

The night the curtain fell on the Markets Field

Reporter Colum Coomey dropped into the famed Mulgrave Street venue to meet real doggie people who aired mixed feelings about the switch to Greenpark

THE MARKETS FIELD has finally closed its gates, but it will live long in the memory of those who spent a lifetime working there, as well as its ever so faithful patrons.

Upwards of 1,500 fans defied the heavy rain to attend the final night's card last Saturday.

It was a particularly nostalgic occasion for Paddy Kiely, aged 86, who had a 70 year association with the venue on two fronts.

Standing in his customary position alongside the tote last Saturday, and with a tear or two detected in his eyes, the former Doran Builders employee recalled the day that he played a minor cup soccer match at the Markets Field in 1942 for Artisans against Wanderers.

That was the day when running under the stand after the match he had his head split with a piece of timber.

Paddy refereed many major matches at the Markets Field including the visit of Glasgow Celtic in the 1960's, when Jock Stein was at the helm and Kenny Dalglish and up-and-coming star player.

Apart from the soccer connection, he played rugby at the ground in the war years, and remembered in particular a friendly match for St Mary's against Garryowen in 1943.

Another long standing fixture at the track was bookmaker Frank Dunworth, 76, of the North Circular Road, who started his business at the Markets Field as a 23 year old, in 1956.

"I was brought up on Mungret Street and I started coming here I was a 10 year-old".

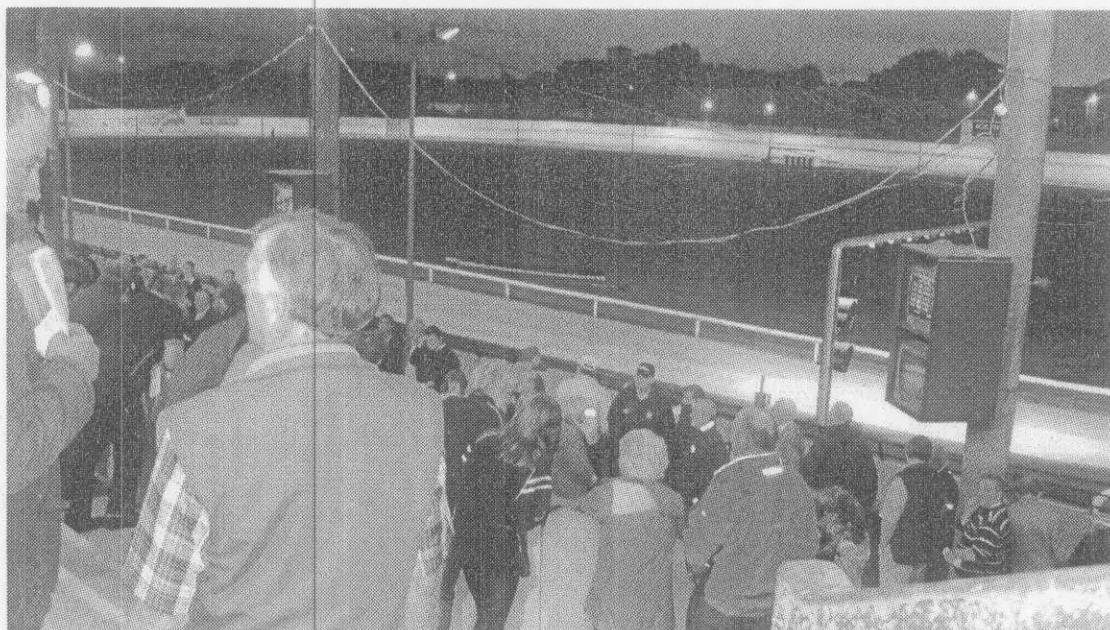
Flanked by his two sons Stephen and Frank Jr, Mr Dunworth did not hide that he was sad to be leaving the track behind, and, indeed, questioned the move from the city centre location to Greenpark.

"There is no need for it, we'll be losing the best track in the country, they should have redeveloped the Markets Field instead".

He has fond memories of those he spent race nights with over the years.

"We had some great characters, the likes of Gerry Brennan, Martin Mullaly, Paddy O'Neill, Stevie Coughlan, Malachy Skelly and Al Hogan".

There were also big punters, but was



reluctant to mention names.

Frank will turn 77 in October when the new stadium opens, but he's not optimistic about the future of the bookmakers at their new location.

"40 or 50 years ago you could get a living out of it but not anymore... it's just a hobby now".

Another bookmaker, almost 50 years younger than Frank, is 28 year-old Hugh O'Neill of Newmarket on Fergus, the third generation of his family to work at the track.

"I was brought in here before I can remember...I started when I turned 16".

He has mixed feelings about the move to the new stadium and the future of bookmakers.

"I accept that we need to move with the times but I think the bookmakers and the dogs are becoming more of a side-show.

"It's not about the gambling anymore, it's about the restaurant and the entertainment. At the same time though, it will bring in more people, I mean you're not exactly going to bring your girlfriend down here".

He remembered when his grandfather had a book at the Markets Field, and there were dozens of others around him.

Punter Tom Hayes is in favour of the

move to the new track: "I saw how greyhound racing was rejuvenated in Cork when they moved to the new stadium in Curraheen; I think it will do the same for Limerick".

The Kerryman, who has been bringing his dogs to the Markets Field for 30 years, described the track as the best in the country.

"I fell out with the race manager in Tralee 25 years ago and I've been coming here every Thursday and Saturday since because it's the finest in the country".

Former race manager Gus Ryan, agreed that the owners and trainers will miss the

only greyhound ever to receive a civic reception in Limerick. When she raced that night she lost, and no wonder she did after spending the day in City Hall".

Other memories that stand out for Gus are the thrill that local winners had when they won a race, especially the St.Leger.

"It was the second most important race in the country after the Derby. When we had local winners they were some occasions.

"Those that come to mind are Gerry O'Dea, Christy Daly, Jimmy Kelly, Willy Barry and most recently Padraig Heffernan's Never Give Up".

So many people worked with him over the years, he said, sometimes you'd remember the dog before the person.

One character who sticks out in his mind was Michael 'The Gyke' O'Sullivan from Hospital, who recently passed away, at the age of 92.

"The owners and trainers would always be pulling strokes on each other. The Gyke wanted to slow one of his dogs in a trial so he stuffed his ears with cotton wool so he wouldn't hear the hare coming".

Gus met his late wife Margaret at the Market's Field in 1970, when she was working with auctioneers Sections.

"You wouldn't believe the amount couples that met here and went on to be married. This was a family venue in the past and you'd have families like the Kirbys and the Reddans here every week".

He almost missed his first date with his future wife when one of his good friend's passed away at the track.

"I could name about nine or ten people who died with excitement here after winning races. Mick Loughnane had a heart attack after winning the Leger with Time Up Please in 1971".

Soccer folk also have very happy memories of the Mulgrave Street venue, singling out the Ewan Fenton and Eoin Hand management years, when crowds of up to 8,000 flocked there.

Some famous names graced the venue, including the legendary Stanley Matthews in 1953, who travelled over to present the Shield Trophy to Limerick, who were collecting their first major honours. The team was managed by Rory Keane, from Prospect, and ex-Swansea FC.

'Out at the new stadium you will have people who won't know the difference between a dog and a goat.... former track manager, Gus Ryan

track: "Limerick was always a great selling track, if you had a winner here, he was sold to England".

Born in Tipperary, but having spent most of his life in Limerick, Gus was employed at the track on and off for 40 years before deciding to call it a day last year.

"There were 400/500 people coming in here every night. However, it was a different scenario back then, they were all dog people. Out at the new stadium you will have people who won't know the difference between a dog and a goat".

However, it's a move he believes is long overdue: "We're the last track to be done which is madness because the Mid West is the biggest breeding area in the country".

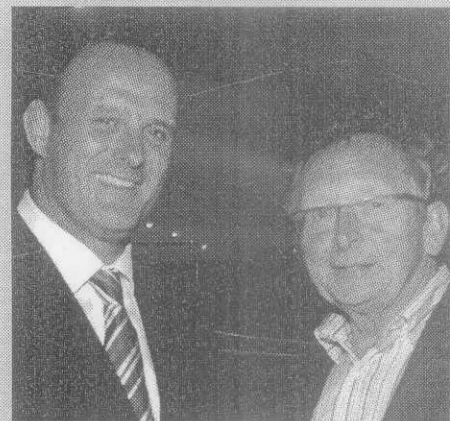
One of his greatest memories was in 1968 when Pauline Wallace's Derby winner, Yellow Printer, arrived in Limerick.

"There were throngs of people here to see her when she arrived over on the Monday for a trial and broke the track record; it would be a health and safety issue if it was repeated today.

"She was invited back for a civic reception on the Saturday; I think it was



Pictured at the final night of Greyhound Racing at the Market Field, Orla Strumble IGB with John Wall, Tralee.



Declan O'Halloran, manager New Greyhound Stadium, and Michael Field.



Richard Crehan, track director with Josephine, Dylan and Luke Sweeney, attending the final meeting at the Greyhound Track.



Elaine Hourigan, Dawn Quinn and Claire Fitzgerald.



Mike and Sarah Loughnane, Nenagh.

