

GOING TO THE DOGS – AN ORAL HISTORY OF WIMBLEDON STADIUM

INTERVIEWEE: Richard Birch

DATE OF BIRTH: 1967

PARENTS' OCCUPATIONS: Bookie

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

Interviewer : Arvo Bickerton-Packer Summariser : Howard Judd

Born in Raynes Park, Richard originally was a horse racing fan, when a friend took him to Wimbledon at the age of 15 one night, so Richard put money on a dog and won! From that moment on, he was hooked.

Richard's grandfather had been a compulsive gambler and owned a greyhound at Catford in the 1950's. He ended up buying his house with all the money he had won at dog racing!

During Richard's days as a punter, he became a successful gambler himself. He once spent £1,400 to interrupt a holiday in Florida just to come back to Wimbledon and place a bet for £400 on a race; then he went back to resume his holiday! In a typical night, he would place bets on about 3 of the 13 races.

He later worked as a horse-racing journalist for the Press Association and used to cover the Greyhound Derby for several years, and then he got a job as the Wimbledon correspondent for the Racing Post, which he did for 15-20 years.

The atmosphere at the stadium sizzled, it was unique, the premier track in London, a national treasure! The Derby final night was amazing, with 15,000 punters, jammed roads, burger vans and rosette sellers. There always was a mass invasion from Ireland, and lots of drunk people but never any trouble. Even people who didn't know anything about dog racing would come along and have a great time.

As an owner, Richard had a very sad experience once when he invited 15 friends and Racing Post colleagues to watch his dog disappear ahead into the lead, only to break his front leg and have to be destroyed. In total, he owned 10 greyhounds across a 30-year period, and paid for resting kennels for 12 years. Unless you won the Derby, which was worth £100,000, there was never much money in owning a greyhound.

He can recall the huge gallery of characters who used to go, such as an eccentric fellow gambler called 'Chicago Pete', who invited Richard and his wife to see the musical 'Chicago' with him.

The crowds changed over the years. Where once it was hardcore gamblers, as those people dropped off, a new crowd began to attend, for whom Richard coined the phrase 'six-packers', as they were only interested in a cheap drinking night out, and by the end this spoiled the experience for him.

It was sad to see the old stadium get run down, but money talks and lots of greyhound tracks in cities have been replaced with apartment blocks. Richard also believes that the younger generation don't see working animals as acceptable in 2024. He feels that in 10 years' time, there won't be any more greyhound stadiums.

Wimbledon Stadium holds wonderful memories for Richard, after all he spent a third of his life there, but now he has finally had to move on.