

## **WiSH/Digital Works Going to the Dogs Oral History Project at Wimbledon Stadium on 01/02/2024**

### **Graham Donaldson, bookmaker trading as J. Hall**

Born 1942 at Nelson Hospital in Merton, London.

Father an engineer, mother a housewife who also worked in retail.

First experience of greyhound racing was in 1961. His then girlfriend's father, James Hall, was a bookmaker at Wimbledon and asked Graham if he'd like to work there as a bookmaker's clerk. Graham was good at maths so it suited him.

James Hall's father was also a bookie, called "Peggy" Hall due to having lost a leg in WW1. "Peggy" had been involved in greyhound racing since the 1920s.

In the 1960s Wimbledon had 40+ bookmakers with 2-300 dogs in the pool. Very busy with only 15 minutes between races. By its closure Wimbledon only had 5 bookies. 90-95% of the crowd were male. It was a betting sport then rather than an evening out, though men used to go to the three local pubs before or after the races. His friend's wife used to come to the track on a Friday to take most of his weekly pay leaving him a small amount to bet.

The atmosphere was very friendly with lots of people going regularly. There were very rarely any problems.

The memorable races started in 1985 when the Derby moved to Wimbledon upon the closure of White City. Before that The Laurels was the biggest night. In 1985 Graham worked in the main enclosure. Coaches came from all over the country. Due to torrential rain an old Wimbledon dog managed to win the Derby. Some memorable dogs were West Park Mustard, Some Picture and Rapid Ranger.

Sky Sports started broadcasting live so there was no longer any need to travel and there were betting shops since 1961, but it was still busy in the 1980s.

Well known faces at Wimbledon included footballers, snooker players, MPs, cricketers and villains from South London. Some money from The Great Train Robbery was laundered at Wimbledon.

Graham had another job at first, but took over his Father-in-law's business in 1989. He already had a licence. To get a licence he had to put a notice in South London Press, go to Wimbledon Magistrates' Court, pay £100 and then renew

the licence every 3 years. He took on his father-in-law's business name. It was all legitimate, he had an accountant and paid his taxes.

Graham talks about and demonstrates the Tic Tac sign language used by bookies' clerks. Regular punters also understood it.

Graham talks about how odds work and the need to be able to do maths quickly in his head. He said that they could take £4-5K in 7 minutes on Derby Night.

Graham talks about dogs running to a pattern. The racing managers put the dogs in the traps depending on these patterns to avoid them running into each other. From the 1980s it was possible to buy videos of the racing, which helped punters with form and bookies with working out odds.

Graham was working 4 nights a week, which meant having no social life apart from the racing. He often missed family occasions. Sometimes his sons would take his place if he had to miss a night, but he mostly did 52 Saturdays a year.

Graham talks about Tony Morris, who was the biggest and most successful bookmaker after WWII. He would take any bet, but was ruthless.

When crowds got smaller, stadiums started encouraging people to the stadium with special deals, meals, bars etc. This brought in a new type of customer, who wasn't really interested in greyhound racing. These new customers would bet using The Tote, because they found bookmakers intimidating. They could also bet via Runners in the restaurant or bar. Turnover increased, but not for the trackside bookmakers. Bookmakers had to pay £240 a night for their place in the enclosure plus staff costs meant they had to spend £1K before betting even started. Turnover went down and it became harder to make bookmaking pay.

Betting shops now have daytime racing without the public. The stadiums weren't getting enough use. The value of the land in London for housing finished the stadiums off. The Derby is now at Towcester, an old horse racing course. It's all provincial now and shown on Sky. It's now sponsored by Star Sports who put a lot of money in to keep it going, but it's not in a good position now.

There was always the Wimbledon Greyhound Association and retirement kennels for dogs. Trainers would do anything for the dogs, well fed and warm kennels. Nearly all retired greyhounds these days find homes. When he was

young he thinks some greyhounds were sent to countries where greyhounds were racing longer than in the UK (e.g. Sweden).

Campaign to Save Wimbledon Stadium – what happened was inevitable. It was even looking iffy in the 1970s. Merton had pressure on them to bring AFC Wimbledon back into Merton. The stadium was in a very poor state and no one wanted to build another stadium with land value being so high.

Graham thinks that greyhound racing will carry on as it is with main stadiums in the provinces. He thinks that it won't expand.

Graham worked at Wimbledon Stadium from the ages of 20-70. He enjoyed it and met many people. People still recognise him as a former bookmaker.