

THE EARLY YEARS

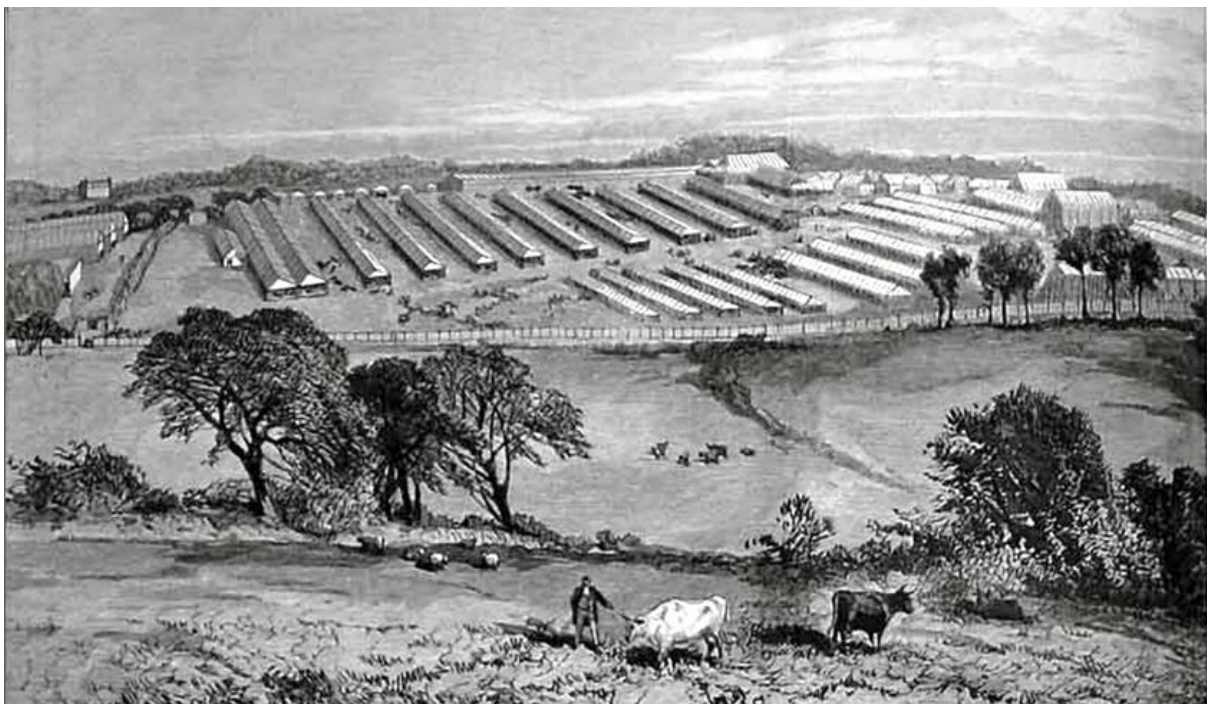
Home Park Field

In 1821 the field was known as “Holm Park Field”. Holm or Holme, as a name, refers to a residence near flat land surrounded by streams or a water meadow. This field was the last Plymouth venue, in 1830 watched by a large crowd, of the brutal sport of ‘Bull Baiting’. In the 1851 Census the name is now “Home Park Field”, home to Thomas Row (Dairyman) renting 21 acres, resident in the Cottage (presumably Gilbert Cottage). The meaning of “Home Park” is the nearest field to the farm. The 1881 and 1891 Censuses show Gilbert Cottage, Gilbert Lane, to be the home of John Budge (Agricultural Labourer), but the 21 acres, including Home Park Field, is rented by William Henry Stoneman (Dairyman) who lives in Wake Street. His rent to landowner Lord St. Levan is £60 a year which caused him financial difficulty by the early 1890s so he gave up a portion of the 21 acres which Lord St. Levan then leased out to become the Plymouth & Devonport Recreation Ground, Home Park.

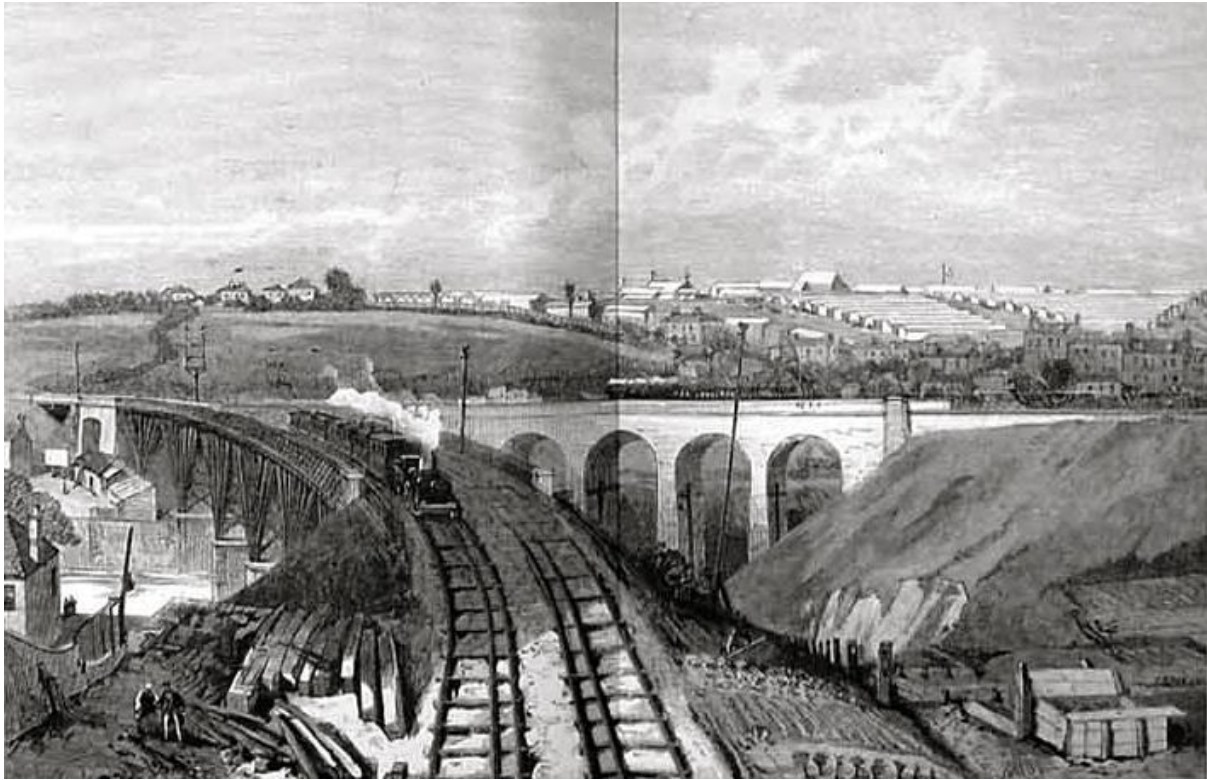
A COURSING MATCH
Will Take Place
In a Field near the Milehouse Inn, adjoining the last Pathfield known as the Exhibition Pathfields, between Mr. A. GROVE'S NELL, of Plymouth, and Mr. HORTON'S LARRUPS, of Knaokersknowle, for £5 a-side, the best of 15 Courses at Rabbits. To commence at Three o'clock precisely. This is a Genuine Match. Run rain or shine. Admission—3d. Saddle Horse 6d. Carriages 1s. Any dog let loose during the Coursing a fine of 2s. 6d. will be strictly enforced.

The “last Pathfield known as the Exhibition Pathfields” is Home Park Field. Post Bull Baiting it was used for another blood sport, Coursing (greyhounds chasing rabbits). The above is in 1885.

(Western Daily Mercury, 5th November 1885).



The Exhibition Fields, the Royal Agricultural Show in 1890. Running across the middle is Alma Road, lined with hoardings to prevent free views. Top left, in front of the farmhouse, is the site of where Home Park was to be built two years later. (Illustrated London News, 21st June 1890).



The Royal Agricultural Show in the Exhibition Fields 1890 from the south. The artist is situated on the bridge in North Road over the railway line to Millbay Station. To the right is North Road Station.

(Illustrated London News, 21st June 1890).

Home Park before Argyle

By September 1892 a large gang of workers had started levelling the ground in preparation for the building of the Plymouth and Devonport Recreation Ground at Home Park. A Limited Company was formed that issued 8,000 shares at £1 each. The cost of the wooden grandstand and enclosure was estimated to be £7,000. The man behind the scheme was Plymouth builder Alfred Richard Debnam who purchased most of the shares. His plans were to build an oval quarter-mile banked racing track and a football field within its midst. The earth cleared from levelling the ground was used for the banking. Debnam was a member of the Plymouth Cycling Club which, since 1877, had held very popular races on the parade ground of Raglan Barracks, Devonport, and the Royal Marine parade ground, East Stonehouse. The War Office took permission away and there was nowhere else capable of holding these regular races in Plymouth.

The impetus behind the football field was to bring professional League Association football to the Three Towns (Plymouth, Devonport and East Stonehouse) spurred on by the large crowds the Football League (formed 1888) was attracting to grounds in the English Midlands and the North. This business venture began on the 21st September 1892 as the Home Park Association

Football Club was formed to achieve that goal. The new club's treasurer was Alfred William John Debnam, the son and building assistant to Alfred Richard Debnam. It was to be a 'Wednesday' football club so it could use the best civilian and Forces players in the district who belonged to 'Saturday' clubs. The keenness of these West Country pioneers was evident immediately as they were regularly seen practicing in the evenings on a field (Gilbert Cottage Field?) next to the Home Park construction site. Their colours were to be chocolate and blue, later changed to gold and black.

To finance these professional plans the most prestigious and successful Rugby football club in the South-west, Devonport Albion, were invited to rent Home Park and negotiations completed. Their matches were mostly on Saturday's so fitted in with the Home Park A.F.C. arrangements. Albion were very unhappy with their current ground in isolated Bladderly Lane (now Beacon Park Road) a half-mile to the north of Home Park. The ground, entered into by a gap in the hedge from the narrow country lane not wide enough for two carriages to pass, had a very basic grandstand, the very first in Plymouth, also built by Debnam. To say Home Park was built for the Albion Rugby Club, which has been written many times since, is not correct.

HOME PARK RECREATION GROUNDS,
MILEHOUSE.

OPENING OF THE NEW GROUND.
GRAND FOOTBALL MATCHES
FOR THE
EASTER HOLIDAYS.

SATURDAY, APRIL 1, 1893.
ALBION v. ABERAVON.
Kick off Three o'clock.

EASTER MONDAY, APRIL 3.
ALBION v. PENARTH.
Kick off Three o'clock.

Admission Sixpence. Extras—Enclosure, Threepence; Grand Stand, Sixpence; Reserved Seats, One Shilling.

Special Notice.—Grand Stand Tickets (numbered and reserved) price 1s. 6d., including admission to the ground. May be obtained from Mr. A. H. Swiss, Stationer, Fore-street, Devonport; or from Mr. J. W. Barter, 43, Frankfort-street, Plymouth.

Note.—On EASTER WEDNESDAY HOME PARK v. WARMLEY (Association), Cup Holders of Gloucester; on EASTER SATURDAY ALBION v. TORQUAY (League Match). 7930

The first two rows of the stand will be reserved up till 2.45 each day for the Albion season ticket holders.

The opening programme of matches at Home Park in April 1893. (Western Daily Mercury, 1st April 1893).

Home Park, with its wooden grandstand on the pitch's southern side and open-air terraces on the other three, came alive for the first time on Saturday 1st April 1893 as 5,000 attended Albion's 10-4 points defeat of Aberavon, from Neath, South Wales. On Wednesday 5th April 1893 the Home Park Association Football Club won 3-nil in a match against Warmley, from Bristol, before a 1,500 crowd. This match was also the first in which goal-nets were used anywhere in Devon and Cornwall. After the 1893/94 season Albion tried unsuccessfully to

reduce the high rent they paid for the use of Home Park and moved back to unloved Bladderly. Their problem was solved by them building the Rectory Ground in 1896. In their place, at Home Park, the Plymouth Rugby Football Club were founded in October 1894, to rival Albion, and they did. Which of the two was the greater was a matter of much contention between the citizens of Devonport against those of Plymouth, as the two clubs refused to play each other for some years.

The Home Park A.F.C. continued their professional quest at Home Park. Becoming termed "The Parkites" amongst fans, they brought the first professional League club to Home Park in 1894/95, Small Heath (later known as Birmingham City), followed by Woolwich Arsenal, and from the Southern League, Millwall Athletic. Without the money from the rent paid by Albion and the soaring cost charged by Football League clubs to make the long mid-week journey to Home Park in-between their League matches, the professional League aspirations withered and finally ended with the Home Park A.F.C. becoming defunct by 1896.

Though Home Park was one of the finest football grounds in the South of England, the remaining tenant, Plymouth Rugby Football Club, very successful from a playing point of view, were disappointed with the crowd numbers attracted to Home Park. The ground, beyond built-up Plymouth, was still not served by regular public transport. From Plymouth, supporters had to walk the narrow, often muddy, up-hill pathfield from Pennycomequick and on match days there were bottle-neck delays at the stiles. In frustration, the club built a substantial football ground at South Devon Place (now the Astor Playing Field), which was on the frequent new electric tram service to Prince Rock, and left under-used Home Park in 1899. The Plymouth Rugby Football Club, who played in familiar, green, white and black colours, and Devonport Albion, cherry and white, were both defunct by the First World War. Revived after the war, it is the Plymouth club that is more closely related to today's Plymouth Albion.

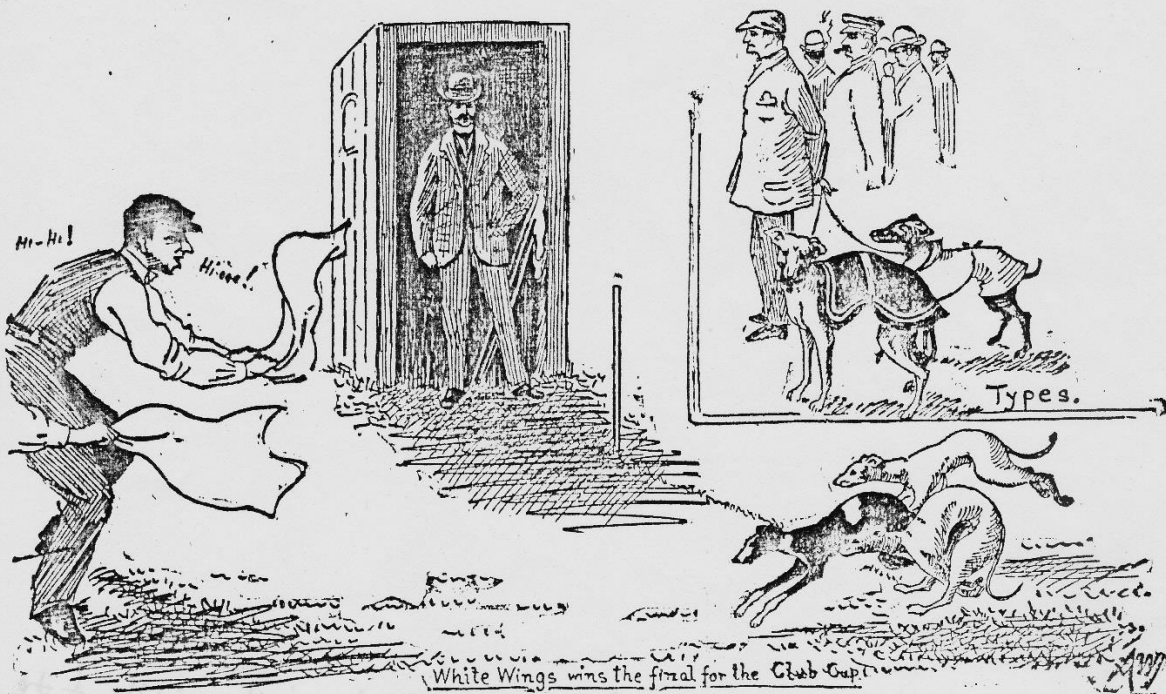
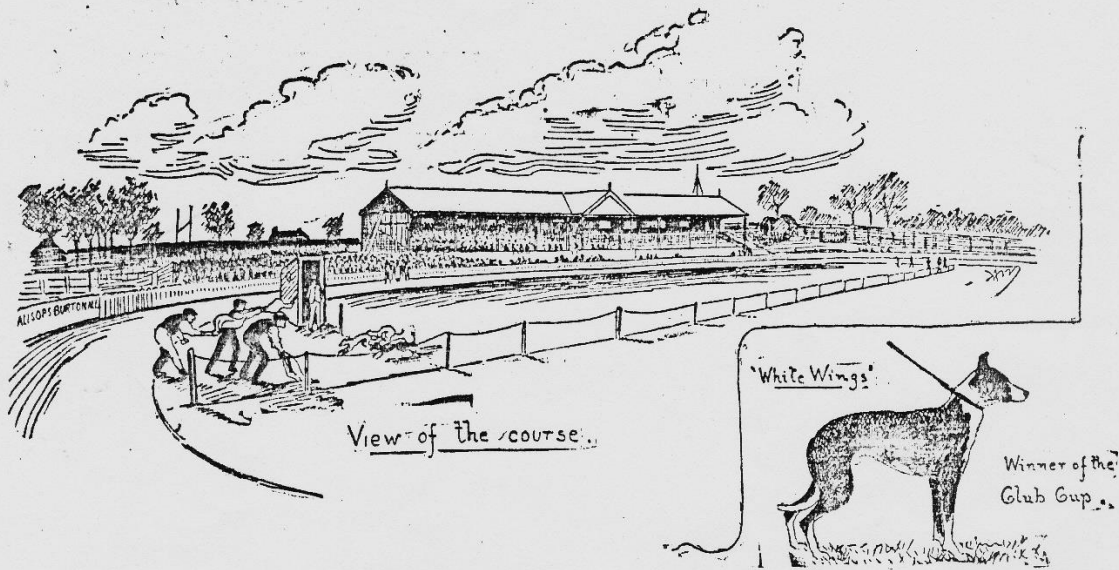
Home Park taken by the Argyle Football Club

The Argyle Football Club was founded in 1886 and its first jersey colours were described as black and green. Later the predominance became green and black. In 1894 they became defunct, at the very same time that the Home Park Association Football Club were taking steps to become a professional League club. In turn, after the Home Park A.F.C. became defunct the Argyle Football Club were reformed in 1897. Joining the club as an official and soon after becoming President of Argyle was Clarence Newby Spooner, the senior partner of the Spooner & Co. department store in Bedford Street/Old Town Street. It was his acumen and money that led to professional League desires being achieved with Plymouth Argyle in 1903. *(For more see the 'History' chapters on the Greens on Screen website: greensonscreen.co.uk).*

It was quite short-sighted of the Plymouth Rugby Football Club to leave Home Park for the inferior and cramped South Devon Place because in 1900 the Devonport and District Electric

AN OLD GOOD-FRIDAY MORNING SPORT.

WHIPPET RACING AT HOME PARK.



SKETCHES AT THE MEETING OF THE WEST OF ENGLAND RACING CLUB.

Whilst football clubs came and went at Home Park, the West of England Whippet Racing Club stayed loyal, running races on Wednesday afternoons and Bank Holidays. Note, in the top picture, to the left of the grandstand, is the roof of Gilbert Cottage, and further to the left are rugby posts on the playing pitch referred to as Higher Home Park. Also of note, some advertising was evident around the pitch and on the grandstand roof from early on in the ground's history. The advertisement in the top illustration is for "Allsop's Burton Ale".

(Western Daily Mercury, 15th April 1902).

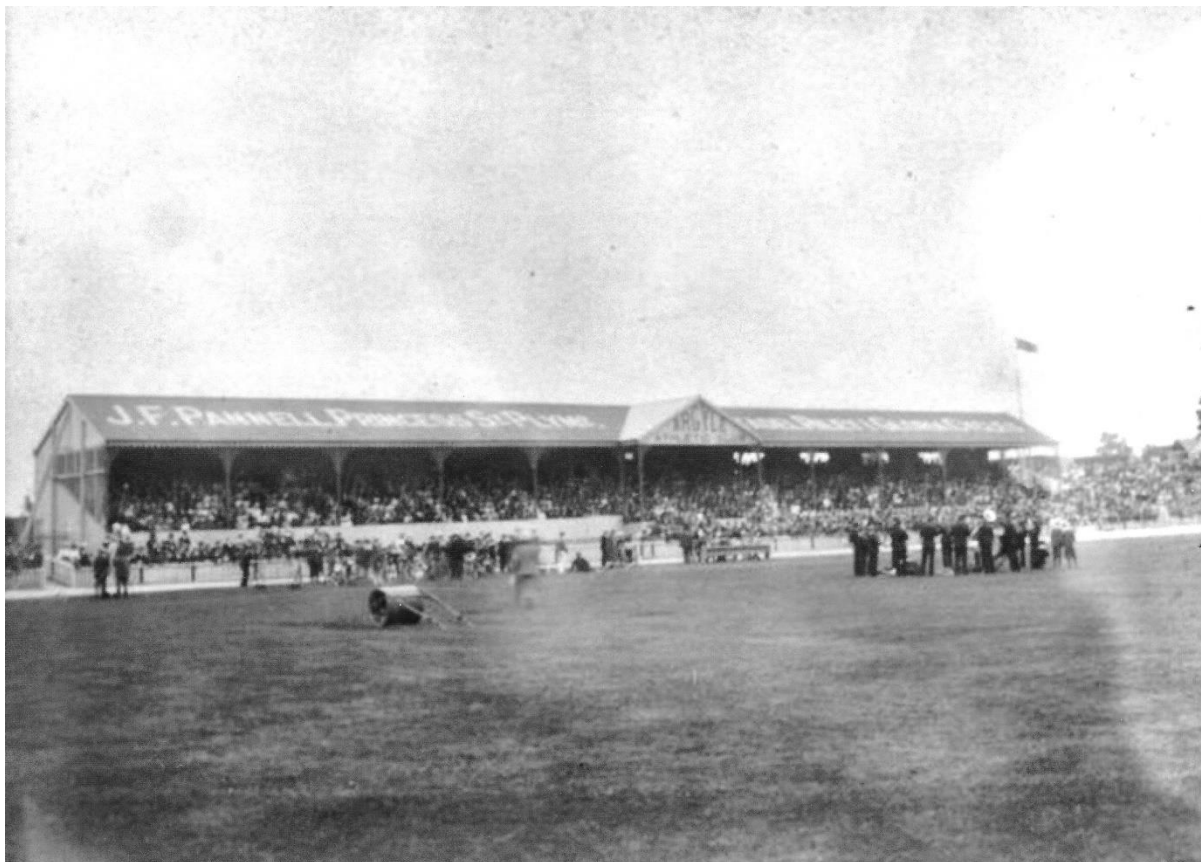
Tramway was being built that, when opened on the 26th June 1901, connected Home Park to frequent public transport for the first time. Peverell and Pennycross were being developed and the suburbs were beginning to encircle Home Park; the tram depot was being built at Milehouse. These buildings were eventually demolished in 1985 but the depot today is on the same site. It was the owners of the Devonport Tramway, the British Electric Traction Company (BET) who intended to take on the lease of largely forgotten and faded Home Park. This is when the Argyle president, Clarence Newby Spooner, seized the opportunity and took on the lease himself for the intentions of the Argyle Football Club.

Prior to moving to Home Park the Argyle Football Club had used various open-field pitches around Plymouth, the last of these being Longbridge, next to the River Plym (now Sainsbury's car park) from being reformed in 1897 to 1898, then they moved across the road to Marsh Mills (the lowest known Argyle attendance was here on a stormy Saturday for a Devon Senior League match on 6th January 1900 of '3'. Half of the 9 pence takings went to the Devon F.A.). After Home Park was leased and used from September 1900, Argyle continued renting and playing some matches at Marsh Mills until April 1901. This was due to the number teams Argyle fielded.

Whilst the main endeavour was to bring professional League football for the first time west of Bristol, Clarence Newby Spooner added many new ideas to the Argyle Club, forming the Argyle Athletic Club in 1899. It had its own social club, first in Mutley Plain, then larger and tastefully decorated premises, paid for by Spooner, in Old Town Street. There were many branches for sport and leisure available to the Argyle members and their families, within the premises, at Home Park and beyond, depending on the activity. Each branch was run by its own elected officials. In correspondence they all used Argyle Athletic Club headed note paper but were separate within the organisation. In 1900 the Argyle Rugby Football Club was formed and won the Devon Junior County Cup in its first season. The Argyle Cricket Club, founded 1899, from 1900 at Home Park played matches on the football pitch during the summer, using a matting wicket. Big hitters, on occasion, put the cricket ball through the glass panes at the end of the grandstand, and some tried to clear the grandstand roof.

At Home Park from 1901 to 1903 the Argyle (Association) Football Club embarked on a programme of exhibition matches against top professional League clubs to achieve their own status as a professional League club and to gain acceptance, despite the geographical difficulties, to ultimately be recommended by the Football Association and voted into a League by the professional clubs in that League. The other must was to entice crowds into Home Park. These matches achieved this, the biggest attendance at Home Park was 12,000 versus Nottingham Forest, a record in the South-west for either code of football. To make full use of Home Park and give it publicity beyond the district, under the name of the Argyle Athletic Club, other major spectacles were held on the grounds banked track.

Argyle brought Home Park back to its former glory with a lick of paint and improved its facilities, including resurfacing the banked track. On the gable, at the centre of the grandstand was proudly painted "ARGYLE ATHLETIC CLUB". To keep the focus on Home Park and the publicity rolling at a national scale, bicycle, motor bicycle, and athletic races were held for valuable prizes which brought in the best participants from around the UK and further afield. During the event the prizes were placed on a large table, close to the finishing line in front of the grandstand, and guarded by a policeman in full uniform for effect.



Bank Holiday motor bicycle races at Home Park circa 1902. Note the prize table placed in front of the centre of the full grandstand. A brass band on the pitch entertains the crowd between races. The advertisement on the roof is for John F. Pannell, Princess Street, Plymouth, Cycle Maker & Repairer. Argyle flag flying on the end of the grandstand. At the other end are the glass panels that batting cricketers aimed their "6s" at.

Olympian style multi-day "Grand Athletic Carnivals" were staged that involved a combination of types of racing. The motor bicycle racing events were particularly spectacular and thrilling, and brought danger to the crowd as well as riders. At the Home Park meetings world time and speed records were broken and there were crashes where riders were hurt which, on occasion, broke through the wooden picket fence holding the spectators back. The surface and banking at Home Park was said to be sufficient and therefore safer than some other tracks. Thankfully nobody was killed but this did happen at a similar event held on the County Ground, Bristol in 1903. A crash hurled two machines into the crowd. One rider and ten injured spectators were taken to the infirmary, of these, three young boys died.



Home Park Bank Holiday Sports 1902. The start of a motor bicycle race.

GRAND ATHLETIC CARNIVAL.

HOME PARK, PLYMOUTH.

Greatest Bank-Holiday Attraction ever
Presented — August 4th, 1902.

Excursions running from all parts,
Foot, Bicycle, and
MOTOR BICYCLE RACES.

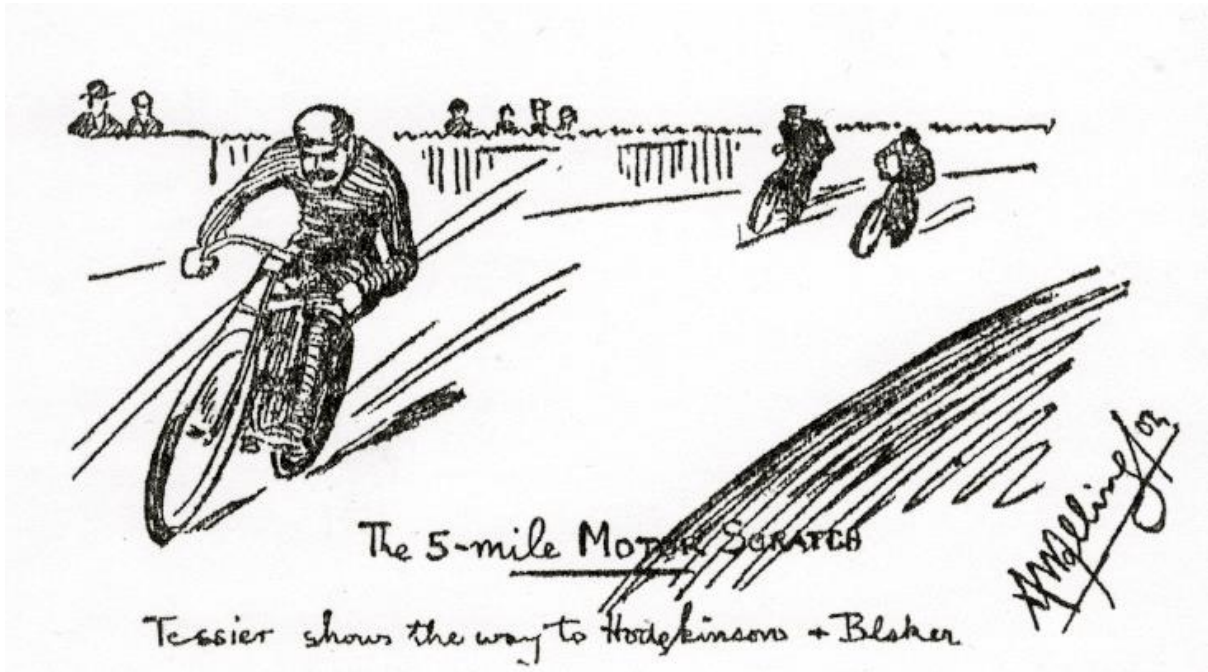
Value in	Prizes	£200	Value in	Prizes.
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120 Yards (Open) Foot Handicap.
440 Yards (Open) Foot Handicap.
Entry Fee, 1/- each event. A.A.A. Rules.

1/2-Mile N.C.U. Bicycle Championship.
1 Mile (Open) Bicycle Handicap.
1 Mile (Open) Bicycle, Scratch.
5 Miles (Open) Bicycle, Scratch Race for
Argyle 50 Guinea Vase.
Entry Fee 1/- each event. N.C.U. Rules.

1 Mile Motor Bicycle Scratch Race.
5 Mile Motor Bicycle Scratch Race.
5 Mile International Contest for 25 Guinea Vase.

ENTRIES to be forwarded on or before JULY 26th
to G. M. TYLER, Hon. Sec. Sports,
Argyle Club, Plymouth.



At Home Park, the 5-mile MOTOR SCRATCH. Tessier shows the way. Flat caps were worn whilst racing, sometimes reversed, in days before crash helmets. (Western Daily Mercury, 27th June 1904).



Start of bicycle race at Home Park June 1902.

THE PLYMOUTH ARGYLE YEARS

Home Park 1903 to 1930

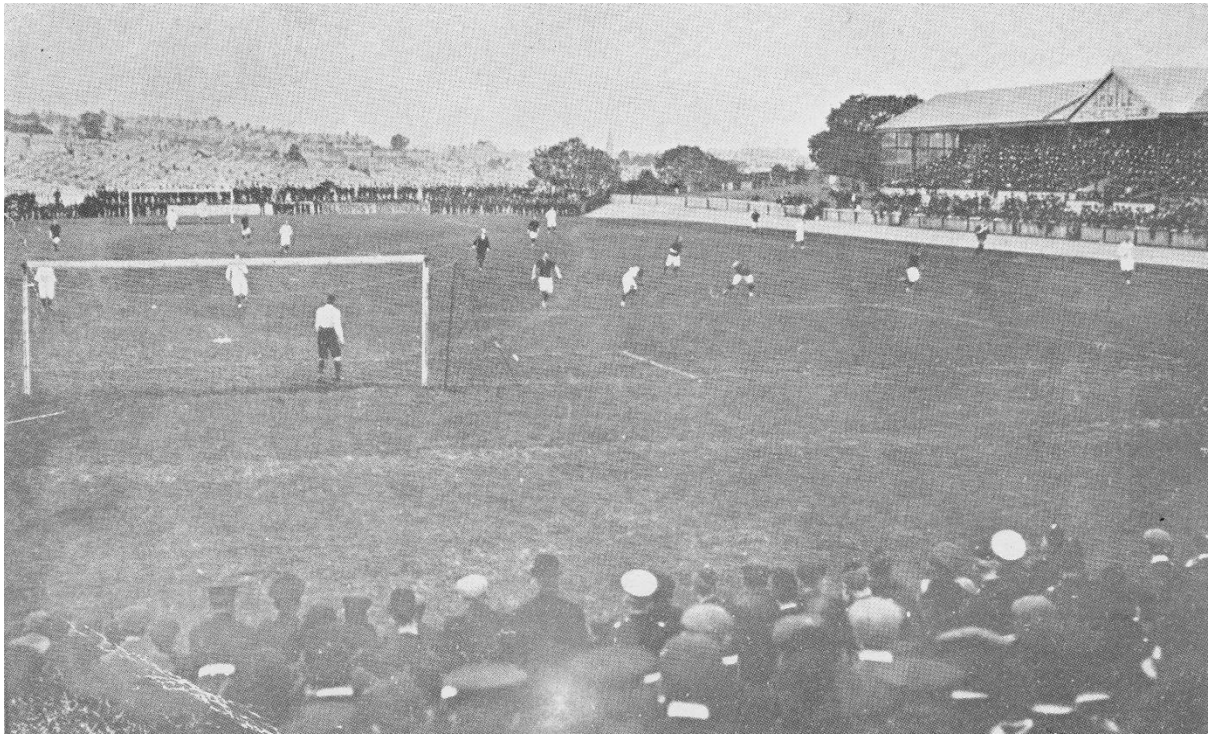
Argyle, with such meticulous planning and heavily financed by Clarence Newby Spooner hurdled all difficulties with ease. The Football Association, keen to expand major football territory into the far west, recommended their acceptance straight into the Southern League Division One, thus the geographical distance grudge held by some clubs was overcome at the expense of better known clubs that were better geographically placed. Plymouth Argyle were founded and registered as a professional League club for the 1903/04 season. Football Association rules would not allow them to be part of the Argyle Athletic Club, so Plymouth Argyle rented the ground at a privileged rate from their lease holding close relation. The fortunes of Home Park and the changes to it are, of course, closely linked to Argyle. The club's very existence has come under threat on more than one occasion, particularly in 1907 when they were rescued by the Argyle Athletic Club and in 2010/2011.

Home Park has gone through changes since 1903. After the first 1903/04 season supporters complained of having no shelter from the elements on the north side. So a small wooden "Flower-pot" stand, sheltering up to 1,000 was quickly put up in the north-west corner.

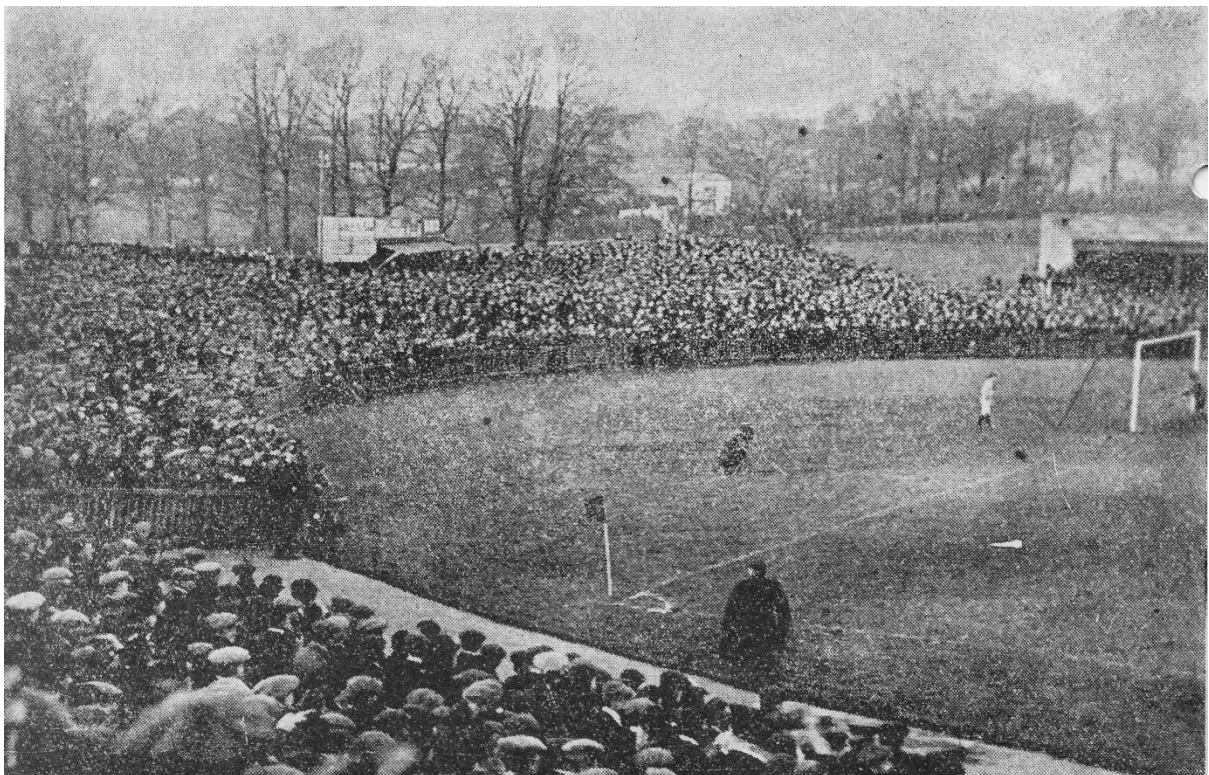


Home Park 1904. The exposed north side with Higher Swilly Farm beyond. The Flower-pot stand was put up across the corner with the Devonport-end for the 1904-05 season. (The Book of Football 1905).

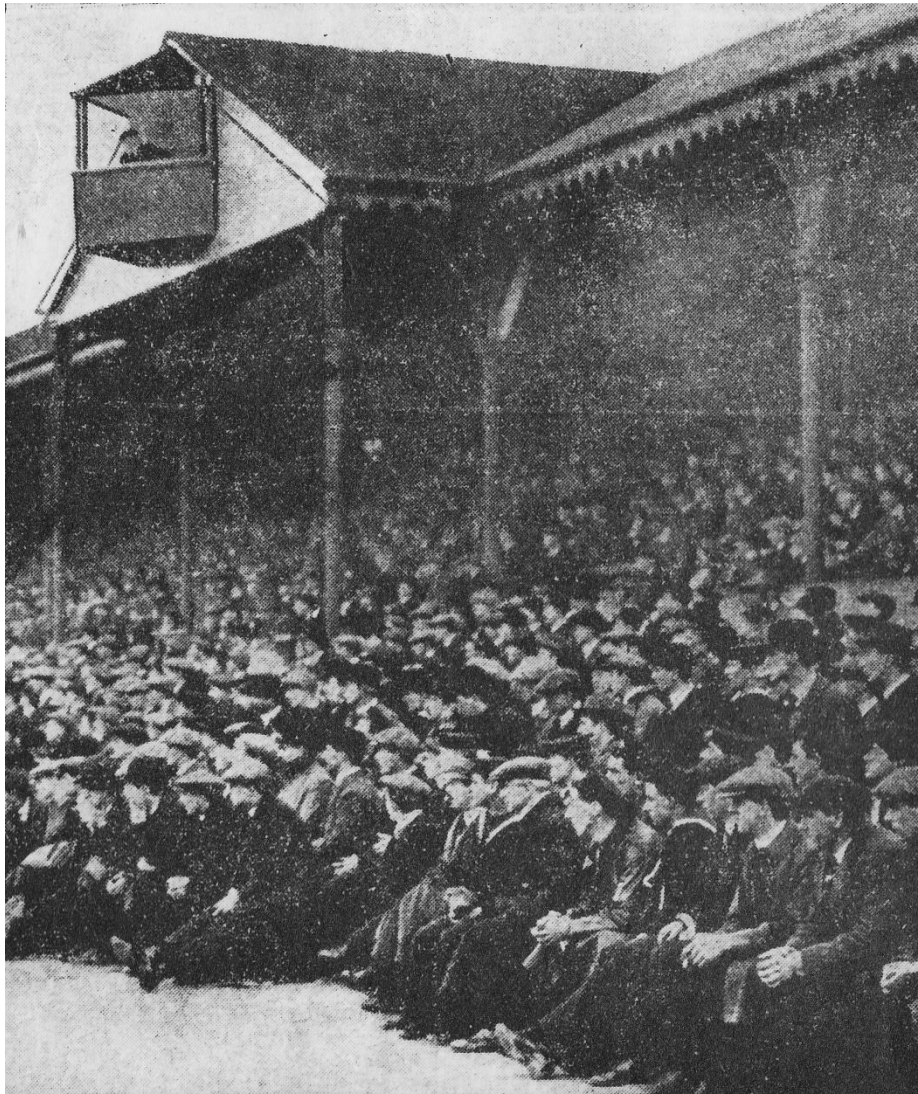
Things stayed little changed at Home Park until 1930.



Home Park 1905, from the Devonport end, match versus Norwich City on 2nd September. Note the spectators at the other end can be seen standing on the banked track which was allowed. It was particularly painful on the muscles of adults to stand on it for the length of a match. Children found it a lot easier



Home Park, Devonport end, Saturday 10th February 1912. The end to the Flower-pot stand is to the right. The crowd are standing on the banked track. The highest terrace on the ground has gained a catering hut. Crouched between the corner flag and the goal is a cinematographer filming the match versus Northampton Town. Moving picture highlights of Argyle matches could be watched, amongst other news, at the St. James' Hall in Union Street. (Western Daily Mercury).



Home Park, Saturday 7th March 1914 versus Crystal Palace. A reporter's telephone box has been built on to the gable of the grandstand and is being used for the first time. Thanks to this addition the Evening Herald was able have Argyle "Football Editions" on sale very quickly (Western Daily Mercury 9th March 1914).



24,287 at a packed Home Park, from the south-west corner, on Saturday 8th January 1921, F.A. Cup 1st Round match versus Rochdale. Note, to the right the reporter's telephone box can be seen jutting out from the grandstand gable. To the left is the Flower-pot stand, and to its right a catering hut that had a large "OXO" sign on the front, below the counter. (Western Morning News,



Taken from the grandstand, Home Park in 1919, a 'Junior' gathering of the Plymouth Co-operative Society. Towards the top left can be seen the "OXO" catering hut, pointed out in the previous photograph.

(Plymouth Co-operative Society Diamond Jubilee 1860-1920 booklet)

In 1925, Plymouth Corporation bought the land from the Right Honourable John Townsend, Baron St Levan, and became the football club's landlord. From the 1920-21 season Plymouth Argyle had become members of the new Football League Division Three (South), finishing 11th. Then followed the heartbreak of finishing 2nd in six consecutive seasons without being promoted, which was followed up by a 3rd place in 1927-28, and a 4th place in 1928-29. At least it can be claimed that Plymouth Argyle had a playing record during the 1920s that was second to none.

Home Park 1930 to 1941

Argyle gained promotion for the first time during the 1929-30 season as "Champions", at a time of 2 points for a win, finishing seven points ahead of the 2nd placed team. Home Park was to be fundamentally altered before they played their first match in Football League Division Two (now known as the Championship). As soon as the season ended work started to build a stand over the Devonport end, and the old original wooden grandstand was to be demolished and a much larger, pitch length, modern grandstand replace it. The old banked racing track was to go and the terracing brought in closer to the playing surface edge forming a more rectangular aspect. In all, the capacity of Home Park was almost doubled.

It was intended that the construction of the covered Devonport end would partly be from material yielded from the demolition of the near 40 year old wooden grandstand, but it was found not to be fit for purpose. Instead it was to be built steel framed and covered with corrugated iron, costing £1,700 and paid for by the Supporters Club and donations. Its

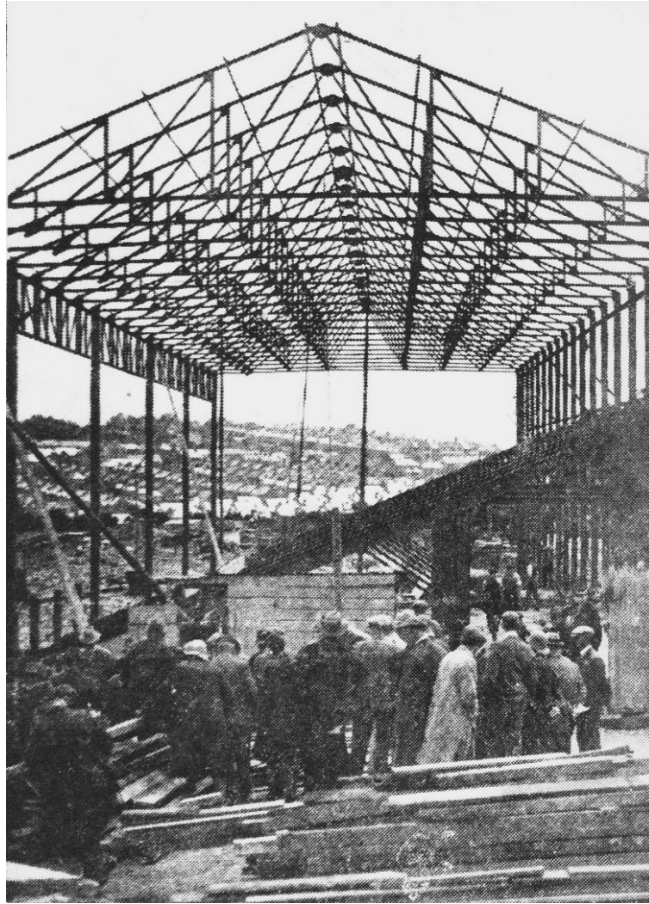
dimensions were 185 feet wide and 75 feet deep, big enough to hold 7,000 spectators. The grandstand was similarly built of a steel and covered in corrugated iron, with all the necessary club facilities underneath, and costing £11,000 to be paid for by Argyle. The work appears to have been mostly completed by the first League fixture, versus Everton, played on Saturday 30th August 1930 in front of a ground record 34,916. The 1904 Flower-pot stand survived the changes. Outside of the ground there was also work going on to prepare the new Central Park.



Beyond Gilbert Cottage in Gilbert Lane is Home Park being re-built. The original wooden grandstand is demolished and the roof over the Devonport end is up. Cutting across the bottom left corner is the old pathfield from Pennycomequick just prior to being widened and surfaced in the conversion of farmland into Central Park. Along it new trees have recently been planted. To the right is a goal post of Higher Home Park (Cottage Field) circa June 1930.



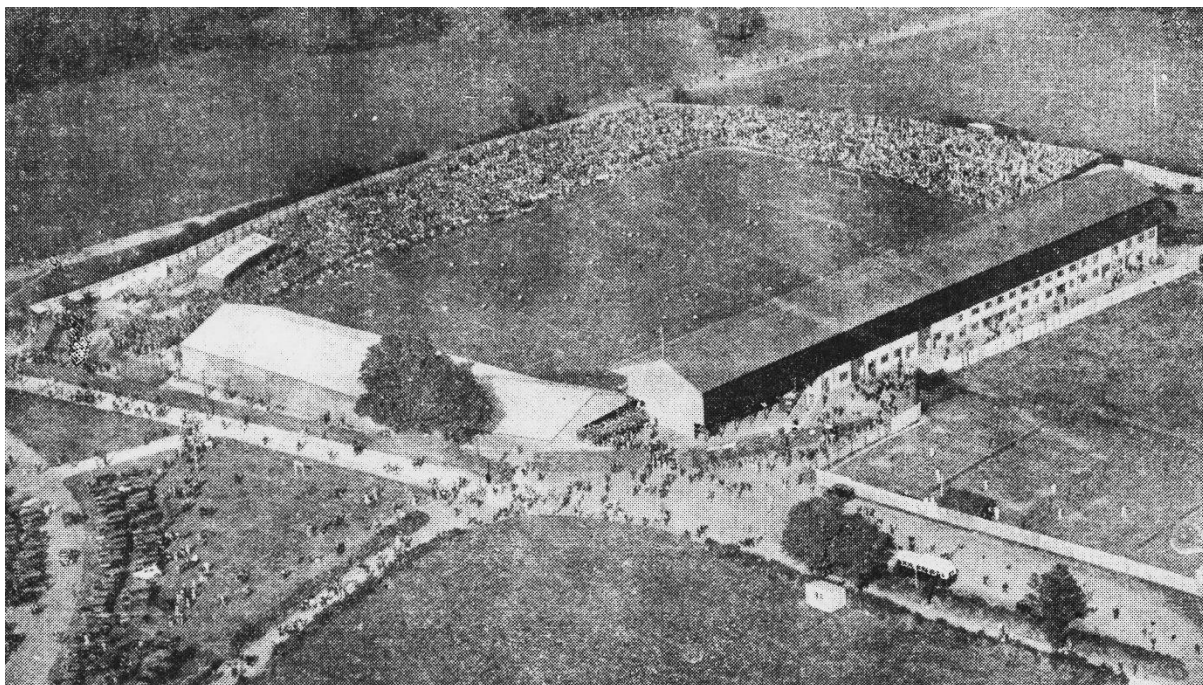
Demolition of the Home Park wooden grandstand complete. (Western Morning News, 17th June 1930).



The newly erected steel structure of the replacement grandstand frames Mutley beyond. Piled in front is the wood of its predecessor being sold off to buyers (Western Morning News, 27th June 1930).



The thirty-year-old wooden Flower-pot stand was the victim of the first fire at Home Park. After a match (no pun intended) a fire was spotted, thought to have been caused by a smouldering cigarette. It was doused before the stand was totally destroyed. The burnt timbers were cut away and after repair it continued truncated. In fact, what remained was to survive longer than the new grandstand opposite to it. (Western Morning News, 24th April 1933).



1933 aerial view of Home Park showing much change to the ground and the former farm land around it, now open as Central Park since 1931. The repaired fire reduced Flower-pot stand sits next to the covered Devonport end. Running along the southern side is the grandstand (it looks to be even longer than the current 1951 built grandstand). The banked racing track has gone, increasing the terracing. The Central Park pathways show many spectators making their way, in eager anticipation of watching Argyle play Manchester United in the first Football League Division Two fixture of the 1933-34 season. Most of the 26,936 crowd went home happy, Argyle won 4-0. (Western Independent, 27th August 1933).



Part of the 43,426 crowd, the second highest attendance in the history of Home Park, where the grandstand met the covered Devonport end. Originally a mistake put the attendance higher but this was later corrected. The match was an F.A. Cup 3rd Round fixture versus Huddersfield Town played on Saturday 13th January 1934. (Western Morning News, 15th January 1934).



In shocking stark contrast to the Home Park record crowd photographs. The eleven year old grandstand destroyed by German bombs during the Blitz, in March 1941.