

The night the Markets Field had its final send off

Mary Crotty with "Inislosky Fox" pictured saying goodbye at Market Field's Greyhound Stadium.



'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...'

Reporter Colum Coomey was at the Mulgrave Street venue to say a final goodbye to a slice of Limerick history

HUNDREDS of avid greyhound racing enthusiasts, young and old, firmly believed that the Markets Field would outlive them.

So many promises had been made over two decades that even mere talk of a new home had almost been abandoned.

The day did arrive, however, when the gates were shut for the last time on a wet mid-July evening.

It was time to make way for the new €20 million stadium at Greenpark.

Upwards of 1,500 fans defied the heavy rain to witness the end of an era on that eventful night.

Even those who had been strong advocates of change were seen to shed a few tears, and left to harbour memories of great occasions.

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

Standing in his customary position alongside the tote, ready to pounce for what he believed would be a safe bet in the opening race on the card, 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 split his forehead 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 took his position for the first time 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".



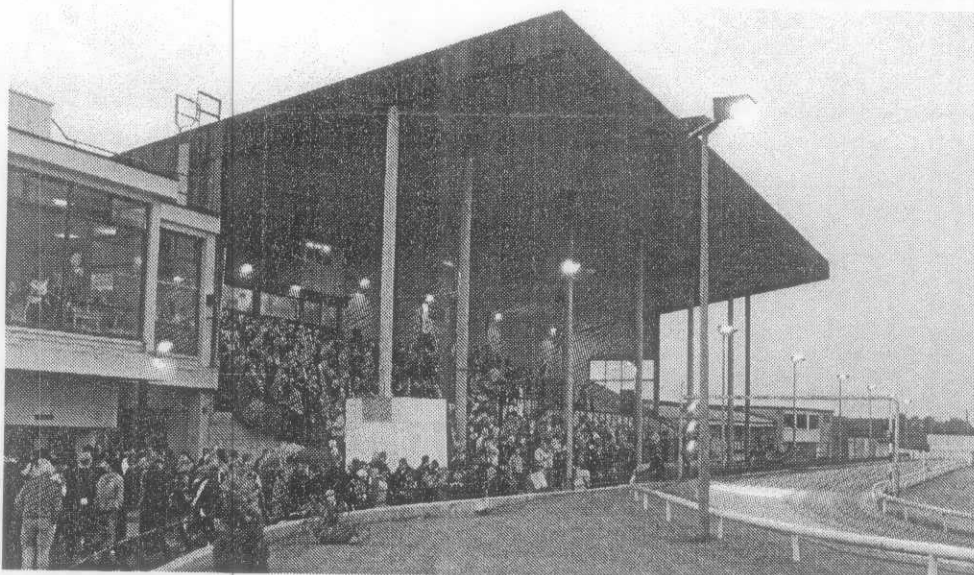
Mike and Sarah Loughnane, Nenagh.

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".

No doubt he had a change of heart when he went to visit the Greenpark facility, what with all its mod cons.

He recalled fond memories of many great race nights 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.

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

Another bookmaker I met, and almost 50 years younger than Frank, was 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.

"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 was very much 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 own-

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 Kirby's and the Reddan's 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 10 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.

Rory Keane, from Prospect, managed the team; he had plied his trade with ex-Swansea FC.

On the way out, a few hardy souls broke into Auld Lang Syne. Well they might!



Orla Strumble IGB with John Wall, Tralee.

ers and trainers would miss the 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.

"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 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".