

“It’s Arsenal around here”: 100 years in Islington (Part 1)

Exhibition at Islington Museum

6 September 2013 – 25 January 2014

1. Introduction: “It’s Arsenal around here”

2. Highbury before Arsenal

3. The move to Highbury

4. 1913-39: the home of football

5. Getting to the match

6. The stadium at war

7. 1946-2006: football returns home

8. Highbury for all

9. Islington parades

10. Emirates stadium

11. 21st-century football

12. Arsenal and the community today [2013]

“It’s Arsenal around here” 100 years in Islington



Friday 6 September 2013 was the 100th anniversary of Arsenal’s first game in Islington. Since 1913, they have been Islington’s local team, bringing years of excitement and success, as well as a few frustrations!

But it is not just football that has had such an impact on Islington. The club has had an important impact upon the local community: the passion and experiences of the fans, visitors it has attracted to the borough, the community events it has led and its contribution to the overall history of the area.

“It’s Arsenal around here” examines the club’s presence in Islington, the development of its grounds and a few highlights from its rich 100-year old story.

The story in Islington starts in 1913 in the sports ground of a training college for priests.



Highbury before Arsenal

A school for priests

The green fields of Highbury and Holloway were just being developed when, in 1825, Highbury College was built for the training of priests. The Church of England, who renamed the college St John's Hall and School of Divinity, then bought it in 1866.

Early in the 20th Century, the school was in terrible financial difficulties. Its main benefactor had died, building maintenance was increasing and costs of training priests were getting higher. By 1908, it was considering selling its land in Highbury and leaving the area.

Changing fortunes

The school tried to sell the whole site to the London County Council for conversion into a mental hospital for £41,000 – about £4 million at 2013 prices – but this fell through. As a compromise, and perhaps hoping that its fortunes would soon improve, the school decided to rent its adjacent sports ground. In April 1913, it gave Woolwich Arsenal FC, a south London club with financial problems of its own, a 21-year lease in return for £14,500 – about £1.4 million at 2013 prices. However, it was Arsenal's fortunes that were to improve. By 1925, the club had bought the sports ground and the hall outright and it was leasing the buildings back to the school.

...and today

St John's Hall and School of Divinity continued until 1946, when it was destroyed by fire. It was too expensive to repair and the site was developed for local authority housing; Aubert Court and a park now occupy the location. Renamed St John's College, the school, is at present in Nottingham.



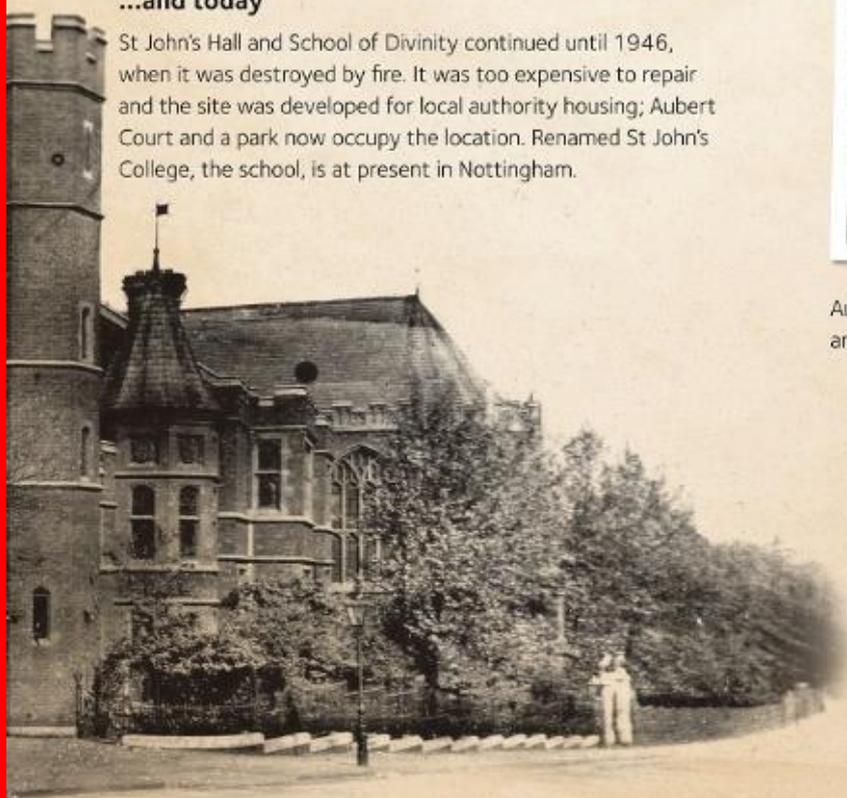
Highbury College in 1825. The college trained non-conformist priests who did not wish to pursue the full Anglican style of worship.



The entrance to St John's Hall. This was constructed, in the 1880s. The Church of England used the school to train priests from poorer backgrounds.



Aubert Court today on the site of St John's Hall and School of Divinity.



The move to Highbury

Plumstead decline

Woolwich Arsenal Football Club, formed by Woolwich Arsenal munitions workers in 1886, was initially very successful but, by 1913, with rising local unemployment and falling attendances, it was struggling. Poor transport links to their ground in Plumstead added to the club's problems. There was only one solution – a new ground had to be found.

Search for a ground

Woolwich Arsenal's chairman, the London developer Henry Norris, was also the chairman of Fulham Football Club. His first proposals, either to merge the two clubs or to share Fulham's ground at Craven Cottage, were rejected by the sport's governing body, the Football League.

Norris had been searching for a new ground and understood that the School of Divinity at St John's Hall was in difficulties. Nearby underground train stations and a large local population promised huge crowd attendances. His offer to purchase the school's sports ground was rejected but, such were the opportunities he saw at Highbury, he accepted an alternative offer of a 21-year lease. This included a clause that insisted upon no play on certain 'holy days' and a ban on the sale of intoxicating liquor.

Local opposition

The move was not without its opponents.

Tottenham Hotspur and Clapton (now Leyton) Orient Football Clubs feared pressure on their own attendance figures but the Football League ruled that it had no control over the matter.

Some Highbury residents formed a 'Defence Committee' against the arrival of the club with the support of Islington Council and the local press. Local traders and many other residents however welcomed the arrival of Arsenal FC.

Before too long, with ever growing local support, objections from the council and the local press went silent and were soon replaced with support.



Highbury in 1869. There are many open fields in Highbury. The grounds of St John's Hall and School of Divinity are an elegant narrow garden.



Highbury in 1894. The railway sidings have arrived and streets have built up around St John's Hall. The grounds are now an open playing field. This is the sports field that Woolwich Arsenal rented in 1913.



1913-39

The home of Football

Norris and Leitch

Norris had recruited Britain's foremost football stadium architect, Archibald Leitch (1865-1939) to design a ground. A planning application for a ground and temporary stand at Highbury was submitted in May 1913, soon after completion of the lease agreement with the school.

On Saturday 6 September 1913, the first day of the 1913/14 season, a crowd of 20,000 enthusiastic locals and Woolwich diehards turned up to see a 2-1 home win against Leicester Fosse, who were renamed as Leicester City Football Club in 1919. Although the stand was not officially licenced for use, the game still went ahead.

The Highbury Horse

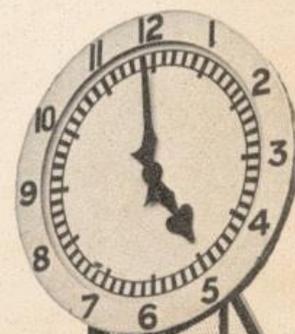
At the time the so-called Laundry End to the north of the stadium was being constructed, the club asked local tradesmen to dump their debris against the back of the stand so that the terrace could be extended over it. This gave rise to the legend of the Highbury Horse. The story was that a horse backed so close to the hole to dump some rubbish that the cart toppled in, dragging the poor beast with it. The horse had to be destroyed and was buried where it lay.

In 2007, a workman on the new Highbury Square project found a horseshoe under the north stand. Could it be?

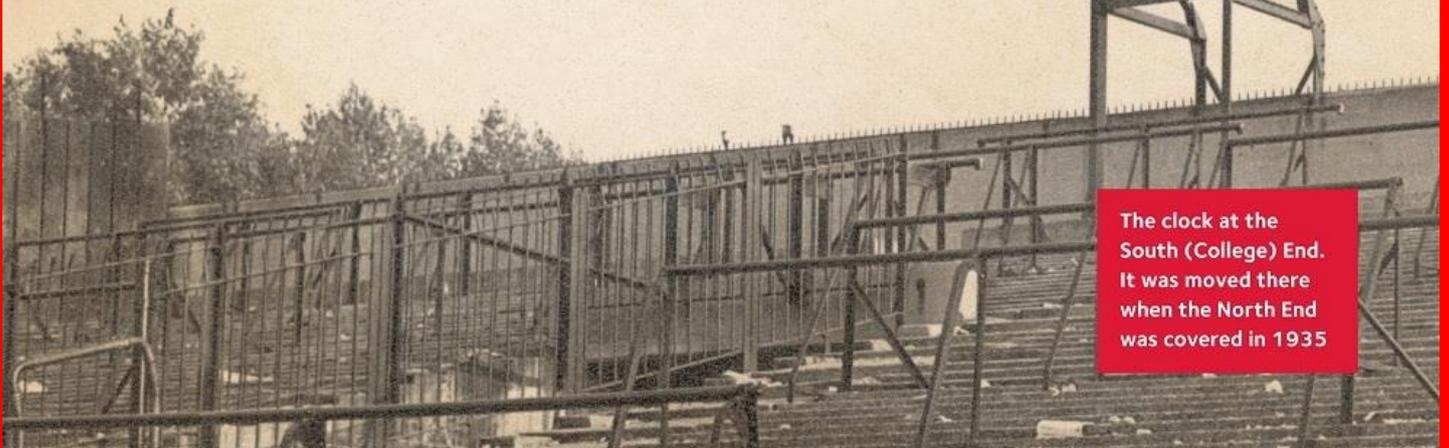
Chapman, Waterlow Ferrier and Binnie

Herbert Chapman (1878-1934) Arsenal's Secretary-Manager from 1925 to 1934, recognised that the stadium had to be modernised to attract higher attendances.

Art-deco architects, Claude Waterlow Ferrier (1879-1935) and William Bryce Binnie (1885-1963), were commissioned to redevelop the ground. A roof was built over the North End (or North Bank), the west side gained a stand and the East Stand, with marble halls and art deco decoration, was created. These improvements, funded by one of the most successful periods in the club's history, resulted in the spectacular football stadium for which Arsenal Stadium became famous around the world: Highbury - the Home of Football.



The clock at the South (College) End. It was moved there when the North End was covered in 1935



Getting to the match

The crowds return

In the first season (1913/14), Norris's tactics worked. Even though Woolwich Arsenal was a Division Two club its Highbury average attendance rose to 23,000 This was more than double the Plumstead figures.

In the 1919/20 season the club were in the top division in the league – a position they were never to leave – and crowd numbers at Highbury had risen to 32,500.

Then, as now, football and transport companies had a very lucrative relationship. The clubs wanted large attendances and the transport companies wanted more passengers. The bus and train companies printed posters that advertised the venues, times of games and nearest transport links.

It's all in a name

Perhaps the highpoint of this collaboration happened in 1932. Arsenal legend Herbert Chapman met with the Underground Electric Railways Company of London (UERL) to change the name of Gillespie Road, the local tube station. Towards the end of the meeting, Chapman is alleged to have said, "Whoever heard of Gillespie Road? It's Arsenal around here." Chapman's lobbying worked and, in November 1932, the name of the station was changed to 'Arsenal (Highbury Hill)'.

To change the name of a station is not a simple thing to do. Signs, plans and ticket machines across the network had to be changed and all this was paid for by the UERL during the midst of the 1930's Depression. In addition, the newly formed London transport rebuilt and enlarged the station to accommodate increasing match day crowds. The selling power of football, and particularly Arsenal, was seen as a very attractive proposition.

Today Arsenal tube remains the only underground station on the network named after a football club!



Gillespie Road Underground Station in 1922.



A 1933 panel explaining changes to the Underground, including the renaming of Gillespie Road Station.



The original Gillespie Road tiles, still visible, on the Platform of the station.



Arsenal Underground Station in 1975.

The stadium at war

Highbury aids the war effort

During the Second World War (1939–45), the national league was abandoned and replaced by regional competitions. In the London region, Arsenal played their home games at White Hart Lane, the home of Tottenham Hotspur. The Highbury ground meanwhile was converted into an Air Raid Precautions (ARP) Centre, the pitch being used twice daily as part of the ARP training programme for the borough. The dressing rooms were used as emergency clearing stations for 'Blitz' casualties and there were decontamination rooms, in anticipation of gas attacks, as well as accommodation for medical and nursing staff.

The West Stand was converted into an air raid shelter, holding up to 1,500 people, while the East Stand became a first aid centre and a reporting post for ARP wardens. The practice ground, behind the Clock End, was used to store building materials and to conduct anti-aircraft training. In 1940 it served as a clearance station for 3,000 refugees who had fled from Holland and Belgium.

War damage

In October 1940 a 1,000lb bomb hit the practice ground, killing William Hammond and Aubrey Criddle. Both were in the 907 Balloon Regiment, RAF. Frederick Clayton, a civilian, was also killed at the stadium that night. Albert Tarr, a Fireman with the Auxiliary Fire Service based at the ground, was injured and died of his wounds that night at the Royal Northern Hospital on Holloway Road.

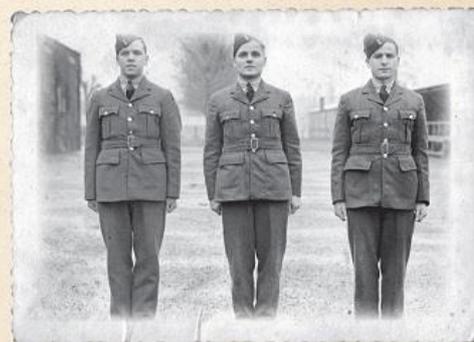
On 16 April 1941, incendiary bombs struck the North Bank setting alight all of the shelter furniture that was stacked up to its roof. The fire was so intense that the roof melted and collapsed. Even the goalposts caught fire.



The ground being prepared for ARP duties.



The demonstration of an anti-aircraft gun to the team manager, George Allison, and the players.



On the left is Laurie Scott (115 appearances for Arsenal) who volunteered for the Royal Air Force as a physical training instructor.

1946-2006

Football returns home

Crowds return

The Football League resumed in August 1946 and Arsenal fans, like many supporters around the country, were delighted to have football back. Capacity crowds returned to Highbury.

Changes to the stadium continued and floodlights were installed in 1951, which saw evening games being played at Highbury for the first time. Also a new roof, a replacement for the one destroyed in the 'Blitz', was finally put on the North Terrace in 1956. This, the North Bank, then became the chosen home for Arsenal's most colourful, vocal and partisan supporters!

Improvements to safety

Crowds began to fall in the 1960s as other leisure activities competed with football. The 1970s and 80s were the worst of times for the game throughout the country, with football grounds falling into disrepair and serious increases in crowd violence.

The tragedy at Hillsborough in 1989, unrelated to hooliganism, exposed the poor condition of crowd accommodation and control in football grounds. The Taylor Report, the official inquiry into the disaster, resulted in the elimination of standing terraces at all major football stadiums in Britain.

In 1991 Arsenal announced that Highbury was to become an all-seater stadium and the new North Bank opened at the start of the 1993/94 season. Work then began on converting the Clock End.

These changes reduced capacity but in order to compete successfully in the new Premier League, Arsenal had to enlarge its crowd. In 1997 plans to redevelop the Clock End and the West Stand were announced but these met with a lot of local opposition. The listing in 1997 of the important art deco East Stand as a building of architectural and historic interest also restricted the club's redevelopment options at Highbury. Once again, the club needed to move to survive. The next venue would be the Emirates Stadium.

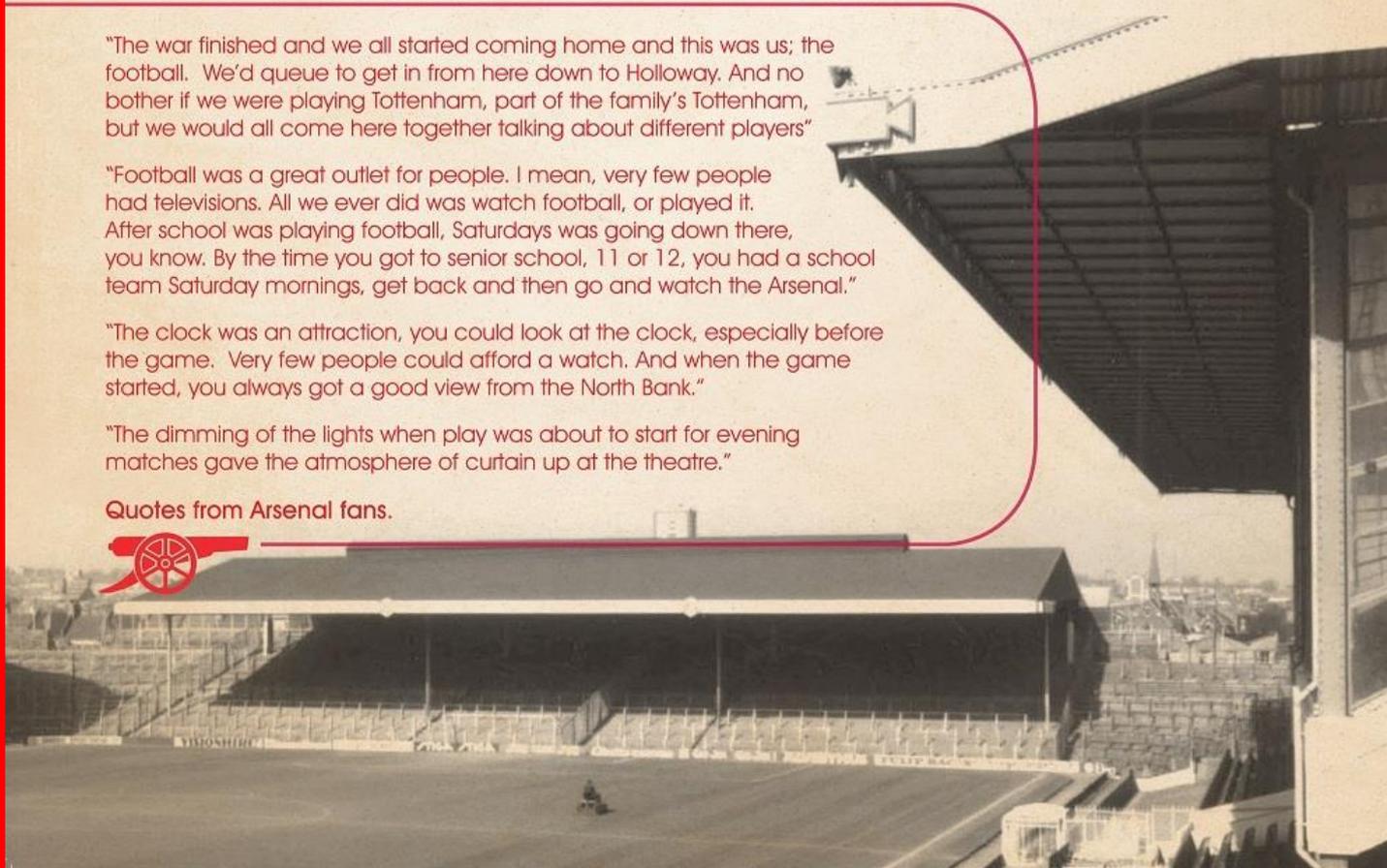
"The war finished and we all started coming home and this was us; the football. We'd queue to get in from here down to Holloway. And no bother if we were playing Tottenham, part of the family's Tottenham, but we would all come here together talking about different players"

"Football was a great outlet for people. I mean, very few people had televisions. All we ever did was watch football, or played it. After school was playing football, Saturdays was going down there, you know. By the time you got to senior school, 11 or 12, you had a school team Saturday mornings, get back and then go and watch the Arsenal."

"The clock was an attraction, you could look at the clock, especially before the game. Very few people could afford a watch. And when the game started, you always got a good view from the North Bank."

"The dimming of the lights when play was about to start for evening matches gave the atmosphere of curtain up at the theatre."

Quotes from Arsenal fans.



Highbury for all

Football

Highbury was so much more than Arsenal's home ground. It has hosted many amateur games, along with exhibition matches such as the Metropolitan Police vs Paris Police and the Boxers vs the Jockeys, both clashes taking place during the 1950s.

Other notable matches include FA Cup semi-finals and also England games, mostly friendlies, between 1920 and 1961. The most famous of these was the 'Battle of Highbury' in 1934 which saw England, featuring seven Arsenal players, beat Italy 3-2 in a fiercely contested match that included a number of broken bones!

The 1948 Olympic Games held in London saw Highbury being used for football matches, including Great Britain's first round victory over the Netherlands.

Baseball and cricket

The ground was also used for many other sports. During the First World War (1914-18) it was used for baseball games by US and Canadian troops stationed in London and, in 1921, there was a charity rugby league game between England and a visiting Australasia side.

Cricket matches have also featured, the first being a testimonial for the great Denis Compton in 1949 followed by one for his brother, Leslie, in 1955. The benefit match for Jack Young in 1952 was the first cricket match to be played under floodlights and was televised on the BBC.

Boxing

One of the most prestigious events held at Highbury was the world heavyweight title fight between American Muhammad Ali and Britain's Henry Cooper in May 1966. A crowd of over 40,000, including Hollywood Stars Lee Marvin and George Raft, watched this international fight as well as many British celebrities. Cooper was beaten in the sixth round.



British Middleweight Champion boxer Randolph Turpin, Leslie Compton of Arsenal and the 26 times Champion Jockey Sir Gordon Richards at the Boxers and Jockeys match in 1950.



A floodlight benefit cricket match, August 1949, in aid of Sir Denis Compton, footballer and cricketer.



Muhammad Ali and Henry Cooper during their world heavyweight title fight at Highbury, May 1966.



British stars Eric Sykes, Ronnie Carroll, Diana Dors and Sean Connery anxiously watch the fight between Ali and Cooper.

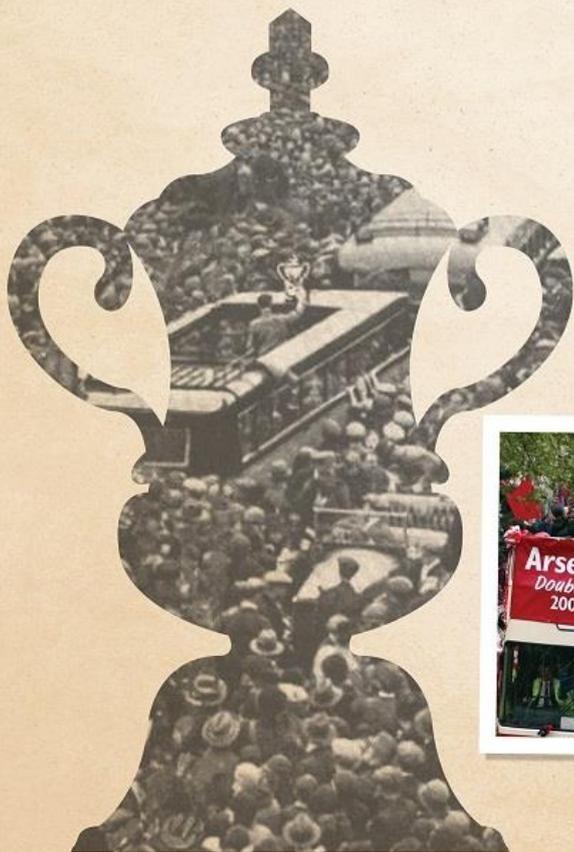
Islington parades

Parades to the town hall

Victory parades have been a major part of Arsenal's tradition, especially since May 1930, when the FA cup-winning Arsenal team made their way in a motor coach from Highbury Stadium down Seven Sisters Road and Holloway Road to Islington Town Hall. The team was greeted there by 3,000 fans and received by the Mayor of Islington and other borough officials.

Civic pride

In the 1970s, as Arsenal returned to their winning ways, regular civic receptions were held giving the fans the opportunity to congratulate their beloved team. Even in defeat the crowds would turn out, as was the case in 1978 when thousands of residents turned up despite the 1-0 defeat to Ipswich Town in the FA Cup final. On this occasion there was an important change in the traditional route, with the 'victory' bus now travelling to the town hall via Avenell Road, Aubert Park, Highbury Park, Highbury Grove, St Paul's Road, Highbury Corner and Upper Street.



After their 2-0 defeat of Huddersfield at the 1930 FA Cup Final, the Arsenal team arrive at Islington Town Hall for a formal reception.



The Arsenal FA Cup winners arrive at Islington Town Hall with the FA Cup Trophy, 1950.



The Arsenal team parade the FA Cup and League Championship Trophies as Double Winners in 1971.



May 2002, Arsenal fans gather in Upper Street to await the team celebrating their double win.



May 2002, the ladies team in the coach behind, the most successful team in English women's association football, also won their league in 2002. (Photograph: Stuart MacFarlane)

Emirates Stadium

21st century football

A move next door

Planning for a new stadium began in 1999 and remaining in Islington was immediately identified as a priority. A potential new site was identified at Ashburton Grove, less than half a mile away from the Highbury ground.

This 60-acre piece of land was formerly Victorian housing dating from the 1860s. These poor quality and overcrowded dwellings were demolished during the 1920s, as part of a local authority clearance programme. The site was gradually turned over to industrial use and in the 1930s adjacent former railway sidings became the waste transfer facilities for the borough.

New homes

The 'Emirates Stadium' project resulted in so much more than just a new home for Arsenal FC. At the time it was one of the largest privately undertaken regeneration projects in Western Europe. Included within the £390 million project budget was substantial investment in Islington, including a brand-new waste and recycling centre to replace the facilities that were at Ashburton Grove, in addition to the creation of 2,500 new homes in a borough with a real need for housing.

Emirates Stadium is now a proper venue for football and so much more in the 21st century.



A detail from the Booth poverty map, 1889. Charles Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, recorded the levels of wealth and poverty in London's streets. The darker the colour, the worse the poverty. The dark blue is 'Very poor. Chronic want'. The Black denotes 'Lowest class. Vicious, semi-criminal'.

Ashburton Grove signal box in 1960 (demolished 1974). It controlled part of the network of railway tracks in this area. The steep track going up Highbury Hill was known to train drivers as the 'Creep-up'.



Arsenal and the community today

The club gives back

Arsenal FC has always been part of the Islington community. The Club, as a local business, has contributed to many charitable initiatives; the Islington War Memorial Fund, a new pew for St Mary's Church in Upper Street during its post-war repairs and contributions to the Great Northern Hospital on Holloway Road to name just a few.

In 1985 Arsenal FC was one of the first British clubs to set up a formal community department. This is considered throughout the football industry to be an exemplary scheme that delivers meaningful initiatives to the local community.

Local initiatives

The Club reaches out to many local people, especially the young, and offers opportunities to help the local community thrive, especially in partnership with other local groups and providers.

This work has covered themes, such as:

- **sport**
- **social inclusion**
- **health and education, employment and training**

Current provision sees the club working with over 2,000 participants in Islington each week across 52 different venues.

Today, the community team at Arsenal brings a unique approach to community work in Islington, which combines a dedicated and knowledgeable staff team (drawn largely from the local area) with the attraction of a world-famous football club.



The community department's focus has always been local, especially young, people living in Islington.



Arsenal in the Community have delivered short mat bowls sessions for local people since the mid-1980s. We currently run 6 sessions across community centres in the borough.



Arsenal Ladies was founded as a community project in 1987. They turned semi-professional in 2002. In 2006/07 they won every trophy available to them - six in total! This is the 1992/93 team.

Arsenal and England midfielder Jack Wilshere at St Aloysius School in Archway. The community department runs a BTEC in sports coaching for the school's 6th-form students.