

## **Wembley Stadium and me**

Whenever I mention to anyone that I was born and brought up in Wembley I find myself answering ensuing questions with the comment that I was not born on the hallowed turf though I got to know the Stadium in my youth and did indeed get a foot occasionally on the said patch of sacred grass as well as participating in many of the varied activities that went on in the famous Wembley Stadium grounds.

The story starts when my father left the Royal Navy after the First World War. He had been in the Navy as a "regular" for 12 years and reached the princely rank of Leading Stoker. He was now 28 years old and the next few years were to see a dramatic change in his lifestyle. His great advantages included marrying my mother, Blanche Kathleen Riddy, a young woman he had known from early childhood. She wisely persuaded him to hand over his Royal Naval gratuity (£150) and with this she purchased outright the house I was born in (29 St Anne's Road, Wembley) only a few miles from their childhood homes at Stonebridge Park. My father got a labouring job at the Aster motor works only a couple of hundred yards from our house. He joined the Aster works social club, played football, cricket and darts for them, and generally made himself popular. He was playing cricket for them on the day I was born, in fact he just had time to see me before he had to rush off to get to the match (where he made his usual one run before being bowled out).

A few weeks later the people building Wembley Stadium started recruiting labourers and he was accepted for a job there. So began a love affair I had with the stadium and all the many activities that took place there over the next few decades. I was taken to the British Empire Exhibition which was held at the Stadium in 1924 and 1925. Being too young to remember it myself I was told how we had seen the King and Queen (George V and Mary). On a later visit (about 1929) they were accompanied by their young granddaughter (Princess Elizabeth of York). Little did I know that the little girl in question would later become my Queen.

Everything was marvellous to a young boy who wanted to know things but had very little money to help him. But I did have a lot of affection in my family and parents who wanted to ensure that my sister and I improved ourselves beyond our parents' own status. When later on I wanted to find out more about this fascinating Stadium estate and all the many activities that took place there – virtually on my doorstep – my father showed his parental skills. He was always proud of any skills I showed. He it was who shared my disappointment with my school teacher on my first day at school in 1925. The teacher had insisted that numerically 10 was followed by 11, 12 and 13 when Dad and I knew that 10 was followed by Jack, Queen and King. It was pretty certainly Dad who took me exploring places like the India Pavilion which was visited by everyone famous, rich or poor. It was he who took me to the Stadium to see the greyhound racing and the speedway racing. Later on I took to haunting the Stadium. I knew how to slither unnoticed into the offices and collect autographs of a few famous people.

When I was about 16 years old I was one of the few King's Scouts in District and as such I was often invited to be a Scout on duty at important football matches and in this capacity I extended my affection and interest in the Stadium. When the Empire Pool was created I went swimming there; when the skating rink was created I went ice skating there. I noted with interest other activities but never watched a sport there except ice hockey - and of course the original speedway racing. But the affection was always there and it overflowed whenever I was involved with the football matches. On several occasions I did ball-boy duties at football matches. Once it was my duty to sit on the padlocked box in which the

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referee locked the match ball and three spare footballs. This proud duty was carried out while the referee and two linesmen went for their lunch. Then there was that memorable Cup Final day when a few of us kicked a tennis ball about on the pitch during lunch time when all grown-ups were away having their lunches in the restaurant – until we were chased away by a determined group of adult staff returning from lunch.

Wembley itself celebrated Cup Final days and England versus Scotland matches which took place at the Stadium – and Wembley celebrated any other sporting activity. One could always buy England or Scotland flags and favours on International days, club badges and flags on Cup Final days, light blue and dark blue favours on Boat Race day (though we were miles from the Thames). There were Scottish pipe bands, local bands, Salvation Army bands. Wembley must have profited immeasurably from having the Stadium on our patch.