Kenneth Powell

Wembley – Myth or Monument?

Wembley Stadium, internationally known today as a football "shrine", was constructed in 1922-23 as the centrepiece of the British Empire Exhibition of 1924 – though it was actually completed in time to host the FA Cup Final in April, 1923.

The Exhibition was the largest that had ever been staged in Britain, an international event in the tradition of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1889 Paris Exhibition – and ultimately of the Great Exhibition of 1851. In 1908 an Anglo-French exhibition had been held at White City in west London – its success stimulated the far more ambitious project for the 1924 Wembley exhibition. The latter was promoted, in the grim aftermath of the Great War, as a morale-boosting, job-creating celebration of the British Empire and its industries, with the support of the governments of the British Dominions and the Prince of Wales as chairman of the organising committee. Amongst the promised benefits was the creation of thousands of jobs for unemployed ex-servicemen.

In contrast to the 1851 Exhibition, and the Festival of Britain of 1951, the chosen site was far from central London in a still-developing suburban area. Until the late 19th century Wembley Park had been a country estate, centred on an historic mansion. During the 1890s the railway magnate Sir Edward Watkin tried to develop the site as a massive leisure attraction, focussed on a great "Metropolitan Tower", 1150 ft high and modelled on the Eiffel Tower. (It was never completed and what had been constructed was pulled down in 1908 – Watkin's venture failed dismally.)

The railway link opened to Wembley Park in 1901 made possible the use of the site for the 1924 Exhibition. The inclusion of the stadium in the project greatly boosted interest – football was a national preoccupation, the annual Cup Final was already a major national event and there was support for a permanent venue.

The stadium was completed in record time because innovative constructional techniques were employed, in situ reinforced concrete rather than the iron, steel and timber hitherto used for sports stadia. Though the architectural oversight of the Exhibition site was entrusted to the senior figure Sir John Simpson and his younger partner Maxwell Ayrton, the key figure in the project was the great engineer, Owen Williams (1890-1969), who was knighted for his contribution.

The stadium, however, fuses an innovative structure with what was regarded as appropriate decorative trappings (designed by Ayrton). Designed to accommodate 120,000, it was made memorable by its now legendary "twin towers", 126 ft high and clearly taking their cue from Lutyens' work in the imperial capital of New Delhi – the aim was to give the functional structure a monumental gloss, with the finish of the concrete treated to resemble masonry.

Something should be said about the other buildings on the Exhibition site. The stadium stood at the head of a formal avenue leading from the railway station, flanked by two major buildings, the huge "palaces" of industry (which survives) and of engineering (demolished in the 1980s), both of which were reinforced concrete structures, though clad in Classical details. (Not for Britain, as yet, the inventive radicalism of a Mendelsohn – though the latter's Einstein Tower predates the 1924 Exhibition.) There was also a Palace of Arts, in similar mode, which survives in part. Most of the other structures were pavilions sponsored by the dominions and colonies (vast for Australia, tiny for Malta) and exhibiting their products and cultures, which were subsequently dismantled. There was also a fairground and other amusements for the more frivolous visitor. An elevated "never-stop" transit system linked the site to the main (Great Central) rail line to the south. Owen Williams' splendid Empire Pool (now badly altered as the Wembley Arena) was not built until 1933, when the Empire Games were held on the site.

The Exhibition was a popular success (18 million visitors) but lost money. When it closed, the site was sold off to a local businessman who cleared most of the buildings but saved the stadium, launching the regular dog-racing events which effectively kept it in business. One of the oddities of the stadium is the fact that, though a national institution, it has always been privately owned – when it became a major venue for the 1948 London Olympics the owners funded major improvements and there was another major revamp in the 1960s. Athletics had always been provided for at the stadium, but football remained the source of its fame – Cup Finals, European championships and, in 1966, the World Cup, with England's famous victory. In 1982, the Pope celebrated Mass at Wembley. Rock concerts and American football were part of a move towards diversification, though the Football Association's 21-year lease, signed in 1982, confirmed that football was still the focus.

The location of the stadium has always been problematic. It was concluded long ago that it could not function as the home of a club – major events are needed to draw the crowds. The borough in which it stands (Brent) is relatively poor and sees the site as the largest opportunity for regeneration in its area. Nonetheless, the area around the stadium has been blighted by poor quality hotel, conferencing and industrial development. With the development of more modern stadia in other capitals, Wembley began to look shabby and unworthy, unlikely to be seen as a fit venue for the Olympics or World Cup. Its spectator facilities were dismal. Even during the 1980s, it was kept going by thrice-weekly greyhound races, attended by no more than 1500 people. In recent years, the maximum permitted seating capacity has been 78,000 with no standing permitted. After the match between England and Germany in October, 2000, the stadium was closed and has remained so since. Along with other buildings on the site, it is listed Grade II, yet there is a general consensus that it will be demolished – indeed, consent has been given. Delays in redeveloping the site for a new stadium reflect the melancholy descent of Wembley into a limbo of political indecision, a consequence, perhaps, of the history of the site.

In 1995 the government decided that there should be a new National Stadium providing for football, rugby and athletics and

Wembley Park Stadium, Entrance

Wembley Park Stadium in London

Wembley Park Stadium, Restaurant

allowing Britain to compete for big international sporting events – it was by no means certain that the site would be Wembley or even London, since regional cities were invited to compete. At this stage, Foster & Partners was brought in by Brent Council to demonstrate not only that the stadium could be developed to the desired standard but that by choosing Wembley the government could assist in regenerating a wide swathe of north London. A masterplan for extensive commercial and leisure development around the stadium was drawn up. At this stage, the twin towers, regarded as sacrosanct, were to be physically moved and retained as a "gateway", with the rest of the 1924 stadium demolished. The replacement would seat 80,000, provide for athletics and football, feature a retractable roof and cost £200 million. The Sports Council, a government body, subsequently opted for Wembley as the National Stadium site.

A new company, Wembley National Stadium Ltd, was formed to progress the stadium plans – the tradition of private ownership was to continue. Foster & Partners were confirmed as architects, working with HOK Sport (a subsidiary of the large American practice HOK, with extensive global experience in stadium design) as the World Stadium Team. The financial doubts which had cast uncertainty over the project seemed to be resolved by the inauguration of Britain's new National Lottery, which offered a subvention of £120 million for a multi-purpose stadium. In the public mind, Wembley was synonymous with football, but the government was anxious not to be seen as subsidizing the football industry, with its hugely wealthy Premier League clubs, massive transfer fees and substantial ticket prices – hence the emphasis on athletics and other sports. Linking the stadium scheme to the overall development masterplan was seen as potentially ruinous, involving major land deals and negotiations with other owners, with endless delays possible. For this reason, the stadium was now redesigned to occupy no more than the existing footprint. The idea of keeping the towers – a very costly option – was abandoned and a new design, featuring a striking masted structure produced.

The decision to demolish the towers aroused some controversy, but was eventually accepted by bodies such as English Heritage and the Twentieth Century Society on the grounds that, in isolation, they would be meaningless remnants. Even so, doubts about the financial viability of the scheme remained, leading to pressure for increased seating and revenue-earning commercial development around the stadium. At the same time, the athletics lobby expressed growing dissatisfaction with the project and a view that athletics would not be well catered for at Wembley. A (basically flawed) scheme for a national athletics stadium on a different site was developed – it was finally quashed by the government in summer, 2001, placing the focus back on Wembley, though there was increasing political pressure for a provincial site, probably in the Midlands, to be substituted. The newly elected Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, was amongst those pressing the cause of London – he had previously represented Brent in Parliament.

Wembley: myth or monument? The latter, clearly, counts for more than the latter, since only isolated voices have been raised in defence of the twin towers and none, it seems, in favour of the rest of the historic structure. The Stade de France, in particular, has generated an awareness of how far British facilities lag behind the best in Europe. The myth of Wembley lives on, since there is a widespread belief that it is the "natural" venue for the Cup Final and other big events. The towers have a symbolic value in tune with Wembley's role as a "shrine". Foster's masted structure was seen as not sufficiently distinctive, and too close in appearance to other big world stadia. In response to these criticisms, the scheme was substantially redesigned in 1999 to accommodate a giant 300m arch which has both a functional role – supporting the north stand roof – and a symbolic one. It will be visible across a wide swathe of north London and is one of a series of projects – the Greater London Authority building, British Museum Great Court, Swiss Re tower and Millennium Bridge, for example – with which Norman Foster is remaking the image of London. The stadium is designed to be readily adaptable for athletics or football use, with an athletics deck which can be installed 6 metres above the level of the central pitch. A retractable roof provides cover for up to 90,000 spectators. All the defects of the old stadium – poor access, lack of lavatories, overcrowding – will be addressed. The total cost of the project has risen to some £600 million, including associated hotel and retail development. A final government decision on the location of the National Stadium is expected imminently – it depends largely on the acceptance that public funding, or at least financial underwriting, is needed to help the private sector create a national amenity. If the decision is positive, and the funding can be raised, the twin towers will go but Wembley's historic place as Britain's chief sporting venue will be confirmed.