Locality was where she came.

Role of gambling: huge passion for many. Easier and more accessible than horse-racing. Back then going somewhere and see it whereas bookies were restricted during the day. Once more money came in it changed. Bookies and greyhound put money into the welfare.

Got into dogs – always had dogs - because made redundant and saw the ad in a paper. Welfare was very small at the start but grew because of bookie money. Used to think people had a dog and took it home. There were 10,000 dogs retiring each year and about 4,000 were found a home.

There was a big disparity between the good trainers and homes. They have worked hard but where we are now with people having to give up dogs with the cost of living. It went on an upward curve but then went down. Most people in greyhound racing are good but there are not so good ones and it's the dogs that suffer.

Greyhound Trust with 70 branches across the country. Six people covering the country with support of local volunteers and owners and trainers and satellite branches. Amazing people. Checked neutered and then checking new owners. Looked after for life. If there were problems could bring dogs back. The charity started with £100,000 to home 60 dogs ... to £4.5 million and 4,500 dogs.

When I started surprised that there was a 10,000 dogs a year turnover and also those dogs that didn't make it. It was left to owners and trainers to work something out. I got a greyhound and everyone questioned why ... perception was high energy and difficult dogs to have but they are bone idle and love a nice warm comfy bed. What they are used to when trainers.

It was difficult to rehome because of the perception of the breed. Taken 25 years to turn that perception around. They weren't seen in society. Can be awkward because they are trained to chase little furry things ... Pomeranians. Volunteers took the dog out so that people could see them and change perceptions.

How has welfare changed over time. Other animal charities – Greyhound Board of Great Britain – they were a little bit behind the times. Greyhounds were a commodity. Now there are more things to bet on. Hope welfare is getting better. So many people out there working hard to look after dogs.

Some dogs had behavioural and physical issues and I changed to become a dog masseur. Racing dogs that have picked up some injuries and they tend to seize up when they retire. They need extra TLC to ensure everything is working.

I was torn because you work from within – I have met so many good people within racing who are now good friends, its predominantly good people who want the best for dogs.

Crowds over the 20 years have changed. In the 1990s you would have a lot of people but later was like a ghost town during the week. It was only put on for the gambling industry to televise. Still busy at weekend. Once it was sold to Galliard you could physically see the cracks appearing. Last few years down 50-60% on 20 years before. Once they moved the stand over the other side. Everything was in the wrong place. Instead of looking at building that was an overflow you were looking at the old stand which was deserted. Bit depressing.

Media effect on racing: in 2007 there was big front page story in the national newspapers about a dog getting shot after finishing racing. Since then a much bigger impact on it. Reduced numbers coming and protesters at the stadium made it not really a place that you wanted to go. Massive impact.

Greyhound racing has evolved and some of the surviving stadiums have become more multipurpose and use. Used to be just for betting but now looking to be pure entertainments. It has declined because of the welfare of the dogs and people less happy to see animal run to entertain and the ability to bet on phone or who is going to score the first goal. Also, not enough money to sustain the sport – expensive to look after and train a dog.

Campaign to keep stadium open; walked very fine line because I am a Wimbledon supporter. Just let it play out. Some of it was vicious from both side from big characters who had a lot to say. Tumultuous time. I always thought it would go to football Galliards were never going to give it up. Pretty horrid at times.

Future: In the next ten years I am not sure it has a long-term future in this country. Up in the North East still do quite well and have changed it around. Some family stadiums and some by the bookies. One of the few countries that still allow it. So, over the next 25 years will maybe decline.

Wimbledon stadium meant friendship to me ... through the dogs. Watching a greyhound run is an amazing thing. When the dogs were racing there was real joy. That was what they were born and trained to do. The breed will survive but ex racing dogs are the most amazing dogs ... easy loving so that will be a big loss.

Mentioned Vinny Jones, Uri Geller, Twiggy who have been involved with greyhounds and publicity shoots to support greyhound welfare.

Injuries of ex racers: majority of track they run anti-clockwise and it was on the outside right side of the body where they would have trigger points and injuries. 0-40 mph in a few seconds