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# The White Horse Final: 100 years on

## The legend of the first Wembley FA Cup final and how a policeman and his horse helped avert disaster

By Phil Dawkes

**Francis William Oldridge (1874-1963) was a police constable at the 1923 Cup Final**

When PC George Scorey entered Rochester Row police station on 28 April 1923 he was only after a cup of tea. Little did he know that it would be the beginning of his journey into football history.

Scorey, a member of the Metropolitan Police's Mounted Branch, had spent that morning on duty in Westminster with his horse Billy.

He had started work at 6am and it had been a largely uneventful Saturday; just the usual London weekend hustle and bustle. The most remarkable thing about the day was the weather, with the Big Smoke basking in glorious spring sunshine.

That was about to change. On the outskirts of the city, a figurative storm was brewing.

Soon after entering the station, Scorey was collared by a concerned-looking inspector. The FA Cup final was on that afternoon and there were reports of trouble with the crowd. The PC was to get over to Wembley as quickly as he could and try to help sort it out.

Moments later, Scorey was back on Billy and heading up towards Edgware Road, all thoughts of that much-needed cuppa abandoned.

A few miles away, at the newly built stadium in the north-west of the city, chaos awaited him…

Scorey wasn't much of a football fan. Even if he had been, you could have forgiven him for knowing little about the two sides contesting the FA Cup final - the 48th in the competition's history - to which he was en route.

Lancashire club Bolton Wanderers were a founding member of the Football League in 1888 but, barring a couple of runners-up appearances in the cup, had failed to make a significant impact. The first quarter of the 20th century had seen them bounce between divisions one and two.

Bolton had previously lost two FA Cup finals - in 1894 and 1904

London’s West Ham United had even less notable history, having only entered the league in 1919, although they were on the up, with promotion to the top tier a near certainty to go alongside their cup run that season.

In Wanderers’ ranks was David Jack, who had scored a solitary winning goal in each of the three previous rounds, while the Hammers boasted talented forwards of their own in Vic Watson and Jimmy Ruffell. There were a handful of international caps sprinkled throughout the two sides; a couple for England, a few more for Wales.

West Ham competed in the Southern League and Western League before joining the Football League in 1919

The real draw for fans was Wembley itself. Or, as Scorey knew it at the time, the Empire Stadium.

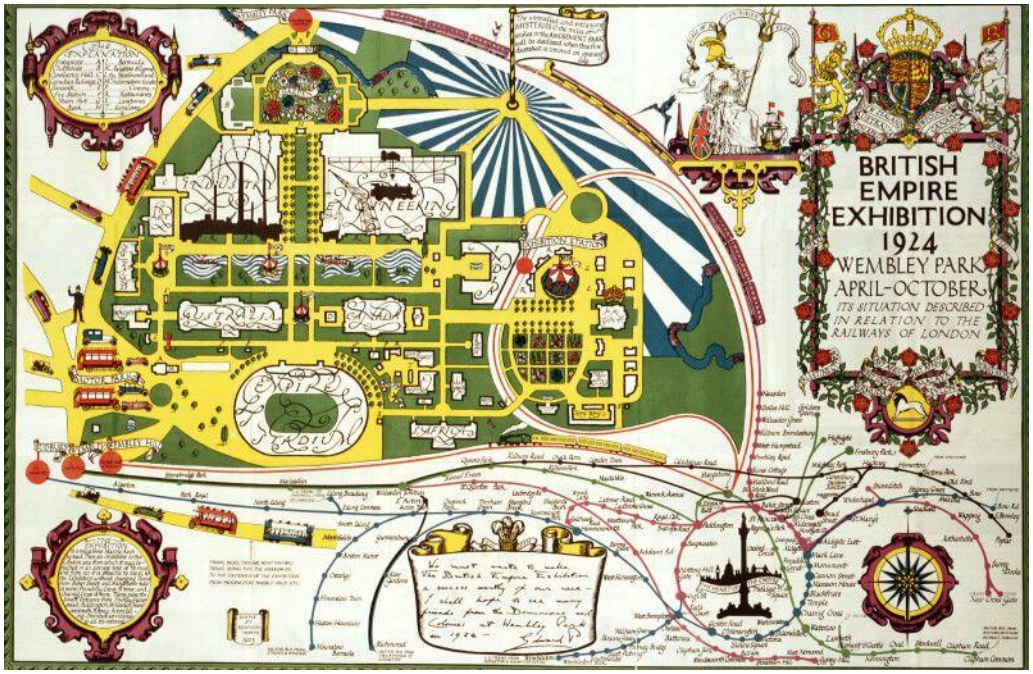
In the decades to follow, the ground and its iconic twin towers would become synonymous with football and its oldest and most revered club competition in particular, but its original lofty purpose was much more fleeting and wholly unconnected to the beautiful game.

Britain's position in the world was faltering, its empire fading and appetite for its aims on the wane. There were now significant challengers on the global stage in the aftermath of World War One, most notably Japan and the USA.

To arrest this decline and to further the forward-looking ideal of a new commonwealth of nations, the British Empire Exhibition was devised in 1920. To be held four years later, it would showcase British greatness, stimulate trade and strengthen faltering bonds with the dominions. The stadium was to be its architectural and spiritual centre.

London was already littered with monuments to Britain’s perceived might. Along Scorey’s journey to Wembley alone he would pass near to Buckingham Palace and the arch and statue dedicated to the Duke of Wellington. Marble Arch would be one of the final significant landmarks before he pushed on out into open country and on to Wembley.

Furthermore, the site to which he was heading had itself once been the intended home of Britain’s version of the Eiffel Tower. However, issues with construction meant work was halted with this having reached just 47 metres of its planned 366-metre height. It would come to be mockingly known as the 'London Stump' or 'Watkin's Folly' after the driving force of the project, railway entrepreneur Sir Edward Watkin, before being dynamited out of existence in 1907.



A site map of the 1924 British Empire Exhibition

The Empire Stadium's pristine, imposing white exterior had been designed to embody majesty and industry, in both senses of the word. Inside, cherished British values of fair play, revelry and the stiffest of upper lips would be showcased through sports, pageants and military demonstrations.

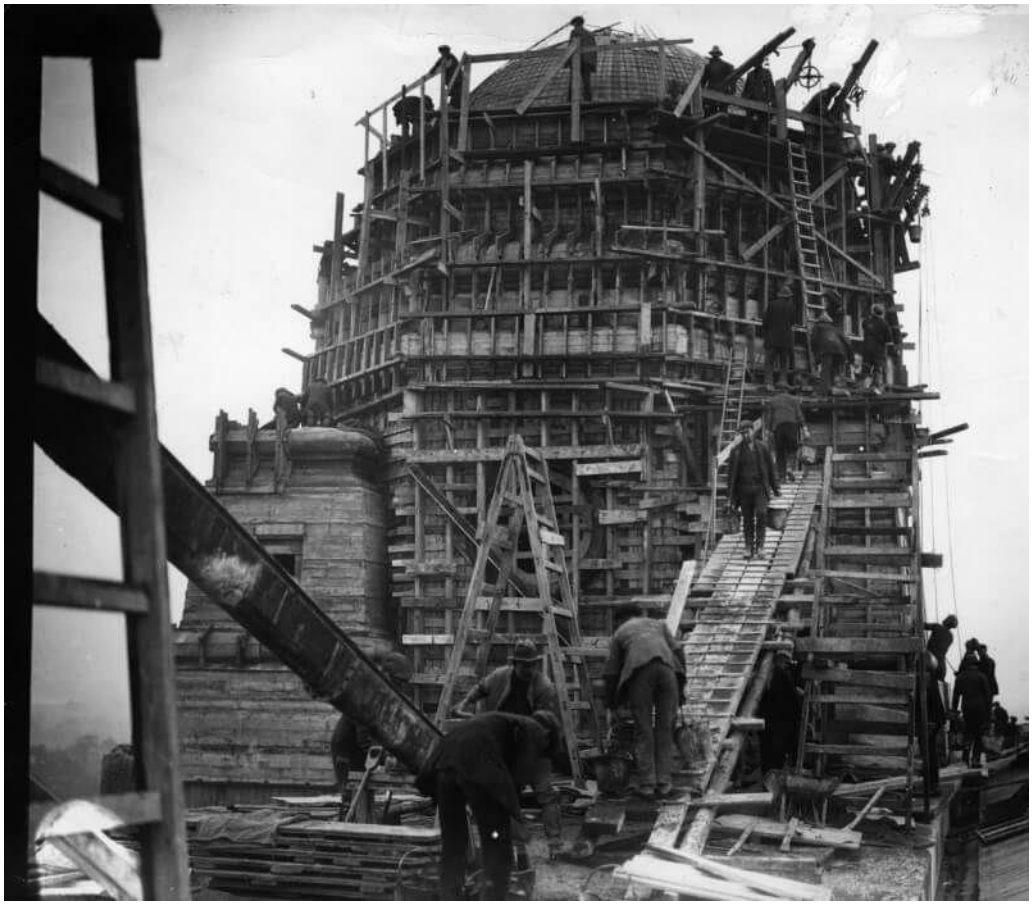
The hope was that such virtues would endure, but there was no such long-term designs for the stadium itself, the original plan being to demolish the vast concrete bowl once the exhibition had ended.

That changed in large part because of an unexpected request from the Football Association.

After struggling in ill-suited stadiums after the war, the English game's governing body needed a more fitting venue for its showpiece event.

The 47 previous FA Cup finals had been held at a variety of grounds, predominantly the Kennington Oval and then Crystal Palace. With the latter still in the possession of the military and in dire need of renovation, the three finals prior to 1923 had been staged at Chelsea's Stamford Bridge but this was woefully inadequate to house the kind of attendances desired.

In Wembley, they spied a timely solution rising from the dirt. A 21-year contract was agreed and a fire lit under construction.

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