

## The biggest stadium in England for a few years at least

"Build it and they will come" is the immortal line from the film Bull Durham (and Wayne's World 2) where a farmer is encouraged by a vision in his sleep to build a baseball field on his farm. As an economist, the concept that you can create demand for something by artificially creating or inflating supply is an interesting idea and is certainly the mantra that has worked Qatar in their realising their dream of hosting the FIFA World Cup Finals (that and a pot of cash like no one has ever seen).

Alas in English football it has also been the rhyme of fools more too often, with clubs investing heavily in redevelopment and new stadiums only to see them sitting virtually empty on a match day such as MK Dons stadium or not even used for football at all such as the Ricoh Arena, once the home of Coventry City.

But sometimes things in football can go spectacularly wrong. The strange tale of New Brighton Tower FC, who played in a stadium on the Wirral that had a capacity once of 100,000 (which was for a time the largest stadium in England). However, they lost that honour in the early part of the 20th Century to a London club few football fans have ever heard of - Thames FC.

Back in 1928 a consortium of businessmen heralded the opening of the West Ham Stadium in East London. Built with a capacity of 120,000 it was the biggest stadium in England at the time and was earmarked to compete directly against Wembley Stadium, opened five years previously, as a venue for all sports. Initially the stadium was used for Greyhound and Speedway racing although the owners soon saw that football was the way forward.

An application was made to join the Southern League for the 1928/29 season where they competed for two seasons, finishing in third place in 1930. The owners felt that the club were perfectly placed to compete in the Football League, and surprisingly their application to join was accepted from the 1930/31 season, taking the place of Merthyr Town.

Alas, with clubs like West Ham, Clapton (Leyton) Orient, Millwall and Arsenal all located close by, the general public of East London failed to warm to the new League club and crowds were appallingly low. In fact, in December 1930 they set the Football League record for the lowest ever attendance (that still stands today) of just 439 for the game versus Luton Town. In that first season the club & finished in 20th place (out of 22 clubs), with an abysmal away record of taking just three points from a possible forty two.

The following season it got worse for the club. Crowds rarely broke the 5,000 mark and on the pitch they struggled to string any positive results together. At the end of the season they finished bottom, five points adrift of Gillingham. Rather than apply for re-election the owners simply admitted their mistake and withdrew the club from the Football League. There was talk of a merger with Clapton Orient but within a few months of leaving the league, the club were no more.

The stadium continued to host greyhound and speedway right up until 1972, although the capacity was reduced due to safety issues at regular intervals. Finally it became too

expensive to run and the ground was sold to property developers. Today, it is a housing estate with nothing to show for its proud history than a few street names with nods to the sporting stars that were once performed there. Just a few hundred yards north of where the West Ham Stadium stood, just the other side of the A13 is the Terence McMillan Stadium which does today host local sides Athletic Newman and Clacton, famed for their Ultras.

The TerryMac, as it is known locally, opened just as the West Ham Stadium was closing, with the growing East End community in mind as an integral part of the Prince Regent Playing Fields. Whilst today the games held here, such as for my visit to watch Athletic Newman versus Frenford FC in the Eastern Counties League One South, are played out in front of crowds measured in the tens, the stadium did open in an auspicious fashion back in February 1976 when a fundraiser was held for West Ham United's full-back Frank Lampard. Back in the day when players were loyal to their clubs, playing more than often for their local team throughout their career rather than chasing the cash, testimonials were granted after a player had been at a club for ten years. Ironically, out of the three Premier League players who have been at their club for ten years or more, West Ham captain Mark Noble is the longest serving with 16 years consecutive service (Lewis Dunk at Brighton & Hove Albion and Leighton Baines at Everton is the other).

Entry for the game between East Ham United and West Ham United on that day was 45p, about £3.50 today, where a crowd of 4,250 saw the Hammers, who included Trevor Brooking, Jimmy Greaves and Lampard himself, beat East Ham, who fielded George Best, 8-7.

Thames FC could have made a huge difference on football if the locals had got behind the team. With no London team at the time having a real impact on English football with the right support they could have today been challenging the Manchester clubs for honours and resources....possibly.

**Written by @Theballisround**