

Oxford Stadium - Factual Report and Assessment of Significance for Oxford Heritage Assets Register Review Panel

Introduction and Background

Oxford Stadium has been nominated by the public as a potential addition to the Oxford Heritage Assets Register. The register is a locally maintained list of non-designated heritage assets that the Council have recognised as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions because of their heritage interest as described in the National Planning Policy Framework. Inclusion of non-designated heritage assets on the register is dependent on their fulfilling criteria adopted by the City Council and will be subject to review by a panel of City Councillors prior to adoption. An adopted nomination form sets out grounds on which a nominated heritage asset may be deemed to fulfil these conditions. For further details of the Oxford Heritage Assets Register, the criteria and nomination, review and adoption process please see the project website at:

<http://www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decP/HeritageAssetRegister.htm>

This report has been prepared to inform the review of the nomination of the Greyhound Stadium for registration as a heritage asset. It includes details of Greyhound Stadia as a class of historic place, information about the development history of the site and surrounding area and a review of the history and architecture of the greyhound stadium. The concluding section provides a review of the greyhound stadium using the nomination form and criteria for the heritage assets register to consider where it might have heritage interest, heritage value and significance. Consultees are invited to provide information to enhance the accuracy of the information provided and may comment on the assessment of the Greyhound Stadium's significance to inform the Council's review of its nomination.

Feedback should be sent using the City Council's online consultation service or in writing to Oxford City Council's Planning Department at planning@oxford.gov.uk, or by post to Planning Dept., Oxford City Council, St Aldates Chambers, No. 109 St Aldates, Oxford, OX1 1DS, or by. For further information about the Oxford Heritage Assets Register please contact Robert Lloyd-Sweet or Nick Worlledge at Oxford City Council (rlloyd-sweet@oxford.gov.uk / nworlledge@oxford.gov.uk : 01865 25 2308/2147).

Factual Report

Background

Greyhound racing involving up to 6 hounds chasing a mechanical lure or hare was invented in 1912 as a development from the ancient sport of coursing. The first professional greyhound racing track opened in California in 1919. The sport was imported from the United States to Britain in 1926 with the first professional course opened at Manchester Belle Vue Stadium by the Greyhound Racing Association. There are reported to have been 40 courses operating nationally by the following year. By 1939 the number of courses had risen to 100¹.

Greyhound stadia were relatively inexpensive to create and required a small amount of space (compared to horse racing), which allowed tracks to be located within urban areas. Greyhounds proved relatively affordable to owners seeking to become more involved in the sport, whilst meetings were held in the evening, outside working hours. Prize money and gambling provided a tempting incentive for participation. As a result, it proved popular with working class men in particular and many were located in manufacturing districts. The earliest tracks were soon also associated with Speedway, introduced to the UK in Spring 1928, as a second sport. This often required a second track set inside the Greyhound racing circuit. Speedway tracks were constructed at Belle Vue, Wimbledon and Haringey (three of the earliest greyhound stadiums) by 1928. The Betting and Lotteries Act 1934 restricted greyhound racing at a stadium to two nights per week. This restriction ensured the owners continued to look for alternative sports and events that would provide income.

Nationally, greyhound racing was enormously popular in the years after the Second World War, when it was second only to football as a national spectator sport. By the late 1940's there were 77 licensed Greyhound tracks in Britain, in addition to unlicensed courses. Speedway also developed as a major spectator sports with major events drawing crowds of upto 60,000 spectators. During the 1960s liberalisation of gambling laws, encouraging the establishment of casinos, bingo halls and betting shops,

¹ English Heritage, 2007, Listing description for Walthamstow Stadium entrance range and Tote Board

resulted in falling attendances at track betting venues. However, the '60s and '70s are considered the glory days of Speedway. The number of greyhound courses operating in Britain had fallen to 56 in 2007. This has declined further in the following years with just 25 licensed courses and 9 unlicensed (34 in total) in 2013.

The stadia were relatively simple structures, requiring little investment to establish, with relatively rudimentary buildings compared to other sporting venues. These often incorporated corrugated roofed shelter sheds on concrete terraces over banked earth. Several of the surviving tracks received investment in the later 20th century, sweeping away earlier structures to provide larger, enclosed grandstands that provided facilities for entertainment, including restaurants and bars, that enhanced the profitability of the grounds but removed evidence of their earlier occupation and use. Many have now been lost to redevelopment, a process that has been very rapid in the past decade.

Development of the local area.

At the outset of the 19th century the area surrounding and including the Oxford Stadium site consisted of open fields associated with the hamlet of Littlemore in the Parish of St. Mary's, Oxford. The medieval villages of Cowley and Temple Cowley lay a short distance to the north west. The open fields of Littlemore were enclosed by Act of Parliament in 1817. Sandy Lane has the characteristic straight alignment of a road established within the enclosure of open fields and is recorded on the inclosure award map as the Littlemore and Garsington Road. The inclosure map records that it met the more sinuous course of the Oxford and Watlington Road just to the east of the site. This is likely to be of more ancient origin and forms part of the historic route from Oxford to London via Henley, which was diverted to run further to the west (through Iffley) in 1771. The G.W.R. Thame Branch Railway was constructed in 1864 as an extension to the Princes Risborough to Thame line and runs along the northern boundary of the stadium site.

Development of the area as an industrial suburb began in the 1860s with the establishment of the Eddison and Nodding Company (later renamed the Oxford Steam Plough Company) manufacturing agricultural machinery on land between Cowley and Temple Cowley. The Morris Motors Ltd. motorcar

works was moved into a former Military College at Temple Cowley by William Morris (later Lord Nuffield) in 1912. This expanded into a larger building in 1914 and further southward over the following decades. Soon after 1926 the construction of the Pressed Steel Company of Great Britain's works extended the industrial area southward as far as the railway line.

The 1937–39 Ordnance Survey map records that land south of the railway line and east of Watlington Road was used as recreation grounds, which are presumed to be associated with the factories as an amenity for workers. This was a standard practice for early 20th century industrial employers. A small iron foundry stood on the west side of Watlington Road on the south side of the railway line with a pair of semi-detached houses (possibly managers' accommodation) adjacent. The 1937–39 map records the presence of a small greyhound-racing track within the site. Between the hamlet of Littlemore and the village of Cowley a large area of suburban housing development was constructed in the inter-war years serving the expansion of Oxford's population, which was growing rapidly in response to the city's developing manufacturing industries.

During the 1950s the City Council planned for development of the Blackbird Leys area as a large housing estate to replace cramped and unhygienic residential areas in the city centre and to house the growing population of car plant workers. The estate's first houses were built as self-build homes on Sandy Lane in 1958, just to the south of the stadium, with the first and second phases of development completed by the early 1970s. The area was popular for workers in the Cowley Factories and was prosperous in the 1960s and 1970s.

Decline in car manufacturing in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in the demolition of the Morris Motors buildings (owned by British Aerospace in 1992) and the redevelopment of the area as Oxford Business Park. The former Pressed Steel plant is now Plant Oxford, owned by BMW, producing the new Mini.

Oxford Stadium

Oxford Stadium opened in 1939 as a member of the National Greyhound Racing Club (the official regulatory body for greyhound racing in Britain) and under the ownership of Bristol Stadium Ltd.. This followed a period of

unknown duration (but not more than 13 years) when an unregulated 'flapping track' used for greyhound racing had occupied the site. The grounds, track and buildings of the older, unregulated, course are recorded on the Revised 3rd Edition Ordnance Survey Map published in 1937–39, with an oval track aligned north – south in the triangle of land between Sandy Lane and the G.W.R. Thame Branch Railway. The position of the Oxford Stadium near to Morris Motor's and Pressed Steel's Cowley works would have attracted the patronage of workers from the factories and can be seen as a response to the industrial development of the nearby area.

The new track was officially opened by Lord Denham on 31st March 1939 at an inaugural race night. Features of the newer course that survive include the much larger course now present, terraces for spectators, greyhound paddock and the 'totalisator', or 'Tote' building which was essential for the 'parimutuel' betting system that operates in greyhound racing. These are all recorded on the first post-war edition of the Ordnance Survey's map (published in 1955). Of the remaining registered tracks in the country only 9 appear to retain Tote buildings, several of which have been modified to support digital displays. One former Tote building (at Walthamstow Stadium) has been listed Grade II as a building of special historic and architectural interest. The Tote building at Oxford Stadium is of a typical design forming a tall, narrow structure standing with its long elevation facing the apex of the track and with a mono-pitched roof sloping away from the track. It is constructed of yellow brick with the elevation facing the track now clad in profiled metal sheet that replaces the display board recorded in historic photographs. It would formerly have displayed the race numbers, time remaining to place bets and the approximate odds on each outcome. It has now been re-clad and windows inserted looking over the track. The long canteen building next to the entrance from Sandy Lane was also present at this date and is a typically rudimentary 'Nissen hut' with large windows inserted on the elevation facing the track, which was known as the Director's Bar.

Speedway was introduced soon after the opening of Oxford Stadium, with several open meetings held between 1939–41². Oxford's Speedway team,

² See Speedway Researcher Website: <http://www.speedwayresearcher.org.uk/oxford.html>

The Cheetahs, were established in 1949 with an inaugural race against Swindon Robins. They moved rapidly from the 3rd to 2nd division of the national league and were National League Champions in 1950 and 1964. 'Pits' for the home and visiting Speedway teams were constructed, with a tunnel entrance through the banked terraces, which remains as a feature of the site (recorded on the 1955 Ordnance Survey map). Races were commonly advertised with posters on street corners along Cowley Road to get the attention of the thousands of workers from the car factories who passed along this route at the end of shift. Oxford Cheetahs had their most successful seasons during the 1980s and '90s, winning national titles and competitions as league champions in 1985, 1986, 1989, 1994, 1996, 2001 and 2005. Team members have included numerous riders of national and international standing. These included Hans Nielsen who rode for Oxford for 10 years and stands as the most decorated Speedway Champion of all time. There has also been a long-standing rivalry between the Oxford Cheetahs and Swindon Robins.

Both uses have attracted large crowds to the venue from both Oxford and from outside the city, contributing to the area's economy. Speedway often attracted a crowd of 6,000 – 7,000 spectators. During the 1960s and '70 bus companies ran special services for Speedway Race nights to the stadium from towns in the surrounding county.

The stadium has provided a venue for other events including American football in the 1990s, sheepdog trialling in 1950 and a popular Sunday Market, which operated until 2009. The stadium was used for other motor sports and related events including an American stunt-driving rodeo, British Side-car Championships, motorcycle trials, American flat-racing, stock-car racing and professional quad-bike racing.

Oxford City Council bought the stadium in 1975 with the intention of redeveloping the site for housing. Considerable public opposition to the scheme, co-ordinated by a 'Save Our Stadium Committee', led the Council to abandon these proposals and was reported in the local press³. Local

³ See Centre for Oxfordshire Studies Oral History Collection Nos. OXOHA:MT 1488, 2077, 2078, 2079

greyhound owners and trainers provided financial support to ensure the continued use of the stadium for their sport.

Investment by new owners, Northern Sports, during the 1980s included the construction of a large new grandstand, including a restaurant and fitness and leisure facilities. These have subsequently developed as dance studios and martial arts training facilities, which are used by several clubs. The dance clubs in particular have been successful in bringing local youngsters from deprived areas forward to attend national dance schools and to work with professional companies. A former Speedway rider has established a go-cart racing circuit in the centre of the stadium, which has been in existence for over twenty years (Oxford Karting). The stadium's car park has also been used for a motorcycle training (Lightning Motorcycle Training) school since the early 1990s. These business uses and clubs have been used by the local community but have also attracted business from outside the city, contributing to the city's economy.

The stadium was sold to Greyhound Racing Association (GRA) in 1998 and a further phase of investment followed, including the extension of the restaurant to seat 350 diners and construction of three executive suites. The stadium hosted the Speedway National League Championship finals in 2004 and 2005 drawing large crowds. GRA were acquired by Risk Capital Partners and their development partner Galliard Homes in 2005. Use of the track for Speedway racing was discontinued in 2007, with a temporary reprieve in 2008. Other motorbike sports have been undertaken in the interim. The community support of the stadium during this time has been shown by the willingness of supporters to give their time and money to help make repairs to facilities, including the safety fencing on the tracks. Use of the track for Greyhound racing was discontinued on 29th December 2012.

Assessment of Significance:

Criterion 1. They must be capable of meeting the government's definition of a heritage asset.

Oxford Stadium would qualify as both a 'place' and a 'group of buildings'.

Criterion 2. They must possess heritage interest that can be conserved and enjoyed.

Historic Interest: The stadium illustrates aspects of the development of Oxford as an industrial town in the early and mid 20th century, including the development of working class culture and sports and recreation associated with the development of the industrial suburb of Cowley. Its position illustrates the association between pursuits such as dog racing and Speedway with workers' in Oxford's motor manufacturing industries. The tracks, set of buildings, including terraces, pits, entrance tunnels and Tote building, all provide evidence of this use and contribute to the historic interest of the stadium.

The stadium has a particular association with sporting history of the local Speedway Team, Oxford Cheetahs and several of their prominent members.

The stadium provides evidence of an early phase of development, preceding the development of Blackbird Leys Estate to the south and Oxford Business Park to the north. As such, it has historic interest, illustrating the development of the area of sports and recreational land that emerged beyond the factories in the early and mid 20th centuries, which has otherwise largely disappeared as a result of later development. As a surviving feature of this landscape it has become an integral element of the landscape used by the community that has grown around it.

As a sporting and social venue used by the local community for over seventy years many members of the community have associations with the stadium both individually and as part of larger communities of supporters etc..

Architectural Interest: The stadium's structures have architectural interest as buildings of a particular use dating from the early 20th century and not otherwise represented elsewhere in the city or, indeed, the county. As a group of structures they illustrate the functioning and development of the greyhound track over the past seventy years and reflect the status and low level of investment that was required to develop these sporting venues originally.

Criterion 3. They must have a value as heritage for the character and identity of the city, neighbourhood or community because of their heritage interest beyond personal or family connections, or the interest of individual property owners.

Communal Value: The historic interest of the stadium is valued for its contribution to the communal identity and social cohesion of Oxford's community and, in particular the communities of Cowley and Blackbird Leys and both the greyhound racing fraternity and Speedway supporters. The site has been a venue for sporting and social occasions for over seventy years bringing participants and spectators together. Particular communities, including supporters of greyhound racing and Speedway have developed a strong sense of identity, through supporting the stadium and the campaigns to maintain it as a resource for their particular interest.

The association with local sports teams, notably Oxford Cheetahs, is valued for its contribution to the historic sense of identity of Oxford's community. This is a very different identity to the academic Oxford that is more widely recognised but is nevertheless of importance to the community of the city.

As part of the vanishing landscape of the area's industrial past it also has communal value for the community that developed around the car and pressed steel works from the early to later 20th century. As the bond created by the shared experience and identity of factory workers has declined, shared social spaces such as the stadium, which help maintain a sense of communal identity and cohesion, have become more significant to the local community.

Through other uses other members of the community have used the facilities, including the development of popular sports and creative arts (dance) clubs in the past three decades, continuing the association of the site as a place of recreation and leisure of value to the identity and cohesion of the community.

Illustrative and Associative Value: The historic interest of the stadium is described above. The industrial area of the Cowley suburb has now been substantially redeveloped for the Oxford Business and Retail Parks to the north of the stadium. The stadium and parts of BMW's Mini Plant are surviving elements of the earlier industrial landscape that developed in the 1930s. This is valued for its illustration of the early development of the Cowley Industrial Suburb, as well as the Blackbird Leys Estate. It illustrates the type of landscape and uses that developed in response to the growth of

car manufacturing as a major local employer, providing evidence of the opportunities for leisure and recreation of the suburb's factory workers.

Evidential and Aesthetic Value: The site is not considered to have any special designed aesthetic value. The utilitarian nature of the buildings reflects the status of greyhound racing as a working class pursuit that did not require additional decorative detailing. As such they have a simple utilitarian aesthetic. In this sense it is similar to many other greyhound racing stadiums in this country. This contributes to the evidential value of the track and other structures to inform understanding of the role and status of the stadium as a sporting venue serving a particular part of the community.

Criterion 4. They must have a level of significance that is greater than the general positive identified character of the local area.

Oxford's Identity: As noted above under Communal Value, the stadium contributes to the identity and cohesion of several groups within the community and, as a long standing social venue, it has been a place where people of different ages and background have come together to support their sports. As the only venue in Oxford for both greyhound racing and Speedway, which has been present for over 70 years, and acting as the home of the local Oxford Cheetahs team, the stadium is important to the identity of Oxford representing the city's longstanding involvement and competition in these sports. It also has value in representing an element of the identity of Oxford as a manufacturing city with a proud working class heritage.

Age: The stadium is noted as representing an earlier phase of development than the surrounding land uses and therefore stands out as having a greater level of significance by helping to illustrate the area's development.

Rarity: Within the city there are few, if any, other sporting venues with a historic pedigree comparable to the stadium. The former Manor Ground Stadium of Oxford United might have been comparable but has subsequently been redeveloped. Whilst stadia and sports facilities associated with the University and Colleges might be considered comparable, these would not have the associative, illustrative and communal value of the greyhound stadium for the wider community of the city and more specific greyhound

racing and speedway supporters' communities. As this is a class of site that is becoming scarce nationally it provides additional value to the status of Oxford that it retains its greyhound racing circuit and Speedway track.

Integrity: The site has developed over the course of the 20th century, largely through the construction and extension of the grandstand building. The other individual structures have received various alterations that will have affected their value individually. However as a group, the tracks, totalisator, terraces, tunnels, pits and cafeteria building and Grandstand provide an integrity as a group of structures that ensure it illustrates the development of the site and associated sporting activities from the mid 20th century to the present.

Sources:

Genders, R., 1990, National Greyhound Racing Club book of Greyhound Racing (Pelham Dogs)

Ordnance Survey County Series Maps: Berkshire 1:12500, 1937-9

Ordnance Survey National Grid Series Map: Berkshire 1:2500, 1955

English Heritage, 2007, *Entrance Range including Tote Board at Walthamstow Stadium*, Chingford Road, List Description

Web-based sources:

<http://www.defunctspeedway.co.uk/Oxford.htm> - including copies of early photographs of the stadium, programmes and the 1949 - 1970 21 years anniversary brochure. In addition to details of prominent riders.

<http://www.speedwayresearcher.org.uk/oxford.html> - details Speedway races held at Oxford Stadium from 1949-1967, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1990 and 1992.

<http://lightningpass.com/about-us> - Lightning Motorcycle Training Company website

<http://www.kartingoxford.co.uk/> - Karting Oxford Company Website

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