

THE OPENING OF THE FIRST WEMBLEY STADIUM

With the new Wembley Stadium finally a reality after so many delays, it seems an appropriate time to look back at the first version of Wembley. In this article I shall examine the background to the building of the original stadium before going on to consider the reaction of the popular press (*Daily Mail, Daily Express, Daily Herald, Daily Mirror*) to the 1923 FA Cup Final, when the stadium was used for the very first time. The occasion, as is well known, was somewhat chaotic with the capacity hugely exceeded although the match between Bolton Wanderers and West Ham United was successfully played to a conclusion.

Although Wembley Park had been linked to the tube network from 1901, when the Metropolitan Railway Company extended its line out to Harrow-on-the-Hill, the area remained a semi-rural environment through until after 1919. For some time a structure known as 'Watkins' Folly' had stood where the stadium was eventually built. An attempt to copy the Eiffel Tower, only the first tier of this structure was ever erected and this was eventually dismantled in 1908. The land had subsequently provided a home for Wembley Park Golf Club from 1910 until April 1922, when the development of the new stadium began in earnest.

In the aftermath of the Great War a proposal was mooted for an Imperial Exhibition to be held on the land at Wembley Park and the Football Association was approached with a view to supporting the venture. The FA had been staging the FA Cup Final at Stamford Bridge as a temporary measure as Crystal Palace had been requisitioned as a War Service Depot and was unavailable for the 1919 final. The feeling was that refurbishment of the Crystal Palace venue would not be as cost effective as supporting a brand new stadium and in May 1921 the FA Ground Committee visited the Wembley site, soon afterwards signing a 21-year contract with the exhibition company to stage the Cup Final at the yet-to-be-built venue.



The crowd on the pitch before the match.



The first piece of turf was ceremonially cut by the Duke of York in January 1922 and with a phenomenal speed, certainly not matched by modern contractors, the stadium was fully completed on 24 April 1923, just days before the Cup Final was due to take place. In the intervening 16 months some 250,000 tons of earth had been excavated, in its place went 25,000 tons of concrete, 600 tons of reinforcing steel, 1,400 tons of structural steel and half-a-million rivets. The stadium was ready for its first taste of action, although it should be noted that there had been no trial run and this was the first-ever football match to be staged by the exhibition company, factors which undoubtedly contributed to the events that followed. The Empire Exhibition itself, costing some £12 million, covering some 219 acres and displaying the merits of all corners of Britain's vast empire, did not open until April 1924, shortly after the second Wembley Cup Final.

There was little hint of the chaos to come in the newspaper previews of the match. The *Mirror's* coverage was typical of all four popular papers: printing a helpful map and instructions on how fans might travel to the stadium on public transport. The stadium was believed to hold 125,000 fans, some 5,000 greater than the previous highest attendance at a Cup Final, and there was no suggestion that this might be exceeded, a sentiment confirmed by the authorities in their decision not to make the match all ticket. The *Daily Mirror* predicted large numbers of visitors from Lancashire, but these figures were minimal compared to the overall capacity: 5,000 from Bolton, 1,500 from Oldham, with substantial numbers also expected from towns such as Blackpool, Bury and Preston.

However, the coverage on Monday 28 April reflected the chaos that reporters had witnessed. "Chaos and Disorder at Cup Final," noted the *Herald* rather soberly, while the *Express* was somewhat more hard hitting: "Stadium Scandal: Who is to Blame?" In contrast the *Mirror* and the *Mail* both focussed on the need for a public enquiry: "Inquiry demanded into Cup Final stampede" (*Mirror*) and "Cup Crush Inquiry at Once." (*Mail*)

When considering the press coverage it is useful to divide this into four areas – the chaotic scenes within the stadium, the match itself, attempts to allocate blame and suggestions for remedies. The chaos surrounding the match attracted more coverage than the actual play in all four papers, varying from three times as much in the *Mail* to a marginal difference in the *Herald*. The crowd, by all accounts was good humoured and relatively passive – as shown by the picture on the cover of this issue – and this factor was crucial in ensuring the events did not take a more serious route. All are agreed on a number of factors. The numbers actually entering the stadium were in the region of 200,000, well in excess of the previous highest attendance at a British match, when some 127,000 had watched the Scotland-England match at Hampden in 1912. The sequence of events, probably taken from the official statement issued by the stadium authorities, was as follows: the stadium doors were opened at 11.30, by which time there were already many thousands waiting outside. Around 1.45 the stadium was full and an order given for the gates to be closed. However, public transport was still depositing fans at a rate of 1,000 per minute and within a short period of time there were 30,000 outside. These fans eventually broke through the flimsy surrounding gates and into the stadium adding to the chaos. Many of those arriving close to kick-off time never caught sight of the pitch, while numerous ticket holders (tickets were sold in advance for the seating areas) failed to gain entry.

The arrival of the King was a turning point. The crowds parted to allow his car through and cheered heartily when he entered the stadium. Almost at the same time Police reinforcements arrived by taxicab, motorcycle and other means, and these included a small mounted contingent. "Led by a lion-hearted inspector on a snow-white, prancing horse" (*Express*) they slowly cleared the field of play. This event was noted by the other sources, for example the *Mirror* in one of its headlines stated, "Cup Riot Prevented by Police Resource, Officer on a White Charger Hero of the Day," and this is of course one of the most famous stories linked to the event. The pitch was not cleared until around 3.45, with the teams kicking off at 4.00, an hour late.



Bolton's early goal perhaps calmed things down a little, but when West Ham came close to scoring after ten minutes the crowd encroached again. However, this time the police were ready and there was a delay of a further ten minutes before play could continue. The game resumed, "with a seated policeman or too-prominent spectator having occasionally to be shifted for a corner kick." (*Mirror*) Conditions were such that at half time the teams remained on the pitch, but once Bolton's second goal went in many began to leave the stadium, reducing the crush considerably.

The chaotic scenes outside the stadium were described in detail by a *Mail* reporter who found himself caught up in the throng and forced through a narrow tunnel into the pitch area along with 30,000 others. Inside, some reporters appear to have been more concerned about the invasion of the press box by outsiders than by the threat to life and limb outside. The police seem to have given up the struggle to control the masses early on, "Policemen ran up and down trying to stem the human tide, and vainly blowing their whistles for assistance, till they gave the job up in disgust." (*Herald*) Bodies, possibly of those who had fainted, were rolled over the top of the crowd to the front. Others, both men and women, climbed into the rafters of the roof area in a bid to secure a decent vantage point. At least one man fell from such a position only to have his fall broken by a girder before he was helped to safety by the masses below. There were many casualties, up to 1,000, of which at least 22 spent the night in hospital. Casualty lists printed in the papers give a total of 12 names: three from Lancashire (although only one from Bolton itself), one from Wisbech in Cambridgeshire and the remainder from London (mostly from east London). The *Herald* reports "hundreds" of fainting cases, which is perhaps unsurprising given the general crush. Most of the more serious cases had fractured arms or were suffering from abdominal injuries, although one had an eye injury after being hit by a stone. Those unable to gain entry were frustrated although threats of violence were few and far between. However, the caretaker of the exhibition company was left to deal with complaints at the company offices alone and rather dryly noted, "Most of them realised that I could do nothing, but one or two wanted to fight me." (*Express*)

As for the match itself, there was no doubt that Bolton deserved to win. West Ham, the underdogs, as their Second Division status warranted, seemed overawed by the occasion and failed to match their performances in earlier rounds. They were nevertheless gracious in accepting defeat. Club captain George Kay was reported in the *Mirror* as saying, "I shall make no excuses, for I think the better team won, but I must say that West Ham did not touch their real form." Despite the difficult conditions, the Hammers seem to have harboured no thoughts of making any formal protest, or of demanding the match be replayed. In contrast 'Syrian' in the *Herald* wrote, "My one regret of the game is that in view of the circumstances, the result was allowed to stand. It was not a fair test, and the match should have been played over again."

The *Express* is perhaps the most explicit of the four sources in dealing with the question of allocating blame for the events. Within an editorial titled 'Human Niagara' five possible factors were considered. Two of these, the players and police, were immediately discounted. Consideration is given to three further factors: the Football Association, the stadium authorities and the crowd, with blame being firmly attached to the latter ("The direct responsibility must rest with them"). The *Mirror's* reporter produced a less wordy analysis but with a rather different conclusion. The two factors considered most blameworthy were firstly the lack of police presence combined with the fact that stewards and stadium officials possessed inadequate experience; secondly, and arising from this, the arrangements within the stadium which resulted in the lower tiers of terracing being filled first rather than the upper tiers. "There was plenty of room on the upper tiers to have accommodated the whole of those who flocked into the playing pitch." The *Mirror* also noted that, "To the man in the street the F.A. will always be held to blame." The *Herald* noted the statements issued by both the FA and the stadium authorities absolving themselves from blame but elsewhere summed up the problems concisely: "The arrangements for getting to the ground were admirable but arrangements for dealing with the crowd were execrable." The *Herald* is also the only source to criticise the police, albeit rather mildly: "Scotland Yard may have mishandled the situation and withheld its reinforcements too long, but the conduct of the policemen and



officials on the spot was beyond praise.” The *Mail* carried a lengthy statement by the deputy chairman of the exhibition authorities, Sir Travers Clarke, announcing an inquiry into the events, although apart from a comment in the match report that, “Stewards and officials seemed to know nothing. They were useless,” there was no attempt to attribute blame on a wider scale.

Despite all the descriptions of chaos and the rather lesser attempts to consider who was to blame, there were few suggestions of how to improve the situation, and indeed little comparison with crowd control in other situations of a similar nature. The *Mirror* was the exception here. Their reporter was perhaps more experienced than those of the other sources (“It was my thirty-fifth final tie”), and could remember back to 1901 when the crowd at Crystal Palace had stormed the gates, but on that occasion an adequate police presence had ensured the pitch remained clear. He also makes comparisons with the way large crowds were dealt with at Hampden and elsewhere in England. “I remember a semi-final at Leeds [presumably the Barnsley-Everton tie in 1909-10] when mounted police had to clear the pitch, and I would say they had a hundred, and did their work quickly. On Saturday with a much bigger crowd under a couple of dozen mounted men were available, and they did not arrive until after the mischief was done.” At Hampden policing and ticket arrangements were more than adequate for a crowd of 125,000, as had already been demonstrated.

In conclusion, it is evident that the fact that all four popular papers raised the question of “Who was to blame?” albeit in different ways suggests that this was the crucial question being asked by both fans and reporters in the immediate aftermath of the match. It is significant here that only the *Mirror* reporter draws to any extent on precedent when analysing the events. He attributed most blame to the arrangements for policing and stewarding, thus implicating both the FA and the stadium authorities (who had both been quick to issue a denial). The *Herald* certainly attributes some blame to the police for their slowness in responding, but also to the imbalance between the arrangements for transporting fans to the venue and those for dealing with the fans once they arrived. The *Mail*, clearly unwilling to criticise those in authority, blames the stewards themselves rather than the stewarding arrangements, while the *Express*, with a similar agenda, directs its ire at the fans. In the aftermath a number of decisions were made to ensure there was to be no repeat of the chaos, with future Cup Finals to become all-ticket affairs and the capacity of the ground reduced to 125,000. Modern health and safety measures may seem a bit pedantic at times, the new Wembley having to be introduced gradually to its full capacity, but a glance back to the events of 1923 provides logical reasons why this should be the case.

Main Sources: Daily Express 23-30 April 1923; Daily Herald 23-30 April 1923; Daily Mail 23-30 April 1923; Daily Mirror 23-30 April 1923; G Green, The History of the Football Association 1863-1953 (London, 1953); Neil Wilson et al, Wembley 1923-1973, the official Wembley story of fifty years (London, 1973).

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