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WELSH RUGBY UNION

WALES

CARDIFF ARMS PARK

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF
THE NATIONAL RUGBY GROUND**

The Story of the Development of the National Rugby Ground

by Kenneth M. Harris, CBE, LLD(Hon.)

This article was written by Mr. Harris, the Hon. Treasurer of the WRU and the Chairman of the Development Committee, on the occasion of the match played between Wales and the WRU President's XV on the 7th April, 1984 to celebrate the completion of the National Ground project.

In five days' time, we could be celebrating the centenary of the first International match which was played on Cardiff Arms Park on 12th April, 1884. Wales defeated Ireland by one drop goal and two tries to nil, the exceptional feature of the match being that Ireland arrived short and two Welsh players volunteered to make up their numbers. Well, here we are, 100 years later, celebrating the competition of our own International ground. No-one can accuse the Welsh Rugby Union of having been in too much of a hurry to achieve this ambition!

Why has it taken so long? Was it the tug-of-war between East and West or simply an inability of the Committee of those early days to take the resolute and positive action to make a plan for the future and then stick to it? Or perhaps it suited the administrators at that time to play international matches alternatively on the club grounds at Cardiff Arms

Park and St. Helen's, where the greater part of the organisation could be left to the club officials.

Be that as it may, history records that even before 1914, the question of whether Wales should acquire its own International ground was raised from time to time, and that during the inter-war years, the issue became even more urgent. So much so that in 1929, when a crisis arose in the affairs of the Cardiff Arms Park Co. Ltd., the Union started to look at other sites and then took the positive step of acquiring 10 acres of land at Bridgend - the Brewery Field - now the Headquarters of the Bridgend RFC.

By 1931, however, the parlous state of the Welsh economy forced a re-appraisal and a year later a fresh agreement was made with the Cardiff Athletic Club, particularly in relation to the Cardiff Arms Park Co. Ltd. - the owners of the freehold - which basically

gave the Union the right to play six matches a year on the ground and to carry out improvements to the spectator facilities.

In 1933/4 the old covered North Terrace was demolished and what came to be called 'the new North Stand' was built at a cost of about £20,000. The ground had, for many years, been used for greyhound racing. The decision to allow this may have helped the finances of the club and of the company, but it did nothing to enhance the state of the ground for Rugby purposes. And yet, in 1937, on the Greyhound Co. threatening to leave, a fresh 50 year lease was granted to them, the owners having no right to break the agreement or to review the rental until the 50 years were up.

The Union had borrowed some £20,000 from their bankers to finance the building of the North Stand but as events turned out they were to enjoy the income from it for but a few years before the war put an end to International Rugby and a German land mine put an end to the North Stand and part of the West Terrace. Throughout the immediate post war years, the Union was pre-occupied with the repair of war damage and the rebuilding of the North Stand. Beyond that, they had to deal with a bank overdraft which by 1945, with the accumulation of unpaid interest throughout the war years, had risen to over £40,000.

The annual meeting of the Union in June, 1953, saw the clubs come to a decision which, in the light of subsequent events, proved to be crucial. They resolved "that until such time as the facilities at Swansea were improved, all International matches be played at Cardiff". The resulting boost to the income of the Union enabled them, almost for the first time in history, to begin accumulating funds with the declared objectives of helping Member Clubs with their own building schemes and either improving the Cardiff ground or building a new ground elsewhere.

To this end, plans were prepared for a new South Stand but when the tender price came out at £90,000 against an original estimate of £60,000, the courage of the parties failed and a compromise, the new South Stand Upper, costing £64,000 was adopted. Towards this the Cardiff Athletic Club contributed £15,000. About this time Cardiff Arms Park Co. Ltd. decided to acquire the freehold

property at the Park St. entrance, a decision which, as subsequent events proved, was fundamental to the long term planning of the ground as we now see it.

In any history of this famous ground the year 1958 will be a high spot. The VIth British Empire and Commonwealth Games established many records, not the least of which was the achievement of a financial surplus of £37,000. The Cardiff City Council had built the Empire Pool in time for the Games, but otherwise the main contribution to the financial success came from the generosity of the Cardiff Athletic Club and the Welsh Rugby Union in making the Park available for the main events - at a very nominal rental. The largest single contribution to the funds was £13,000 from the Welsh Rugby Union.

Many members of the WRU and the Athletic Club Committees took a prominent part in the organisation of the Games and were proud to do so. But for them and those they served, there was a price to pay. The construction of the running track and its essential rapid removal to enable the Greyhound Racing to be resumed - contractors were digging up the track before the last spectator had left the closing ceremony - did permanent damage to the drainage system, with results which became painfully apparent in subsequent years. It was perhaps the complaints of other Unions about the state of the pitch for International matches that served palpably to concentrate the minds of the Union Committee Members on the need for a permanent solution to these problems and in April, 1958 - 26 years ago - a new Development Committee was set up.

On their failing to arrive at any solution acceptable to the Union, for some restriction on the use of the Cardiff ground, the Committee began to look elsewhere. Several sites in Cardiff suggested to us by the Cardiff City Council proved, on examination, to be entirely unsuitable for our purposes and we began to look elsewhere until finally in 1962, having again failed to come to any agreement with the Cardiff Athletic Club and with the approval of the clubs at annual meeting, we signed contracts for the purchase of about 80 acres of land at Island Farm, Bridgend. A newly constituted Development Committee was



1967 Before the start of the development.

set up, of which I had the privilege of being appointed Chairman, and outline plans for the building of a National Ground were prepared.

Unfortunately, the Glamorgan County Council refused to give us outline planning permission unless we first delivered an unequivocal undertaking that the National Ground would be built at Bridgend, something we could not possibly have done until the final costs could be ascertained and means devised for raising the money. Moreover, the Ministry of Transport had proposed stringent conditions regarding road access which would have added very substantially to the capital costs of the project.

It was at this point that the Cardiff Athletic Club under the energetic leadership of the late Hubert Johnson came forward with a radical re-appraisal of the whole position and an offer to transfer the pitch to the Welsh Rugby Union subject to alternative facilities being made available for the Rugby, cricket and tennis sections of the Athletic Club. The Lord Mayor in August 1962, having heard the news of the Bridgend project, had called a meeting of interested parties to protest at the prospect of the Union leaving Cardiff Arms Park and his Council subsequently made their contribution to the overall scheme by making part of Sophia Gardens available for the Cardiff Cricket Club and for Glamorgan County games. It might not unfairly be said that their decision has proved to have been not wholly disinterested; our rate bill next year is likely to be in the region of £75,000.

It was not until June 1964 that the Bridgend scheme was finally abandoned. Had it not been for the difficulties raised by the Planning Authorities, there is little doubt that the Ground would have been built there and it says much for the support and loyalty of our Member Clubs that having overwhelmingly approved the Bridgend scheme they were ready just 2 years later, at the Annual Meeting in June, 1967 to approve almost unanimously the decision to develop at Cardiff.

Plans for that development now proceeded apace but first the financial and legal tangle associated with the ownership of Cardiff Arms Park had to be cleared,

and those who were engaged in that operation know how complicated they were. This is not the place to record in detail what, to the experts, was an entirely novel and indeed exciting experience. Suffice it to say that by July, 1968 these problems had been resolved, the freehold of the Park was now firmly in the name of the Union, and we were able to authorise the building of the North Stand and the conversion of the cricket ground next door into a new Rugby Club for Cardiff.

Our original agreement with the Athletic Club had included an undertaking to contribute up to £180,000 towards the cost of their facilities, including those at Sophia Gardens. In the event, our final contribution in providing these new facilities exceeded a figure of £300,000 in addition to which the Union transferred to Cardiff, without charge, the freehold of that part of the Park which the Club was now to occupy.

The new Cardiff Arms Park had begun to take shape. The cost of this first stage was a little over £1M. The contract was completed on time and on 17th October, 1970, I had the honour as the then President, to open the Welsh National Rugby Ground. The occasion was celebrated with a match between Wales and a side selected by the President of the Rugby Football Union. The finance for this development came partly from accumulated funds, from a bank overdraft, and from an issue to clubs and to the public of a series of debentures.

£50 entitled the holder to purchase the right to buy a ticket for a seat in the North Stand for a term of 50 years. The Union was looking for a total of between £350,000 and £375,000 from this source and when subscriptions reached £365,000 the issue was closed, some £108,000 having been taken up by the Pearl Assurance Co. and then sold by them to individuals associated with 10-year life policies. It is a fact, contrary to general belief, that some 95% of this issue was taken up by clubs, by club members and by individual members of the public. Only about 5% went to companies and commercial firms.

It was unfortunate for the Union that the years following 1969 when the plans for the complete rebuilding of the whole ground

were first formulated, were a time of enormous increases in costs, so that whereas it had been within their financial resources to build the West Stand at the same time as the North Stand, by the time that all the problems had been resolved and it was possible to go to tender, costs had escalated to such an extent that the West Stand had to be omitted.

However, by 1976 the bank borrowing incurred in the previous operation had been cleared and the Committee decided to fulfil a long felt need to construct its own offices on the ground. Having achieved that, they were faced with the question of whether or not to go ahead with the building of the West Stand but before this could be tackled they had a problem.

The overall plan of the complete project envisaged moving the playing pitch some five yards towards the north to make room for a new South Stand and about fifteen yards towards the west or river end, so that eventually a much enlarged East Terrace could be accommodated at that end. This moving of the pitch could not be achieved whilst the greyhound track was in operation but fortunately, it was at this time that an approach was made to us by the Greyhound Co. indicating their willingness to vacate the ground, and finally an agreement to this end was achieved, so that the construction of the whole of the new West Stand and West Enclosure could be brought about.

This particular contract involved an expenditure of almost exactly £1M and the finance of this operation was again partly by bank borrowing and partly by an issue of debentures, but this time the debentures were not in the Stand being constructed, but in the North Stand Lower where it was decided to convert what had been the North Terrace to a seating Terrace of some 4,000 seats and 3,000 standing places and to issue 1750 debentures at £200 each to raise £350,000. With the experience of the first issue of debentures, the Union decided that this time they were to be issued only to Member Clubs and were to be non-transferable. The object was to enable clubs, should they choose to do so, to exploit the issue for their own long term financial benefit. The issue was three times over

subscribed.

By December, 1977, it had become apparent that the East Terrace was in such an appalling state of repair that the Union might well be barred from using it at all and accordingly architects were instructed to prepare plans for its reconstruction. Six months later instructions were given for the work to proceed and the new terrace was complete by March, 1980 and was available throughout the Centenary celebrations. These Centenary activities produced a substantial profit for the Union and enabled us by 1981 to begin thinking about the south side of the ground, much of which was in extremely poor condition and was in danger of being condemned. Eventually the decision to go ahead was taken, despite the formidable financial problems involved.

The Union would have to borrow some £2½M from its bankers and would have to raise something under another £2M via a debenture issue. Fortunately the experience of the second issue proved valuable and although this time the price of the debentures went up from £200 to £500, the issue at £1,800,000 was over subscribed and once again many clubs were able to use this issue to produce substantial future financial benefit to themselves.

Today we celebrate the completion of the project which was planned some 20 years ago. We have entirely rebuilt an International Rugby ground and financed it from within the Rugby game in Wales, without any help from public funds, except a comparatively small contribution for which, nevertheless, we are most grateful, from the Sports Council for Wales. We have expended something like £9M in a time of economic and financial difficulty and now we can see the future with some confidence.

No-one, least of all the present Treasurer of the Union, is going to predict when we shall once more be free of debt, but certainly that happy state ought to be achieved well before the end of the present decade. Then, and only then, will the Union be able to resume financial aid to clubs and consider other imaginative expenditure to give more and more boys and young men the opportunity to play amateur Rugby football under the best possible conditions. We

shall be left with an outstanding debt of some £2½M due to be repaid in the years between 2019 and 2032 but even that will present no problem at all because we have already set up a sinking fund invested in Government securities which, without any further additions by way of capital contribution, will, with the accumulation of interest, provide the complete repayment of all the debentures when that event falls due.

We hope that all of the Welsh Rugby public feel able to join in our pride in the completion of this great project. It could not have been achieved without the support of that public or without the backing we have had throughout the last 20 years from the clubs of the Union. When we started this operation, we were given to understand that the total cost would be about £2¼M. It has proved to be nearly

four times that amount and tribute must be paid to the Committee of the Union which has been able to find the resolution to continue the development to its conclusion despite the enormous increase in building costs during the period that the reconstruction has taken place.

Beyond that, I would wish to pay tribute to all those who served on the Development Committee since it was set up 26 years ago and particularly to Mr. Cliff Jones who has served with me on that Committee throughout the whole of the time.

Finally, may I make an appeal? This famous ground is known throughout the world as the Cardiff Arms Park. In recent times some press writers and television commentators have adopted the somewhat pompous sounding "National Stadium". May we now return to the historic and well loved title?

Development of Cardiff Arms Park

1884	12th April	First international on ground <i>Wales - 1 dropped goal and 2 tries</i> <i>Ireland - nil</i>
1967		Agreement with Cardiff Athletic Club following which the Union acquired freehold of main ground
1968		Work of construction began
1970		Completion of Cardiff R.F.C. ground and new North Stand complex
1976		New W.R.U. office accommodation
1977		New West Stand
1980		New East Terrace and Centenary Suite
1984		New South Stand and Enclosure brought to final fruition the scheme planned in 1967



1970 Completion of the new North Stand complex.

1977 Completion of the new West Stand followed by the new East Terrace in 1980.





1984 Completion of the development with the new South Stand.