

Bootham Crescent – Sharing Memories, Shaping Place



York City Football Club's home had been at Bootham Crescent for nearly 90 years when the club moved to a new stadium in 2021. Historic England has been recording memories of a locally iconic place, and helping to see that the site's redevelopment reflects its history. Jason Wood reports

For anyone who didn't already know, the instant condemnation of a proposal to create a football Super League, announced in April, revealed the strength of emotions that the game inspires in its fans and players. A group of high-ranking European clubs, it was said, would play each other in their own bubble, without the usual threat of league relegation for poor performance. The plan was criticised as elitist and money-driven. A big complaint was that it ignored the importance of place in football, of tradition, pride and hope: as a *Guardian* writer put it, the "battle of nations and cultures, towns and regions, ideas and systems", in which young players might start in their local club and rise to stardom, was being shown a red card.

Right: York City FC was formed in 1922 at Fulfordgate; parts of the stadium were appropriated in 1932 to build the Popular Stand at Bootham Crescent

Much of that local passion is embodied in football grounds. In the last 30 years they have been comprehensively demolished, redeveloped and relocated. Many have now disappeared below housing estates, supermarkets and retail parks, often without a nod of recognition to their history and heritage. Yet research has shown that grounds are keenly valued as cherished places and repositories of memory. Interrogating



the relationship between place and memory, between tangible and intangible heritage, is always very difficult: but for football in particular it is a very important challenge, and one that remains under-researched.

Place-shaping and the enhancement of public benefit are priorities for Historic England. Examples were needed to show how the heritage sector can improve ways in which places proposed for redevelopment may be shaped to give them greater meaning and resilience. York City Football Club was planning to leave Bootham Crescent and move to the LNER (London North Eastern Railway) Community Stadium, with its old home earmarked for housing. A project was devised to explore how heritage could influence the redevelopment of the football ground, as a case study in respecting previous use and strength of associations, and by so doing creating a more distinctive place with real character.



Above: Fulfordgate was redeveloped for housing, leaving only a street name to show its story

when York Cricket Club left in 1932, the Football Club took over the site and sold Fulfordgate for housing.

Bootham Crescent has changed surprisingly little since its speedy construction, partly reusing elements dismantled and transported from

replaced by concrete terraces after the Second World War. The Main Stand was extended in 1955, and the Popular Stand and the Enclosure in front of the Main Stand seated in the 1970s and 1990s respectively. The northern terrace, or Shipton Street End, was covered in 1991 and the new stand named after David Longhurst, a York City player who tragically died during a home game in 1990.

After 75 years, with relegations outnumbering promotions, the club finally lost its Football League status in 2004, and since 2017 it has competed once again in regional non-League football as when originally formed. It has, however, caught public imagination, notably for its giant-killing exploits in the Football Association Challenge Cup (the FA Cup). Back in 1938 the club reached the quarter finals in a memorable game against Huddersfield Town watched by a record crowd of over 28,000, some of whom spilled over the picket fence and stood along the touchlines. The 1954–55 season saw the club embark on its most famous Cup run, this time reaching the semi-finals and beating the likes of Blackpool and Spurs along the way. Some 15 minutes into the Spurs match a section of the fence in front of the Popular Stand collapsed, allowing several hundred fans to funnel through the opening giving them an unimpeded pitch-side view. A notable fourth-round match in January 1985 saw a celebrated win against Arsenal, with victory sealed by a last-minute penalty on a snow-covered pitch – a goal still eulogised over today.



Above: Bootham Crescent's Main Stand today

Cup winners

Formed in 1922, York City FC was elected to the Football League in 1929 after a probationary period in the Midland League. During its first decade the club's home ground was at Fulfordgate, on the city's southern outskirts. Bootham Crescent cricket ground – a ten-minute walk from the Council for British Archaeology's previous offices – was closer to the city centre with better transport links. So

Fulfordgate. In many respects it is the quintessential British football ground, nestled between terraced houses, with a Main Stand and Popular Stand (whose costs were defrayed by supporters) on the long sides, banking at each end and a white wooden picket fence around the perimeter of the pitch. Originally, the only seating (mostly in the form of benches) was in the Main Stand; elsewhere, railway sleepers were repurposed as steps,



Meanings & memories

Historic England's involvement at Bootham Crescent began at the start of the 2018/19 season, then scheduled as the last to be played at the old ground. Delays with the new stadium, however, meant that Bootham Crescent continued to be used for another season and a half. This had a knock-on effect of postponing the planning application for the site's redevelopment and its sale to the York-based developer, Persimmon Homes. Fortuitously, this extended period gave the Historic England project more time to work with the club and more opportunities to influence the redevelopment proposals as they emerged.

Our aim was to identify ways in which the physical fabric of Bootham Crescent, and crucially also the experience, sense of identity and memory expressed by the football community, could be used to shape, drive and improve the redevelopment. Although the project related specifically to a football ground, the approach was seen as relevant and applicable to redevelopment at other sport and leisure venues. An important result, therefore, would be a methodology and guidance for Historic England. This would allow it to demonstrate how it can both embrace the public history and heritage of the recent past, and be prepared to be imaginative, collaborative and innovative in future projects nationally.

We began by drawing lessons and inspiration from studies of how the loss of football stadiums had been recorded, marked or celebrated in previous redevelopment schemes. The most successful were found to respect the plan form of the original stadium by adaptive reuse and creative use of space. The redevelopment of Arsenal's Highbury is an exceptional example. Here the shells of the listed art deco

Relocation had been an inordinately long time coming: York City's desire for a new stadium and the initial proposals for housing at Bootham Crescent were first mooted almost two decades ago. Various schemes came and went – including the idea of turning Bootham Crescent through 90 degrees – but plans eventually settled on a site at Monk's Cross on the city's northern outskirts. Here, the City Council proposed building a new stadium for the football and rugby league clubs to share (in recent years, Bootham Crescent had played host to rugby league, as well as baseball in the 1930s). It would take another frustrating decade, however, of money-raising efforts and the enabling development of a retail park and leisure centre, and latterly construction setbacks, covid-19 restrictions and safety certification,



before the LNER Community Stadium finally opened in February 2021. It is a move that has been met with continuing trepidation by York City's fans, understandably suspicious of new, out-of-town identikit stadiums and apprehensive about disruption to their match-day routines.

Above: The new LNER Community Stadium under construction in 2019, and in use today

Left: Housing at Highbury Square, London, site of Arsenal FC stadium until 2006, nearing completion in 2009; Arsenal's then manager Arsène Wenger called it "a quality residential development that reflects the club's heritage and allows the spirit of Highbury to live on"

Right: Street names in Roker, Tyne & Wear, commemorate the site of Sunderland AFC's stadium, demolished in 1998 (though no Relegation Close)





Left: Tony Cole's photos capture the spirit of lower-League football and the fans who call Bootham Crescent "home"



Right: A plaque in a Sainsbury's carpark at Christie Park, Lancashire, former home of Morecambe FC, marks the centre spot; it honours the club's benefactor, fans and "the few whose ashes forever remain here"



stands were sympathetically converted for residential use and the pitch transformed into a communal garden, ingeniously preserving the stadium's historic fabric, footprint and sense of enclosure. The worst examples were those that failed to respect the previous use and layout of the site, provided little or no public open space, or which simply ticked the heritage box by naming streets after famous players or parts of the stadium, or laying a plaque on the centre spot.

By far the most important aspect of the project, however, was the breadth of consultation, especially among York City's passionate fans. Despite now playing in the sixth tier of English football, the club retains an extraordinarily loyal and impressively resilient fan base. This extends to a deep affection for their stadium – a place for them loaded with meaning and memories (and indeed the final resting place for some whose ashes have been interred or scattered there). It was crucial to explore how and why

the fans valued Bootham Crescent and how it should be memorialised.

Five-minute flag

It soon became clear that there was a strong desire for retaining a tangible part of the stadium – somewhere people could focus their memories, somewhere they could orientate themselves after the stadium had gone, and somewhere they could continue to pay their respects. To create such a lasting legacy would demand sensitivity and imagination. After over two years working with the club, the Supporters' Trust, local residents and businesses, politicians, the planning authority and latterly Persimmon Homes, the legacy plans have been agreed and planning permission successfully sought, with the developer now obliged to deliver them as a planning condition.

The main feature will be the retention of a short section of the Popular Stand terrace incorporating a tunnel that runs under the rear of the

stand and against the west boundary wall. The centre circle will be marked out in the middle of a Public Open Space, aligning with the retained terrace and providing a further place for orientation.

The tunnel is a unique survival from the original 1932 construction, which once permitted rival fans to switch ends at half time. It was used as an air-raid shelter by pupils of a nearby school and local residents during the Second World War, adding a further layer of meaning and significance. The



Right: A section of the Bootham Popular Stand terrace at the half way line will be retained

section of retained tunnel and terrace will be as close to the half-way line as possible. The roof and some seats will be removed, the sides under-built, the terrace perimeter secured with metal fencing and the tunnel ends gated, all using reclaimed material from the stand.

This will be flanked by a Memorial Garden bordered by the original wooden picket fence which survives in front of the Popular Stand. The garden



Left: The five-minute flag, lowered to signal a game's imminent end

will provide a home for existing memorials, buried caskets and ashes (subject to families' wishes), but also future interments. The caskets will be removed under licence and soil cores taken in areas known to be where ashes have been scattered.

One of the oldest and most endearing traditions at the ground was

the lowering of the club flag to signal the final five minutes before the end of a match. Present since the outset, at a time when there was no stadium clock and few people had wrist watches, the so-called "five-minute flag" flew from a pole standing between the south-east corner of the pitch and the main entrance. As part of the legacy plans, a

new flagpole will be erected as close as possible to its original site, flying a replica of the club flag, as a permanent and symbolic reminder of fans' allegiance to Bootham Crescent.

Finally, the brick boundary wall around the site, which was originally in place for the pre-existing cricket ground, will be retained and consolidated, but where concrete blockwork has been added to its summit this will be removed. The face of the west boundary wall, either side of the retained terrace/tunnel, has the potential to support old signage from the stadium or potentially new artwork. Consideration is also being given to retaining the walls of the gents urinal built against the west boundary wall south of the Popular Stand and reusing the structure in some imaginative way.

Sense of place

Some 25 years ago Simon Inglis, a writer and stadium expert, concluded a description of Bootham Crescent by raising and answering a pertinent question:

"What is it we love so much about cities like York? It is its higgledy-piggledy heritage, its twisted streets, its mélange of building styles. The sheer urban anarchy of it all. Well, maybe it is the same for football grounds. We plan and build them haphazardly. We fly in the face of logic. We even have a name for the consequence of all these failings, thanks to the narrow lanes... of medieval York... The Shambles, and just like the football grounds of Britain we delight in their quirkiness and would not wish them different for all the world."

It is a sentiment that persists today, to judge by the recently created Facebook group Lost Football

Left: "Thank you for all the memories" – an anonymous note and flowers on the old gates to Bootham Crescent



Below: Parts of the wooden picket fence will be reclaimed to border the Memorial Garden



Grounds & Terraces of the United Kingdom, which has attracted over 50,000 members in less than 10 months. The numerous daily posts are a potent reminder of how football stadiums continue to convey intense senses of identity and belonging, with the power to stir hearts and minds and evoke strong and enduring social responses, even long after the grounds have gone. This is especially true when clubs like York City are relocated, and the fan base is dislocated. It is really important, therefore, to acknowledge the emotional attachment people have for Bootham Crescent and that this will remain undiminished following the redevelopment. Hopefully, with imagination, effort and investment, there is now the opportunity to create a housing scheme that marks and celebrates the ground's distinctive sense of place, lending it both popular appeal to York City's fans as well as potential home owners.

*The author has written and presented a series of short videos about the project, filmed and edited by Edward Whyte, for Historic England's YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrDmHCfzME0&list=PL6BYFxi15IHBqT71FfmYhD2terCX9B2D7K. For a CBA Festival of Archaeology webinar on Bootham Crescent see <https://festival.archaeologyuk.org/events/bootham-crescent-sharing-memories-shaping-place-discussion-sporting-heritage-1603454642>. See *Football Grounds of Britain*, by Simon Inglis (1996), *Bootham Crescent: A Second Home*, by Paul Bowser (2019/2021) and *Home End*, by Tony Cole (2018). Thanks to Keith Emerick, Historic England project lead; Ian McAndrew, YCFC Stadium director; Mike Brown and John Lacy, current and former chairmen, York City Supporters' Trust; Claire MacRae and Jonathan Kenyon, City of York Council; Neil Redfern, director of the CBA; and Tony Cole and Matt Kirkham for images. Chris Gaffney and Tom Sparrow, University of Bradford, undertook geophysical survey and 3D laser scanning of the site, and Laura Whitham of DACA Studio produced the housing graphic based on Persimmon Homes plans. Jason Wood is director of Heritage Consultancy Services and specialises in the heritage of sport and leisure: jwbc@yahoo.co.uk ■*

Right: A tunnel under the rear of the Popular Stand allowed rival fans to switch ends at half time



Above: Iterations of a housing scheme. In the 2002 layout, the Public Open Space (POS) was roughly centred on the football pitch but the development's shape and orientation failed to respect the stadium's plan form. In the 2018 scheme (prior to Historic England's involvement), orientation was improved with the POS shifted to the west, probably anticipating plans to link up with a proposed redevelopment on the adjacent site. The final scheme, following consultation with Historic England, was the one that won planning approval in 2020. The concept was now to provide a central built form, with town houses and apartments framing a central POS with gaps between, giving the feel of a "stadium nestled between terraced housing". The POS contains the retained terrace/tunnel and adjacent Memorial Garden, centre circle and five-minute flag. In an earlier version it was suggested that the Memorial Garden occupy the centre circle but this was changed so as to provide a more discreet location for remembrance. A further recommendation by Historic England saw the central built form aligned to the west boundary wall to respect the stadium's orientation. The Club and Persimmon Homes have submitted a request to the local authority to name the road, cycleway and apartment blocks after former York City players, including David Longhurst Way (the author would like to put in a cheeky bid for Club legend Arthur Bottom)

