

Going to the Dogs, An Oral History of Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium

INTERVIEWEE: John Forster, Track Manager

DATE OF BIRTH: 1947

PARENTS' OCCUPATIONS: father worked at the stadium, then in printing; mother worked in the kitchens

Interview Location: AFC Wimbledon Stadium, London, 2 February 2024

Interviewer: Jonathan Buckley; Summariser: Sarah Armstrong

Dad drove the hare at Wimbledon. John started as plumber there at 18, then involved with Speedway and finally with greyhound racing. In early days the track was formed from Isle of Sheppey turf which might freeze, so was covered with 3 inches of peat all round; later they moved to sand which also needed to be kept soft and loose. Keen to minimise injuries and keep dogs safe. Wimbledon was busy in the 60s - up to 5000 crowd on weeknights and 10,000 at the weekend.

Westmead Hawk - a fantastic greyhound in the way he won, the great Derby roar; 'Simply the Best' played as the winner paraded. John would carry the winner to the podium through the crowd to protect its paws. He campaigned to get Mick the Miller's mosaic uncovered.

Decline of racing as entertainment – rise of betting shops and the internet mean you can bet without going to a track. BAGS (Bookmakers afternoon greyhound session) may only have 100 punters.

A friendly place, his last night (Derby Final night) was emotional; he had been variously head groundsman and clerk of the course. As the latter he would check the track and traps, ensure the timing for opening them was consistent.

He'd seen Bros, Prince Philip, Vera Lynn at the track. He was sworn to secrecy over the Queen(band) album photoshoot of 50 naked girls on bicycles at the track.

Memories of the whole stadium flooding because of the River Wandle in September 1968, It was 5 feet under water, he rowed across the central green. Dad had told him of watercress beds in the past and there was a brook running through the car park when he first arrived.

Wimbledon was the place where all his friends were, whether trainers, owners, staff. The punters were never any trouble and it was a big part of his life.