

# LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT THE OLYMPIC WAY STORY

Millions of people walk along Olympic Way in Wembley Park every year. Many, on their way to the stadium from the underground station think of it as “Wembley Way”, but it has been “Olympic Way” since 1948, when it was opened by the then Minister of Transport, just in time for the Games of the XIVth Olympiad. People had first walked this route more than fifty years before, and this article will help you to discovery its story.

**The opening plaque for Olympic Way, now tucked away near the Wembley-bound bus stop at Wembley Park Station.**

[Photo by Philip Grant]



Wembley Park got its name when the grounds of the Page family’s 18<sup>th</sup> century mansion near Wembley Green were landscaped by Humphry Repton in the 1790’s. A hundred years later, much of this estate had been bought by the Metropolitan Railway Company, which had extended its line out of Baker Street to Harrow-on-the Hill in 1880. The company’s chairman, Sir Edward Watkin, planned a large pleasure ground, where thousands of people from crowded

inner London could come (via his railway) to enjoy their leisure time. It would be dominated by the Wembley Tower, taller than Monsieur Eiffel’s tower in Paris.



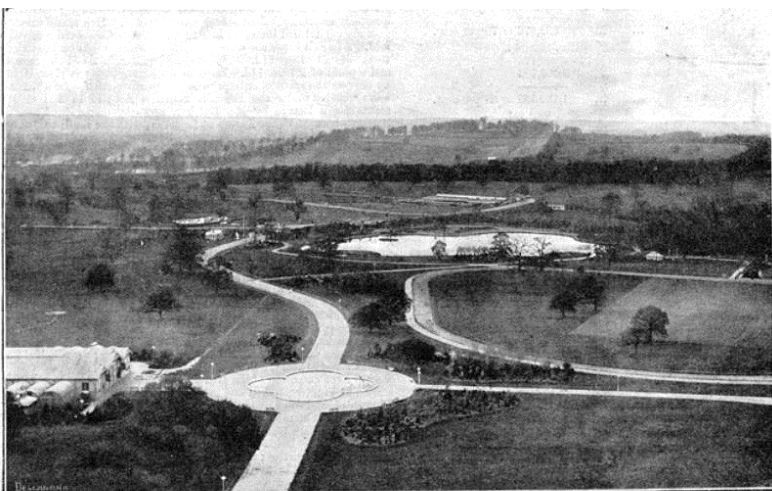
**A poster for the Wembley Park Pleasure Ground, c.1894, showing the planned tower.**

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

The pleasure grounds, and the Wembley Park Station which would serve them, opened in May 1894. The first stage of the tower was completed in time for the 1896 season, with spectacular views across London on a clear day. However, financial problems and worries about the foundations sinking into the underlying clay meant that it never went higher than the 47 metres of this viewing platform. Part of the main drive from the entrance in Wembley Park Drive to the tower would later be followed as the route of Olympic Way.

**View from the first stage of the Tower, towards the station and Barn Hill, May 1896.**

[Source: Brent Archives]



WEMBLEY PARK.—VIEW FROM THE TOWER, OPENED ON MONDAY.



The abandoned stump of Wembley Tower (which by then had been dubbed “Watkin’s Folly”) was demolished in 1907, but the pleasure grounds remained in use until the First World War, with part of them used as a golf course. In 1921, the vacant site, within easy reach of Central London and with a good railway service, was chosen as the location for the proposed British Empire Exhibition (“BEE”). The Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII), as President of the



organising committee, was keen that the scheme should include ‘a great national sports ground,’ and this was the first BEE building to be started in 1922.

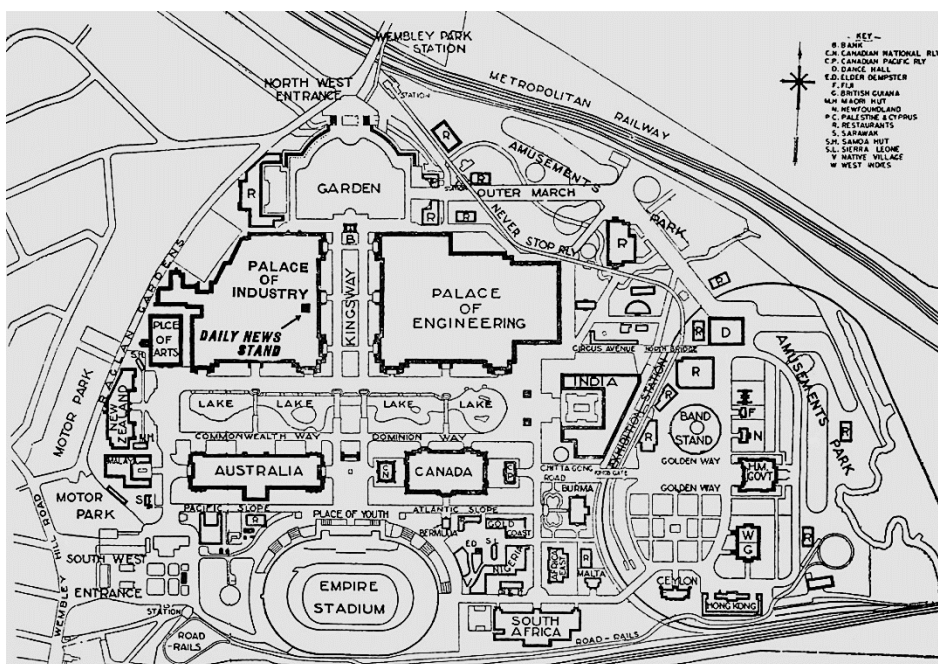
**The Empire Stadium (Wembley Stadium) emerges in 1922, surrounding the four craters left by dynamiting the foundations of the demolished Wembley Tower.**

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

The Empire Stadium was finished in time to stage the 1923 F.A. Cup Final, but the estimated 200,000 fans who came to the event had to cross a huge building site in order to reach it. The BEE itself was not ready to open until April 1924, by which time there was a direct route from Wembley Park Station to the stadium.

**A 1924 guide map of the British Empire Exhibition.**

[Source: Brent Archives]



Once inside the entrance gates, the way passed through gardens (where a lake in the pleasure grounds had been), before following a wide avenue called Kingsway (now the section of the route between Fulton Road and Engineers Way).

After crossing two bridges over the BEE’s new artificial lake, the avenue continued between the pavilions of Australia and Canada, to the foot of the steps up to the stadium.



**Looking up Kingsway towards the stadium in 1924, with the Palace of Industry on the right.**

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

The Exhibition finally closed on 31 October 1925. The intention had been that all of the buildings would be demolished (even the stadium, despite the Football Association being keen to continue holding its Cup Finals there), and the liquidator agreed to sell the whole site for £300,000. Most of the national pavilions were demolished, but in 1927 Arthur Elvin, who had made profits from selling off the concrete rubble and steel from some of them, managed to buy the stadium for £122,500. The Wembley Stadium and Greyhound Racecourse Company's name reveals his original idea for the stadium's main use. Motor-cycle speedway racing followed as another regular event from 1929, and the crowds who came to both could still walk from Wembley Park Station through the former BEE grounds. However, nothing was done to improve this route until after the Second World War.

The International Olympic Committee had visited Wembley Stadium in 1939, when considering London as a possible venue for the 1944 Games. The war had meant that no Olympics were held in 1940 or 1944. Early in 1947, London offered to stage the 1948 Games, after the by then Sir Arthur Elvin offered his Wembley buildings free of charge for the event. He had already discussed plans for improved access to the site with London Transport, Wembley Council and the Ministry of Transport, and was willing to build and pay for a new £120,000 access road.

Plans for the new road, 500 yards long and 45 feet wide, were soon in place, although there were delays in getting government approval for the labour and materials involved, because of tight post-war building controls; but by the middle of 1947 the work was underway. Even though the war had ended two years before, more than a third of the 120 men working on the project were German prisoners-of-war. Although there was opposition to using what some regarded as "forced" or "slave" labour, the government argued that it was justified, as the German surrender in 1945 had been unconditional, and the war Germany had started was the reason for Britain's labour shortage.

**German prisoners-of-war at work  
on Olympic Way, 1947.**  
[Still from a film made at the time]



One of the obstacles in the way of the new road was the reinforced concrete colonnade between the BEE Palaces of Industry and Engineering. This had to be demolished before the

roadway could be built. A section of the BEE's artificial lake also had to be filled-in. The work continued into 1948, with the withdrawal of PoW labour, and the workers' repatriation to Germany, beginning in March.



**Workers with pick-axes demolishing the  
colonnade, with the "twin towers" of the  
stadium just visible through the mist.**  
[Still from a film made at the time]



Wembley Borough Council had also agreed to make improvements to the road from Forty Lane to Wembley Park Drive (at a cost of £100,000, paid for by Middlesex County Council), which would link with the new “stadium avenue”. Their plans had to be co-ordinated with both Wembley Stadium Ltd and London Transport, who were adding a pedestrian subway under Bridge Road. By early May 1948, work was underway on the roundabout at the junction, and the concrete retaining walls for the slope down from this to the new road. It was anticipated that the work should be finished by the end of June, and Sir Arthur Elvin met the Mayor on site to discuss the final details. The Council approved Sir Arthur’s suggestion that the new road should be called Olympic Way, and that the Mayor should invite the Minister of Transport to open it in early July.

**Alfred Barnes M.P. opening Olympic Way on 6 July 1948, with the Mayor of Wembley, Cllr. H.S. Sirkett, and Sir Arthur Elvin (third from right) alongside him.**

[Source: Brent Archives]



Alfred Barnes M.P. duly opened Olympic Way on 6 July 1948, and just over three weeks later this impressive approach to the stadium was thronged with crowds heading to the opening ceremony for the Games. On the afternoon of 29 July, the final runner in the torch relay carried the Olympic flame along here, and it also saw the dramatic final stages of the marathon race, on the last day of the athletic events. By the end of the Games, Olympic Way had already established itself as “the” route to what was now the world famous Wembley Stadium.

**The torch used for the final leg of the 1948 Olympic torch relay, which was presented to the Mayor of Wembley as a gift to the borough.**

[Source: Brent Museum]



**Crowds heading to the stadium along Olympic Way during the 1948 Games.**  
[Image from the internet]

By the 1960's, several office blocks had been built along the section of Olympic Way nearest to the station, between Bridge Road and Fulton Road. This latter road served the many factory and warehouse businesses which were housed in the huge former Palaces of Engineering and Industry, on either side of the middle section of Olympic Way. Between Engineers Way and the stadium itself, the land on either side was used as car parks for Wembley events, including F.A. and Rugby League cup finals, England football international matches and, in 1966, the football World Cup finals.



**Olympic Way packed with football fans in the 1960's, including F.A. Cup Final day 1965 (right).**

[Images from the internet]



The excitement over England winning the World Cup could not hide the fact that Wembley Stadium was getting old, and that it had become run-down after Sir Arthur Elvin's death in 1957. The early 1970's brought new owners of Wembley Stadium Limited, who cleaned-up Olympic Way and made improvements to the stadium itself. One of the changes made to improve pedestrian access was a raised concrete concourse, with ramps up to it from either side of Olympic Way, which allowed the crowds to pass above Engineers Way on their way to and from the stadium.



**< The concrete concourse leading to the stadium.**

[Image from the internet]

**Olympic Way in the 1980's, with football fans on the pedestrian ramps to the concourse >**

[Image from the internet]



In 1979, permission was given for the BEE Palace of Engineering building, on the east side of Olympic Way, to be demolished. Further planning permissions given by Brent Council in 1980, for new commercial and office buildings on the site, included conditions that Wembley Stadium Limited would sign a "Section 52" agreement to 'make up Olympic Way and the subway between Wembley Park Station and



Olympic Way to a standard suitable for adoption,’ and that the company would ‘contribute towards the cost of improving the Olympic Way / Bridge Road junction.’ My research has not yet discovered whether or when Brent Council did formally “adopt” Olympic Way as a public highway.

The Council did adopt a Wembley Stadium Area Local Plan in July 1984. Action on improvements to Olympic Way was triggered in 1991, when England was chosen to host the 1996 European Football Championships (with Wembley as the venue for a number of matches, including the final). In 1991, Brent’s Traffic Division applied for, and was given, planning permission for the pedestrianisation of Olympic Way, and for building eight sales kiosks and new public toilets along it.

As well as replacing the roadway, the scheme included a much wider subway under Bridge Road, linking a new Olympic Square beside the station with the full-width pedestrian route to the stadium. The subway was opened as the Bobby Moore Bridge in September 1993, by the widow of the World Cup winning England football captain. Its walls were covered with



murals made of coloured tiles, featuring famous events from the history of the Stadium and Wembley Arena.

< The 1966 World Cup mural, and Bobby Moore plaque.  
[Photo by Philip Grant, 2009]



Tile mural of Michael Jackson at one of his Stadium concerts >  
[Photo by Philip Grant, 2009]



< Tile mural showing ice hockey at the Empire Pool (now Wembley Arena).  
[Image from the internet]

A new staircase was meant to link Wembley Park Station with the Bobby Moore Bridge subway in time for the 1996 Championships, but building work on this was not completed. The future of Olympic Way then hung in the balance, with plans to demolish the ageing Wembley Stadium

and uncertainty over whether a new “national stadium” would be built there to replace it. The prestige of Wembley as a world-class venue won the argument of where the new stadium should be, and by 2000 plans for the new Wembley Stadium were underway.

The old stadium was sold to a new Wembley National Stadium company owned by the Football Association, but as they did not want most of the land which Wembley Stadium Limited had bought in 1927, this was sold to a property company, Quintain Estates and Development Ltd. Wembley’s “twin towers” hosted its the last football match in October 2000, but there was a

delay before demolition of the old stadium began in 2002, and work started on the new stadium the following year.



< Demolishing the old Stadium, January 2003.

**The new Stadium taking shape, February 2005 >**

[Both photographs by Pete Tomsett, from “Wembley – Stadium of Legends”]



The new Wembley Stadium was due to open in 2006, and improvements to Wembley Park Station in 2005 saw lifts installed, and a widened staircase, between the ticket hall and the pedestrian level of Olympic Way. Brent’s 2003 planning guidance, “Wembley – a Framework for Development”, said that any redevelopment proposals should ‘retain Olympic Way as the principal processional route to the Stadium for the vast majority of spectators going to events. The uninterrupted axial view towards the Stadium, which is one of the historic

images of Wembley, should be maintained and enhanced.’ This policy certainly seemed to be upheld when the new stadium finally opened in 2007.



**Fans of Barcelona and Manchester United on Olympic Way for the 2011 UEFA Champions League final at the new Wembley Stadium.**

[Photo by Philip Grant, May 2011]



From the Spring of 2007, Olympic Way was regularly bustling again for events at the new stadium, and a refurbished Wembley Arena. Both played a part when London hosted the Summer Olympic Games in 2012, with nine games, including both finals, in the men's and women's football tournaments under the arch of the 90,000 seater stadium, and with the badminton and rhythmic gymnastics competitions held at the Arena.

**Spectators in Olympic Way, on their way to the stadium during the Olympic Games in 2012 >**

[Photo from the internet]



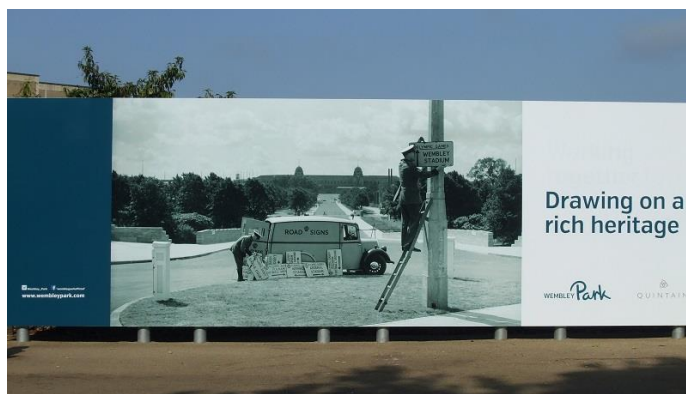
**< Crowds leaving Wembley Park Station, via the steps to the Bobby Moore Bridge and Olympic Way, during the 2012 Olympic Games.**

[Photo from the internet]

Olympic Way has also seen a huge growth in its everyday use in recent years, as the regeneration of the former Wembley Stadium Ltd land by Quintain Estates has gathered pace. This has seen the opening of the London Designer Outlet shopping centre, and Brent's new Civic Centre, near the Arena in 2013, as well as a hotel and large block of student accommodation along the east side of Olympic Way itself. 2013 also saw the demolition of the remaining section of the BEE Palace of Industry building on the west side. There was new landscaping along that section, to brighten up a temporary car park where tall blocks of flats are now being built.

Quintain Estates, and its Wembley Park company, have promoted their redevelopment of the area as “drawing on the rich heritage” of the site. But they have also used their management of Olympic Way to cover the tile murals (see page 6 above) around the subway from the station in advertising material.

**A Quintain promotional billboard in Olympic Way, July 2014 >**



**< Advertising for Quintain's “Tipi” rented apartments, covering the tile murals near Wembley Park Station, September 2017.**

[Both photos by Philip Grant]



In the Summer of 2017, proposals were announced for a joint project by Brent Council and Quintain Estates to enhance the quality of this seventy year-old route. A Council report said:

‘Olympic Way as a piece of public realm is showing its age. It does not present the type of quality considered consistent with the environment necessary for a world renowned iconic venue and the wider Wembley Park development.’

The suggested improvements include removing the old concrete “pedway” and replacing it with ‘substantial steps’, a better crossing at Fulton Road and new hard and soft landscaping. Much of the work would be funded from the Community Infrastructure Levy payments made by Quintain and other developers.

**Olympic Way from Bridge Road,  
Wembley Park, September 2017.**

[Photo by Philip Grant]



So the story of Olympic Way goes on. It will remain a tree-lined route that millions of people will walk along every year. Planned improvements will hope to make it a better

place for local people and visitors, both visually and economically. But where Wembley Stadium once towered over the view along it from the station, the view of the stadium is now flanked by tower cranes and the tower blocks which they are helping to build.

**Philip Grant,  
Wembley History Society,  
November 2017.**