

= Priestfield Stadium =

Priestfield Stadium (popularly known simply as Priestfield and officially known from 2007 to 2010 as KRBS Priestfield Stadium and from 2011 as MEMS Priestfield Stadium for sponsorship purposes) is a football stadium in Gillingham , Kent . It has been the home of Gillingham Football Club since the club 's formation in 1893 , and was also the temporary home of Brighton & Hove Albion Football Club for two seasons during the 1990s . The stadium has also hosted women 's and youth international matches and from 2013 onwards will play host to London Broncos rugby league matches .

The stadium underwent extensive redevelopment during the late 1990s , which has brought its capacity down from nearly 20 @, @ 000 to a current figure of 11 @, @ 582 . It has four all @- @ seater stands , all constructed since 1997 , although one is only of a temporary nature . There are also conference and banqueting facilities and a nightspot named the Blues Rock Café . Despite having invested heavily in its current stadium , Gillingham F.C. has plans to relocate to a new stadium .

= = History = =

New Brompton Football Club , the forerunner of Gillingham Football Club , formed in June 1893 . At the same time an area of land in Gillingham was acquired by the club 's founders , the purchase being funded through an issue of 1 @, @ 500 £ 1 shares . Sources differ on whether the stadium was named after the road on which the land stood , Priestfield Road , or whether the road was named after the stadium , although until 1947 the stadium itself was officially named Priestfield Road . A pitch was laid and a pavilion erected , and the first matches at Priestfield were staged on 2 September 1893 . New Brompton 's reserve team played Grays , followed immediately by the first match for the club 's first team , against Woolwich Arsenal 's reserves . The admission charge for the two matches was 3d . A newspaper report on the matches noted that the club had recently purchased an additional acre and three @- @ quarters of ground and had accepted a contract for the construction of a stand containing 500 seats . Most spectators stood on terracing , banked earth , or simply along the perimeter of the pitch , as was the case at most football grounds at the time . In order to raise funds to assist with the running of the football club , New Brompton allowed the ground to be used for other events , such as smoking concerts , fêtes , athletics meetings and a ladies ' football match . Sheep were allowed to graze on the pitch during the week , a common practice at many grounds at that time . In 1899 , a second stand was added along part of the Gordon Road side of the ground , reportedly built by off @- @ duty dock workers in exchange for beer and cigarettes .

By 1908 , the total number of seats had been increased to 800 and terracing added at the Rainham end of the ground . In 1912 , the club 's first Supporters ' Association was formed , its initial project being to raise the necessary funds to construct terracing at the opposite end of the ground . Two years later the club , which had changed its name to Gillingham F.C. in 1913 , secured a bank loan of £ 1 @, @ 570 which was used to build a new grandstand , but just a month after it was completed the stand was severely damaged by high winds , which ripped off the roof and twisted most of the ironwork . The club sued the contractors , but it took a further three months for the damage to be repaired .

A new attendance record was set in 1924 when an FA Cup match against First Division leaders Cardiff City drew a crowd of 19 @, @ 472 . This record stood until 1948 , when 23 @, @ 002 fans watched Gillingham take on Queens Park Rangers in the FA Cup , with many more turned away . In the same year the club , which had lost its place in the Football League ten years earlier after failing to gain re @- @ election , produced a glossy brochure as part of its bid to be elected back into the league . The facilities at Priestfield were highlighted as one of the club 's strengths in the brochure , which listed the ground 's capacity as " between 25 @, @ 000 and 30 @, @ 000 " but stated that plans had been drawn up to increase the capacity to 50 @, @ 000 , with 5 @, @ 000 seats .

The ground underwent its most extensive redevelopment to date in 1955 , at a total cost of £ 28

@, @ 500 . The previously sloping pitch was levelled , the terracing that occupied part of the Gordon Road side of the ground replaced , and new covered accommodation , known as the Stanley Stand , erected between the Rainham End and Gordon Road Stand . The first floodlights were erected in 1963 , at a cost of over £ 14 @, @ 000 , but this was to be the last significant development work at Priestfield for over thirty years . By the early 1980s the capacity of the ground was listed as 22 @, @ 000 , although this was reduced to 19 @, @ 000 when the Gordon Road Stand was closed for safety reasons . In 1987 , a clock was erected at the corner of the Rainham End and the Stanley Stand , dubbed the Lord Sondes Clock in honour of Henry Milles @-@ Lade , 5th Earl Sondes , a member of the club 's board of directors . The clock was removed during later stadium redevelopment work and its current whereabouts are unknown .

New owner Paul Scally took over at the club in 1995 and soon instigated a programme of redevelopment which completely transformed the formerly run @-@ down ground . The closed stand was replaced with a new Gordon Road Stand in 1997 at a cost of more than £ 2 million . Two years later the Rainham End terracing was replaced with a new all @-@ seater stand , with the sports centre behind it demolished and replaced with a car park .

The main stand on the northern side of the pitch was demolished in 1999 , along with a section of away terracing , to be replaced with a new state @-@ of @-@ the @-@ art facility dubbed the Medway Stand , but the work was beset by problems . Due to serious delays with the building of the new stand , the club was forced to spend most of the subsequent season first with that side of the ground completely empty , then later with building work ongoing . Supporters were not able to sit in the new stand until the latter stages of the 1999 ? 2000 season , and even then many of the facilities had not been finished . The stand also caused severe financial problems for the club , as its facilities eventually cost significantly more than the original estimate .

The fourth side of the ground was redeveloped in 2003 when the Town End terracing was removed and a temporary stand put in its place , named after the late football commentator and Gillingham supporter Brian Moore . It was hoped that work would begin on a permanent Brian Moore Stand in 2004 , but due to talk of relocating the club to a new ground and the club 's current financial problems , this has been put on hold .

On 1 June 2007 , the stadium was officially renamed KRBS Priestfield Stadium as part of a sponsorship deal that lasted three years with the Kent Reliance Building Society . In 2011 another such deal led to the rebranding of the stadium as MEMS Priestfield Stadium .

= = Structure and facilities = =

The pitch is surrounded by four all @-@ seater stands ? the Medway Stand , the Rainham End , the Gordon Road Stand and the Brian Moore Stand . All are covered with the exception of the Brian Moore Stand . The Medway Stand , which replaced the old Main Stand and part of the terracing at each end , is the largest and northernmost of the four . It has two tiers with a row of twenty executive boxes between the top and bottom tier . The stand also contains the changing rooms , physiotherapy facilities , club offices and club shop . The Rainham End , located behind the goal at the eastern end of the pitch , opened in 1999 and houses 2 @, @ 400 fans . This stand , like the terrace it replaced , is known for housing the club 's most vocal supporters . The Gordon Road Stand , which seats 2 @, @ 600 , was opened in 1997 and is opposite the Medway Stand . Due to planning requirements , the stand had a height restriction placed upon it , making it significantly lower than the other three sides of the ground , and due to the road layout behind it is narrower at one end than the other . A gantry for television cameras is located on the roof of this stand .

Opposite the Rainham End is the Brian Moore Stand . This stand is a temporary one , and accommodates visiting supporters . It occupies the site of the former Town End terracing , which was unusual in that it had a pronounced slope , with one end of the terracing being higher up than the other . In 1955 the pitch , which previously sloped at that end of the stadium , was levelled out but the gradient of the Town End was left unchanged .

The state of the stadium 's pitch caused the club severe problems in 2003 . A number of fixtures had to be postponed due to the state of the pitch , which was described as resembling a ploughed

field , and the surface had to be heavily sanded before an FA Cup match against Leeds United . At the end of the season , taking advantage of the demolition of the old Town End , which allowed better access to the pitch , the club had the drainage system replaced and a completely new pitch laid .

Added to the new stands were several new developments . The Conference and Banqueting Centre , which is located behind the Rainham End , comprises the Great Hall , which can accommodate up to 600 delegates for events , and twenty smaller delegate rooms . The Centre is connected to the Medway Stand , thus allowing views from the banqueting suite onto the pitch , and is also licensed for wedding ceremonies . The Blues Rock Café nightspot , located within the Medway Stand , is open between four and five nights a week and stages live music and screenings of major sporting events . The club purchased many of the fixtures and fittings for these new developments at discounted prices when the furnishings of the Millennium Dome were sold off upon its closure .

Despite the stadium 's new facilities , Priestfield is still viewed in a negative light in some circles . In 2004 , it was voted the worst football ground in England by a poll in the Observer newspaper , although most of the comments made in the poll concerned the town of Gillingham itself , rather than the actual stadium as a building .

= = Future = =

Gillingham chairman Paul Scally has made it clear that he intends to relocate the club away from its current stadium , announcing in September 2003 that " there is no future for the club at the Priestfield " . In 2004 , the club outlined plans for a new stadium at Cuxton but abandoned them soon afterwards due to the cost of improving transport links to the site . At the time Scally stated that he anticipated the club moving within four years , but by 2007 the proposed date had been pushed back to 2010 .

Despite the proposed move , the club promoted its facilities , in conjunction with Medway Council , as a possible training base for athletes competing in the 2012 Summer Olympics , saying :

In December 2007 , Gillingham shareholders passed a resolution to sell the ground to Priestfield Developments Ltd , a company wholly owned by Paul Scally , for £ 9.8m as part of a restructuring of the club 's debts . The deal was to allow three years use of the stadium at £ 1 p.a. , with the club meeting running costs , with tenure secured for a further seven years at a rent as yet unspecified . In 2011 , however , the club purchased the stadium back for around 10 % of the fee paid by Priestfield Developments .

= = Other uses = =

In April 2006 , the ground hosted the England women 's team 's World Cup Qualifier against Austria , achieving a gate of 8 @, @ 068 (a higher attendance than Gillingham 's average home gate for the 2005 ? 06 season) . Priestfield has also been the venue for home matches for the England youth team , including a November 2007 match against their counterparts from Ghana .

The stadium has also occasionally been the " home " of clubs other than Gillingham . In 1895 , Woolwich Arsenal played a Second Division home game against Burton Swifts at Priestfield after their own Manor Ground had been closed by the Football League for five weeks after crowd trouble at a match there earlier that year . Over a century later , during the 1997 ? 98 and 1998 ? 99 seasons Brighton & Hove Albion played their home matches at Priestfield , as they had entered a ground @-@ share agreement with Gillingham as a result of the sale of their Goldstone Ground to property developers . The move , undertaken by the club after a plan to groundshare with nearby Portsmouth fell through , was a controversial one for Brighton 's fans , who faced a 150 @-@ mile (240 km) round trip to each home game . The two clubs subsequently became embroiled in a dispute over the charges levied by Gillingham for the hire of the ground , which was eventually settled out of court in 2001 . In May 2012 the London Broncos hosted a rugby league match at the stadium , the first Super League match to be staged in Kent , and the club later announced the

possibility of making Priestfield their permanent home venue with effect from 2013 , although this did not occur .

The social and catering facilities are used for a range of business and entertainment events , and the premises is licensed for marriages . The pitch area and the Gordon Road Stand were used for a Christian outreach festival in May 2000 .

= = Records = =

The highest attendance recorded at Priestfield was 23 @, @ 002 for a match against Queens Park Rangers in the FA Cup 3rd round on 10 January 1948 . The highest Football League attendance was 20 @, @ 128 against Millwall in the Third Division South on 2 September 1950 . The record modern (all @-@ seated) attendance is 11 @, @ 418 , set on 20 September 2003 against West Ham United in the First Division .

The highest seasonal average attendance for league matches at Priestfield since Gillingham returned to the Football League in 1950 was 12 @, @ 576 in the 1951 ? 52 season . Gillingham 's lowest seasonal average was 2 @, @ 979 in the 1994 ? 95 season , although Brighton recorded a lower figure of 2 @, @ 328 in the 1997 ? 98 season .

= = Transport = =

The stadium is approximately 0 @. @ 5 miles (1 km) from Gillingham railway station , which lies on Southeastern 's Chatham Main Line from London Victoria to Dover Priory and Ramsgate . The station is also the southern terminus of the North Kent Line , which connects to London Charing Cross . The stadium has no parking facilities for supporters , and the streets around the ground are subject to a residents @-@ only permit parking scheme on match days , which means that supporters have to park a considerable distance away from the ground . For the 2007 ? 08 season the club introduced a park and ride scheme whereby supporters leave their cars in a car park approximately one mile from the ground and are transported to the stadium by taxi . Chairman Paul Scally has cited the lack of parking as one of the main reasons why a new stadium is essential .