

# Wembley Stadium – Old and New

## The Twin Towers, 1922-2002:

In 1920 a government-backed company was formed to promote trade throughout the British Empire by holding a major Exhibition in London. Land at the vacant Wembley Park pleasure gardens was purchased (see “Wembley Park – its story up to 1922”) and the event planned for 1924. The Prince of Wales was President of the Exhibition’s organising committee, and was keen that the scheme should include ‘... a *great national sports ground*’. The Football Association took great interest, as plans for the stadium gave them the opportunity to use it as a permanent base for their Cup Finals.

£750,000 was raised (including £175,000 from the government) and work on the Exhibition site was begun in early 1922 by Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons, on a design by Sir John Simpson and Maxwell Ayrton, using the new material of ferro-concrete for the Stadium (which Sir Robert called ‘... a *triumph of modern engineering*’) and the other buildings, as well as the six huge lions from which the Wembley emblem derived. The distinctive domed twin towers that were to become the building’s trademark were built in situ and were 126 feet high surmounted by concrete flagstuffs capped by concrete crowns. Work on the Stadium was completed by April 1923 with safety tests including 1,000+ men sitting, standing, marking time and marching in formation around the stands. These would seat 30,000 people, while terraces provided space for a further 100,000 standing spectators.

The F.A. Cup Final on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1923 gained worldwide headlines and made Wembley internationally famous before the British Empire Exhibition when mounted P.C. George Scorey riding his white horse, Billy, managed to clear the pitch. Up to 300,000 people had descended on Wembley Stadium and many more than the official 127,000 were in the ground, spilling onto the pitch. This event has been commemorated by the White Horse Bridge, completed in 2006, linking the town centre and the new Stadium. The name was chosen in a ballot organised by the London Development Agency and BBC Radio Five Live.

### Wembley Stadium (The Empire Stadium) in 1924.

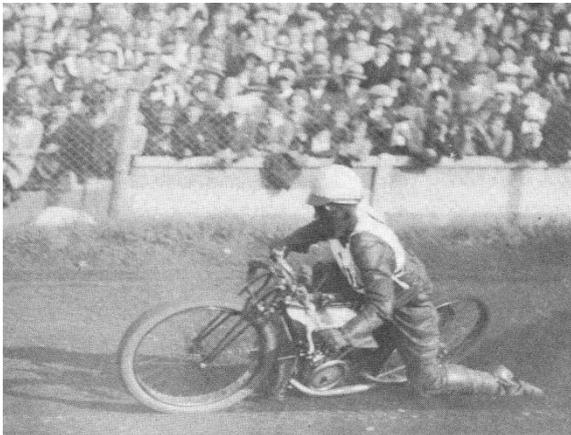
[Source: Brent Archives –  
Wembley History Society  
Collection]



The British Empire Exhibition was officially opened on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1924 by King George V, who was heard to speak on the radio for the first time. In the 1924 Official Guide it said: ‘*There is not in all England a modern building that can compete with the Empire Stadium in the effect it creates upon the mind of the spectator.*’ The Exhibition reopened for a further six months in 1925, by which time there had been 27 million visitors, including 4,500,000 to the Stadium. (See “The British Empire Exhibition, 1924/25” for further details and pictures of this major event).

There were no “legacy” plans for the Exhibition site, and Jimmy White offered £300,000 for it, to be paid as he broke up and sold the buildings. Some of the demolition was sub-contracted to Arthur Elvin, an ex-serviceman who had done well after obtaining a job in a tobacco kiosk at the Exhibition. In 1927 Elvin offered White £122,500 for the Stadium, payable over a number of years, but the latter’s suicide meant that Elvin had to raise £150,000 within two weeks for the sale to go ahead.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> August Elvin became managing director of the Wembley Stadium and Greyhound Racecourse Co, which was soon putting on profitable greyhound race meetings. He soon arranged for the stadium to be used for the annual F.A. and Rugby League Challenge Cup Finals, and followed this in 1928 by setting up a motorcycle speedway team. This quickly had large attendances, helped by “half-time” events including women speedway riders, and 60,000 fans in its supporters’ club. Improvements to the Stadium in the 1930s saw better concreted terraces, and a crowd capacity of 100,000 of whom 45,000 would be seated.



**The “Queen of Speedway”, Fay Tylour, on her way to the fastest lap of the Wembley speedway track in 1929 (a record she held for several years).**

[Source: “Glorious Wembley” by Howard Bass]

By 1947 Sir Arthur Elvin, knighted in 1946 for his contribution to the efforts of war charities, was Chairman of Wembley Stadium Ltd. He made the 1948 London Olympic Games possible by loaning the Stadium (and the Empire Pool, now Wembley Arena) free of charge and guaranteeing the organising committee £100,000 towards any loss. Sir Arthur told the shareholders that: *‘The holding of the XIVth Olympiad in this country should be very helpful to Britain’s prestige at this difficult time in our history, and we are very proud that Wembley should be so closely identified with the organisation.’* The Stadium was the centrepiece of the 1948 Olympic Games hosting the opening and closing ceremonies, 33 track and field events, and some equestrian events, as well as the football and hockey finals.

#### **The Opening Ceremony for the 1948 Olympic Games.**

[Source: Brent Archives – 1948 Olympic Games Official Report]



The Stadium continued to stage major sporting and musical events, including the 1966 FIFA World Cup and 1985 LiveAid Concert, and further improvements were made. These included floodlights in 1955, so that evening football matches could be played, a new roof to cover all spectators in 1963 and the replacement of the last terraces in 1990, so that all of the new maximum crowd of 80,000 would be seated.

#### **From Old to New:**

By 1995 the Sports Council was looking into options for an English National Stadium, and the following year chose Wembley as the site for a new Stadium, so remaining in London and retaining a name recognised world-wide. Whilst the twin towers still looked magnificent, the

1920s Stadium no longer had all the facilities expected at a major venue. In 1999 Wembley National Stadium Ltd, set up to oversee design and financing and operate it on completion, bought the Stadium for £103m. At first it was expected that the twin towers would remain, but the scale of the project meant they were in the way. Despite protests and its Grade 2 listing, Brent Council approved its demolition with no objection from English Heritage.

In September 2000 the Australian contractors, Multiplex, agreed to build the new Stadium for £326.5m, but the plans were still vague. The World Stadium Team Consortium, with architects Sir Norman Foster and Australian Rod Sheard, were asked to design a stadium providing the best for fans and modern media coverage whilst still creating an iconic building to aid regeneration of the surrounding area. In 2000, the old Wembley's last Cup Final was played on May 20<sup>th</sup>, last concert on 20<sup>th</sup> August and the last football match on 7<sup>th</sup> October.

After many delays, demolition started in 2002 with the twin towers coming down in February 2003. Several features of the Stadium were saved by the Brooking Collection of Architectural Detail, set up by Charles Brooking in the 1960s. He spent 18 months identifying elements to save - doors, windows etc. His inspection of the towers confirmed that the way they were made meant it would have been impossible to take them down and re-instate them elsewhere. In fact, the walls broke irregularly like a huge Easter egg when they came to be broken up. The foundations of the new building include rubble from the twin towers.



**Demolishing the old Stadium, January 2003.**



**The Arch in place, June 2004.**

[Both photographs by Pete Tomsett, from "Wembley – Stadium of Legends"]

### **The Arch, 2004 - :**

In May 2004 the iconic arch, visible from miles around, was lifted slowly into place, with a warning beacon on its apex for low-flying aircraft. It supports all the weight of the northern roof and 60% that of the southern end. Originally the architects had wanted 4 masts. The arch is 133m high and weighs 1,750 tonnes, with a diameter of 7.4m and a span of 315m. In December 2005 a time capsule - a metallic sphere 1m in diameter - was lowered into place beneath the pitch's centre. Its contents reflect the important and varied role the venue has had in the lives of British people since the 1920s and some memories of life in 2005.

After numerous delays and disputes the new Wembley Stadium was completed in 2007. Its Managing Director said: *'We wanted to build one of the greatest and grandest stadiums in the world worthy of the Wembley name...a world-class entertainment facility on every level.'* It had cost £757million (including £120m from the National Lottery) plus £183m overspend for land purchase, demolition and design fees, transport improvements, building and fitting out the new stadium. The 90,000 seats are closer to the pitch, which is 4 metres lower than the old one, with an unimpeded view and more legroom. The retractable roof protects every spectator from the elements; it is opened between events exposing the turf to sunlight and ventilation. There are many more toilets, food points, restaurants, escalators and media seats than before. There are two giant TV screens and 26 lifts. The bars are named after famous Wembley events e.g. Bar 1966. There are now 107 steps up to the Royal Box.

The first football matches (including the F.A. Cup Final on 19<sup>th</sup> May) and music concerts at the new Stadium took place in 2007. It has since been used for many more, with the biggest event so far (as at November 2011) being the UEFA Champions League Final in May 2011. The indoor warm-up area includes 2 sets of changing rooms for both sides to accommodate larger squads. 5,000 staff are there for merchandising, catering, cleaning and hosting the 26-37 major events per year.



**Barcelona and Manchester United fans arriving at the new Wembley Stadium for the Champions League final in May 2011.**  
[Photograph by Philip Grant]

In July 2005 London was awarded the 2012 Olympics. As part of the celebrations to mark this success the Wembley Arch was illuminated. The new Wembley Stadium will be one of the many venues used. Lord Coe said: *'It's a truly iconic venue, known the world over. Wembley will be a key part in London 2012's plans and will*

*be a fitting venue for the Olympic football finals'* which the Stadium will host from 29<sup>th</sup> July to 11<sup>th</sup> August. The 2012 Olympics will be a great contrast to the 1948 Austerity Olympics held at the old Wembley.

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