

# CLASSIC SPEEDWAY VENUES

PAST & PRESENT

Philip Dalling

Attending a sporting fixture, for regular supporters and occasional visitors alike, represents a real sense of occasion. Many fans, whatever their sport, have time-hallowed pre-match rituals, favourite areas of a stadium, and a liking for sharing the experience with other individuals, with whom they may have stood (or increasingly, sat) for many years.

The shelves in bookshops devoted to sport boast an increasing number of volumes which concentrate on the venues rather than the players or the matches. Books spotlighting football stadia, cricket grounds, racecourses and other arenas, photographed either from ground level or the air, abound.

Speedway today – and over the 80-plus years since it was introduced to Great Britain – offers a quite exceptionally varied range of stadia – a variety enhanced by the fact that a majority of its venues were originally designed for other sports.

Philip Dalling has visited speedway venues in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. He has also taken every opportunity to become acquainted, through photographs and film, with the delights and the idiosyncrasies of those arenas which, sadly, disappeared before he had a chance to explore them.

This is a highly personal and richly illustrated exploration of more than 50 highly individual homes of speedway, including all of the UK's current tracks and a selection of iconic venues from the past.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Dalling is a journalist and author who has covered speedway racing for more than 40 years, meeting and interviewing most of its great names.

He is an associate member of the World Speedway Riders Association (WSRA) and in addition to four published books on the sport, has contributed articles to magazines and websites including *Speedway Star*, *Backtrack*, *Classic Speedway*, *Speedway Plus*, and many regional newspapers.

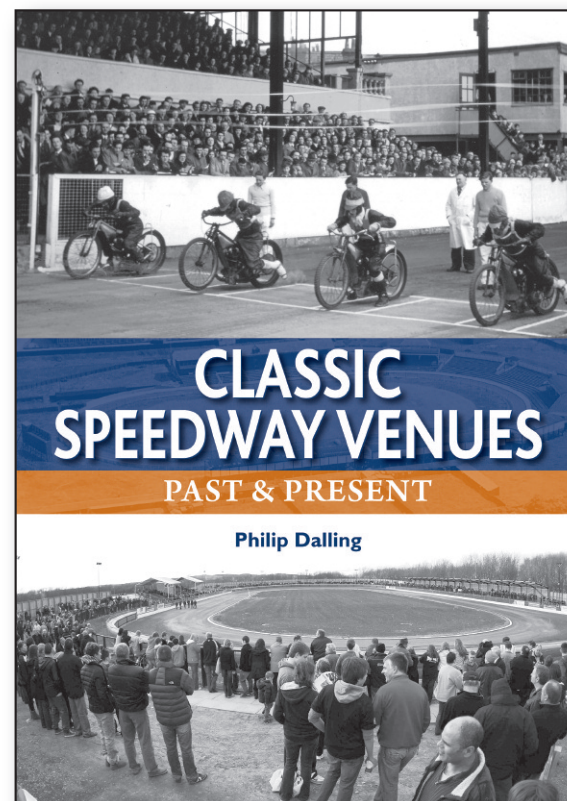
His previous volume for Halsgrove, *Speedway: the Classic Era*, was published in 2011. Although his published work concentrates on the first four decades or so of speedway, from the late 1920s to the end of the 1960s, he enjoys modern day racing, attending meetings whenever possible.

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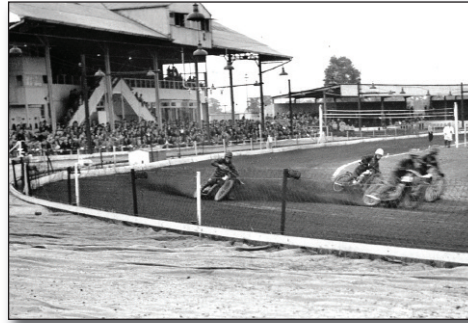
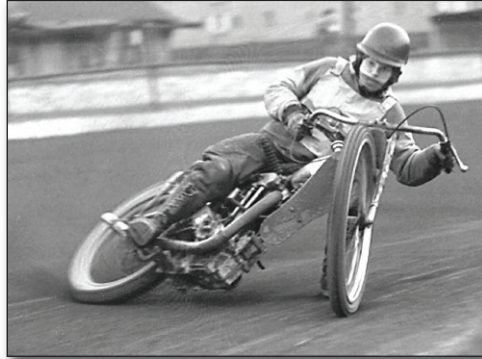
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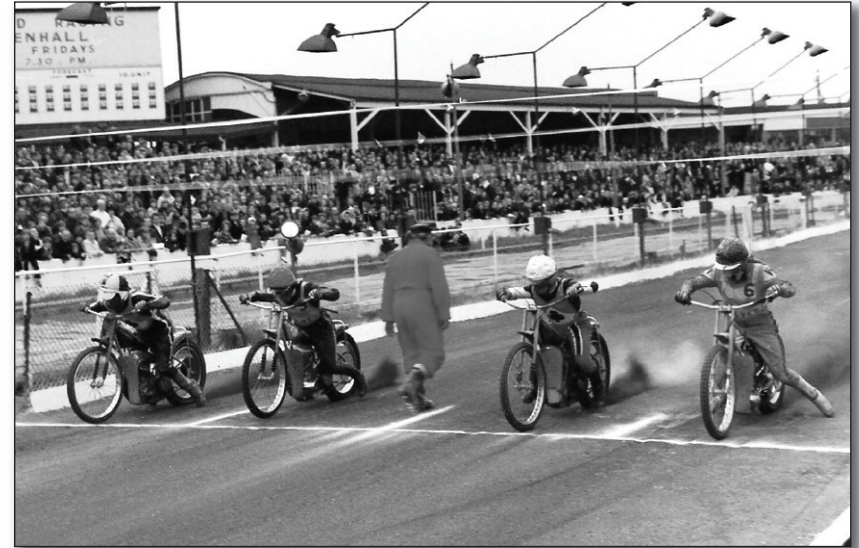
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Right: The White City Stadium, photographed by the late Dick Smart in 1936, showing the main grandstand and the covered terrace on the fourth bend.



Left: Liverpool was the home town of double World Champion Peter Craven and he made some appearances for the Merseyside team before transferring to Belle Vue and glory.



Start line action from Monmore in 1971 when the spectator facilities, including the stand on the fourth bend and cover on the back straight, were still intact.

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The referee's decision may be binding, but it is not always popular with a rider excluded for some offence. As Peter Craven is pictured making his way up the steps to the referee's box to make his point in person – an activity much discouraged by officials. (AC)

Many presenters are excellent, and add to the enjoyment of the meeting. Others should, if the venue is shared with greyhound racing, be confined to one of the kennels until the meeting is over.

The immense pressure of riding speedway at the top level, and in some cases in three different countries in a week, means that one once-common after meeting feature, the get-together in the bar allowing riders to mix with fans, is now relatively rare.

Whatever the case, and often whatever the result (provided the racing itself has been enjoyable), a night or an afternoon at the speedway means a couple of hours away from life's duller routines. A brief and usually satisfying glimpse of speedway heaven. Long may the experience continue to be available for us all to enjoy.

However stimulating the pre-match rituals may be, the fans are essentially there to watch the racing. A packed grandstand at Leicester's former Blackbird Road home watches a 1951 National League Division Two clash between the local Hatters and visiting Motherwell. Johnny Carpenter leads from team-mate Harwood Pike, and cages Rob Lindsay and Joe Crowther (in white). (AC)

Some sixty years later the grandstand is also full at Kye House, and a re-born Leicester are the victors. (BB)

With draws a relatively rare phenomenon in speedway, there is usually a winning team. The hickies side take a once traditional tractor ride, now banned on safety grounds. The visible riders are, from the front, Colin Pratt, Roy Tegg, Brian Davies and John Poyser. (AC)

## Chapter Two

### NATIONAL STADIA

#### – the Stately Homes of Speedway

Wembley The Empire Stadium	Bradford Odial Stadium
Cardiff The Millennium Stadium	Belle Vue Hyde Road
Glasgow Hampden Park	London White City Stadium
London Crystal Palace	

**S**PEEDWAY'S STately HOMES, the sport's largest and most glamorous venues, have over the decades comprised only a very select group of stadia.

For many years the accolade of speedway's jewel in the crown was shared between two iconic venues which, sadly, no longer exist.

The old Empire Stadium, Wembley, was home to the fashionable, successful and for long fabulously well-supported Wembley Lions National League Division One speedway team.

It was also the venue on 24 occasions for the World Championship Final, in the days before the creation of the Grand Prix system, and the setting for innumerable test matches and national and international championships and tournaments.

Belle Vue's Hyde Road Stadium may have been smaller and less grandiose than Wembley, but it more than held its own with its southern rival when it came to history, atmosphere and, arguably, the sheer quality of the racing. Largely, if not entirely, built for speedway, with no greyhound track to act as an extra barrier between the spectators and the action, Hyde Road was a spectacular setting for the exploits of the world's most famous and long-lived team.

Wembley was metropolitan and sophisticated, with a royal box (and occasionally even a royal visitor to a speedway meeting), a swish restaurant, and a reputation for insisting on the highest possible standards.

Belle Vue claimed to be the kiss-me-quick slowground of the world, not just of the north of England. The fans who packed its stands and terraces for major annual events



Wembley Stadium, the spiritual home of both the famous Wembley Lions team and the World Speedway Championships, pictured in its later form, noted all round to stage the 1966 Football World Cup. (AMC)



Example of a double-page spread.