



Groundtastic
The Football Grounds Magazine

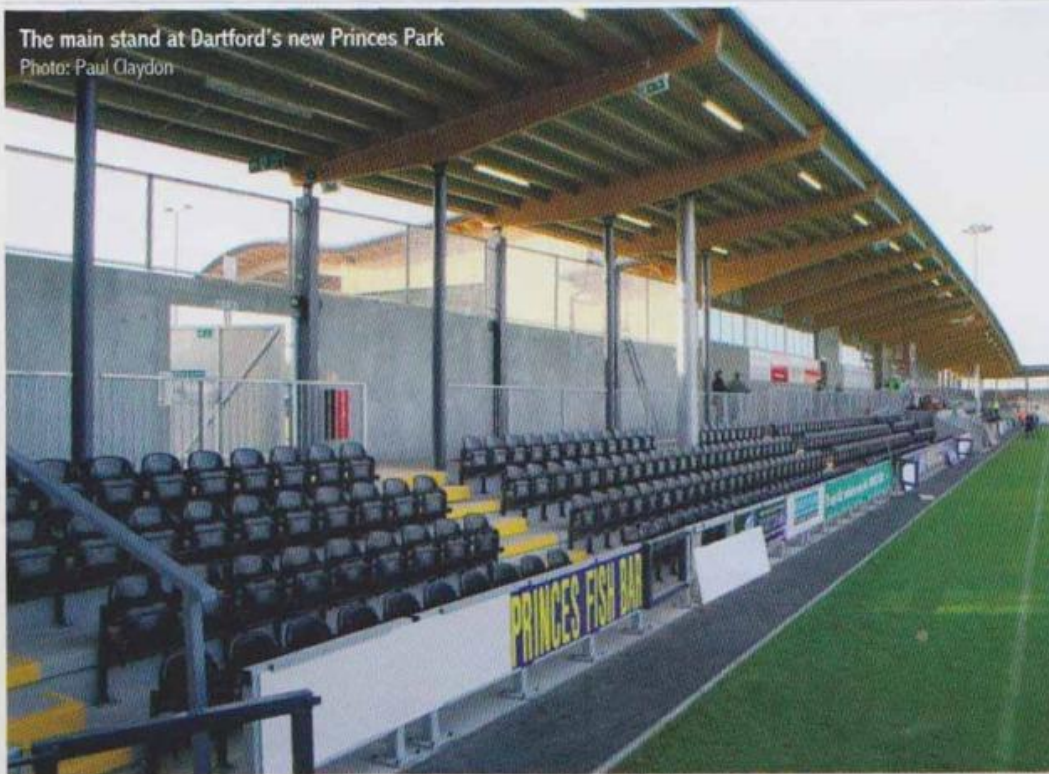
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THE OAK MAN COMETH . . .

DARTFORD • HASLINGDEN • RIJECKA (CROATIA) • SHREWSBURY TOWN • FALMOUTH TOWN •
WELSH PREMIER LEAGUE GROUNDS (1) • DONCASTER ROVERS • LILLIE BRIDGE • LONDON PAPER MILLS •
TOP TEN BEST PREFABS • THE NEST • GROUND AWARD PRESENTATIONS

Dartford: HOMECOMING DARTS HIT BULLSEYE

The main stand at Dartford's new Princes Park
Photo: Paul Claydon



As they filed in through the turnstiles for the opening match at Princes Park on November 11th 2006, there must have been a strong temptation for Dartford's long suffering supporters to pinch themselves to check that they weren't dreaming. Not only was a sell-out 4,100 crowd about to witness Dartford's first match on home soil for fourteen years, but they were going to do so at a £6.5 million stadium that hadn't cost the club a penny. From being one of football's waifs and strays, Dartford were now the proud owners of not just a Football Conference standard ground, but a venue whose 'green' credentials were second to none.

Seven different grounds across Kent and Essex were used by Dartford during those fourteen years of exile, which began in 1992 when Dartford were forced to sell their historic Watling Street ground to clear debts accumulated following a groundsharing agreement with Maidstone United. With rent to pay, and little money in the coffers, just keeping the club afloat was a major feat, and the prospects of ever returning to Dartford appeared bleak. When it was announced in 2004, that the newly elected administration at Dartford Borough Council intended to provide funding and a site for a new stadium, feelings of euphoria among supporters were tempered by the knowledge that previous promises of assistance from the local council had proved to be empty. It soon became apparent however that Dartford Borough Council, and in particular Cllr Jeremy Kite, who has proved to be the main driving force behind the project, meant business this time. Once a site was located, the planning process, which can sometimes drag on for months or even years, proceeded so quickly that by November 2005 the contractors were ready to move in and start construction work.

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Instead of an unattractive brownfield site on the edge of town, Dartford Council wanted the new stadium to be at the centre of the community and sited in a pleasant location. The council owned Princes Park Golf & Leisure complex, which was within walking distance of the town centre and only five minutes from the M25 turn off, fitted the bill nicely. Plans to incorporate an athletics track were quickly dropped following consultations with Dartford's supporters, whose ideas about how the stadium should look were actively sought out. Visits were also made to a number of recently opened stadiums, where the predominant use of tin and the close resemblance most stands and buildings bore to anonymous factory units, prompted the desire to come up with a stadium that was fresh, exciting and unique to Dartford, a brief that was enthusiastically taken on by London architectural practice Alexander Sedgley.



The Princes Road side
Photo: Paul Claydon

Rather than create a large arena in which even a good sized crowd would look lost, a sensible capacity of 4,100 was settled upon. Despite being small in scale, the layout of Princes Park follows the template set by the current generation of Football League and Premiership grounds, with a single continuous tier covered by a gently curving wrap around roof. Eight steps of terracing, curved at each corner, give way to a pitch length section of seating, four rows deep, on the clubhouse side of the ground. Billed as the UK's first sustainable stadium, in football ground terms Princes Park is unique in the choice of building materials used. One of the stadium's most talked about features is its 'living roof'. Not made of turf, as one might assume, the roof covering is in fact comprised of sedum, a low growing succulent plant with excellent water and heat retaining qualities that requires little or no maintenance. The roof structure itself is remarkable for being made of renewable laminated timber, rather than the usual steel, while the underside of the roof is made up of exposed wooden decking. Solar panels located on the clubhouse roof, together with extensive insulation throughout the complex, contribute substantially towards the stadium's energy needs, though with West Kent's limited exposure to the sun, this does not include the floodlights. The base of the clubhouse is built in flint and brick, the flint having been excavated locally, while the upper portion is made of untreated larch that will fade and colour with age. All rain water at the site is piped to a pair of specially created ponds, where it is recycled for use on the playing surface, which cost £600,000 to install and is the handwork of pitch specialists SIS, whose recent clients include Real Madrid. Behind the clubhouse and next to the landscaped ponds, plaza and gardens is a floodlit full size third generation artificial pitch, separate changing facilities for which are housed within the main club building.



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Above: Close-up of the terracing showing the curved corner section
Below: Panoramic view showing the sedum roof



Photos: Paul Claydon

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Photos: Paul Claydon

Clockwise from top left: The Princes Road side from the roof, solar panels on top of the clubhouse, the third-generation practice pitch next to the stadium and the main stand showing the clubhouse with viewing gallery.

Delayed for three months due to overrunning archaeological assessment work, the opening match at Princes Park eventually took place on November 11th, when Horsham YMCA were the visitors for a Ryman League Division One South game. The excitement generated by Dartford's long awaited homecoming ensured that all 4,100 tickets were snapped up with two weeks to spare. In a brief ceremony before the start of the match, the keys of Princes Park were handed over to the football club, who as tenants of the council will be required to pay a yearly peppercorn rent of £1.



Left: The packed stadium for the opening game against Horsham YMCA on 11th November 2006
Photo: Vince Taylor



Above: A ticket from the opening game



Dartford: HOMECOMING DARTS HIT BULLSEYE



Above & Bottom left: More crowd scenes from the opening game
Below: Tickets were stamped 'I WAS THERE' on the reverse



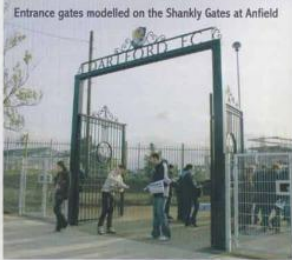
Right: The programme from the inaugural match

Princes Park and its array of modern architectural touches is a far cry from the steep old fashioned grandstand and rusty covered shelter of Dartford's former Watling Street ground. Sunk to a depth of 1.5 metres in order to minimise its environmental impact, the height of the stadium has deliberately been kept to modest proportions, but is visually arresting all the same. Close to the action, but only rising to a height of eight steps, the terracing has a wide concourse at its rear that encircles the whole of the stadium. Though filled with spectators on the day of the Horsham YMCA match, the concourse would normally be kept clear so that supporters can circulate freely around the stadium. Another benefit of this arrangement is that disabled fans can gain easy access to the specially created viewing bays. To aid the playing surface, a sizeable gap has been left between the rear retaining wall of the stadium and the roof, and though this is good news for the pitch, this could expose spectators to the elements during periods of rough weather. Just over a 1,000 seats are provided on the clubhouse side of the ground, and though tight to the pitch and not elevated, the sight lines are good. More cosseted viewing is available in the clubhouse and the adjoining function suite, both of which have large glass fronted areas looking out over the pitch. The income from these luxuriously appointed facilities, which can cater for weddings, seminars and conferences, is to be shared between Dartford FC and Dartford Borough Council. A 300 space car park is available at the stadium, which also has a dedicated stop on the Fastrack bus network.

Dartford: HOMECOMING DARTS HIT BULLSEYE

Of the 4,000 plus spectators packed in to Princes Park for the opening match, one supporter stood out more than most. Bearing in mind he was 4 metres tall and made of solid oak (from a renewable source, of course), perhaps this was hardly surprising. The work of renowned sculptor Philip Bews, the figure represents a Dartford fan in the act of celebrating a goal, and with the arms outstretched reaches a height of 5.5 metres. Fixed to the top of the terracing on the Princes Road side of the ground, with its hands bolted to the roof and a support beam, the sculpture has been deliberately positioned in such a way that it mingles with the fans. A novel idea and something that will remain a major talking point for years to come, the sculpture's presence within the ground is emblematic of Princes Park and the fresh approach to stadium construction it represents.

Entrance gates modelled on the Shankly Gates at Anfield

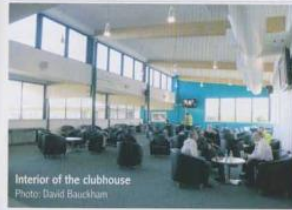


The Oak Man of Dartford

The luxurious clubhouse



Dartford: HOMECOMING DARTS HIT BULLSEYE



Interior of the clubhouse
Photo: David Bauckham

One of the more remarkable aspects of Princes Park is the fact that the entire cost of the project, £6.5 million, has been underwritten by Dartford Borough Council. Indeed even the assistance of the Football Foundation wasn't sought, as the organisation's application procedure was deemed to be too cumbersome. To Dartford Borough Council's credit, the money spent at Princes Park is seen not as a drain on the local exchequer but as an investment in Dartford and its inhabitants.

What better way of restoring local pride than bringing Dartford FC back home? Cllr Jeremy Kite, the leader of Dartford BC, explains: "Over the years, developers and big business have done very nicely from Dartford's growth but what about our local residents and communities? Isn't it time for them to share the rewards?"

It will be interesting to see whether Dartford Borough Council's bold initiative will inspire other local authorities to invest in new stadiums. Despite the credit a football club can bring to a town, not to mention the many associated social benefits, local councils of all political colours have traditionally been loath to lend support when it comes to stadium construction, both with regard to granting planning consent and providing financial assistance. It is because they have to rely on a mixture of grants and complicated land deals that so many new stadiums, while perfectly adequate, have a low budget look to them. If we are going to see any more venues of Princes Park's calibre, one feels that local government will have to alter its present hands off approach to football clubs and football stadium provision.

GROUND INFORMATION: Princes Park, Grassbanks, Darenth Road, DARTFORD, DA1 1RT
Capacity: 4,200 (all covered), Seats: 1,024



BLAST FROM THE PAST
Left & Below: Two views of Dartford's former home at Watling Street. These views were taken in 1973 and show the Main Stand and the covered terrace on the opposite side.
Photos: Bob Lillman

