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# Changing stadium in the digital era: a case study on football clubs in the Greater London area

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“The author is the sole responsible of the content of this work”

## Abstract

A stadium means much more than the matches played there: it is a gathering place that, for many, has a mystical atmosphere, where people come together to support their team regardless of age, origins and social class. Stadiums play a relevant social role and, during the past decades, their structures evolved as they became more critical sources of profit opportunities for football clubs, as well as social hubs for the communities surrounding them. While in the past stadium change and renovations were usually caused by safety concerns, today these updates are mainly motivated by opportunities for greater profits and by the need to increase the stakeholders' network surrounding the club. England and the United Kingdom in general are exemplary in terms of sport structures. London is a metropolis that is relevantly affected by this renovation process, mainly because of the high concentration of sport clubs in the area.

The objectives of the present thesis are:

- Analysing available bibliographical references about changes in structures belonging to football clubs.
- Recognizing the clubs in London that faced this challenge and analysing each case.
- Analysing the related level of interactions on the most relevant social media.
- Analysing the frequency of related searches on web browsers.
- Identifying critical factors and possible benefits of changing structures.
- Providing a set of possible guidelines for football clubs interested in changing their stadium.

This subject is critically important given the constant growth of the sport entertainment sector. After an introduction of the historical context, the procedures applied by clubs in these situations will be exposed, enumerating the possible merits and flaws. Furthermore, the instances concerning Arsenal FC, Barnet FC, Brentford FC, Fulham FC, Tottenham Hotspur FC, West Ham United FC and Wimbledon AFC will be analysed as case studies. In the conclusions section, recommendations for clubs intending to change or renovate their home stadiums will be provided.

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## 1. Introduction and subject focus

Football as a sport is capable of attracting a multitude of followers, captivating individuals across all social classes and from any origin, and creating a deep bond between them and their favourite teams (Foglio, 2018).

Football as it's known today was founded in England, the country where its current rules were established. It was originally a sport for well-off people, played in colleges (the number of players in a team is actually set to eleven as college classes were composed of ten students plus the teacher, the latter acting as captain). Cambridge Rules, introduced in 1848 at the University of Cambridge, were the first formalized football rules that were accepted by English schools. In 1857, the first football team, Sheffield FC, was founded. Football quickly reached all social classes and the saying "the people's game" was coined (Tuttobene, 2019). Along the rules of the game, England was the forerunner in football infrastructure, and was already way ahead, as compared to other European countries, at the beginning of the past century. It should be noted that many teams, even the less renowned ones, were founded between the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, contributing to the depth of the English football tradition (Roggero, 2019).

A stadium on the other hand is a gathering place, a structure that is almost sacred to the followers of a club. Inside the stadium, people gathered to follow the match are embraced and feel part of a greater whole for the duration of the game. A stadium is a fascinating location that enchants at first sight: as soon as the floodlights become visible above the roofs, one's sight becomes glued to it until the turnstile is reached. A stadium and its surrounding area cover a relevant role, as a club identifies in its home and, through it, strengthens its values and its bonds with the territory (Coluccia, 2020).

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when football as a sport was only played during the winter months in order to allow cricket players to keep in shape in view of the following season structures were state-of-the-art (Mandle, 1973). Football was just starting off. Nonetheless, and due to the presence of other sports, played since the Victorian age, that drew a lot of public, many structures were already available (Sandiford, 1982). Furthermore, new ones were built in record time because of the increasing propagation of what would become the most followed sport in the world, as well as due to the low price at which clubs could find terrains (lawns, unused or abandoned plots, or land provided by the club owner directly) (Coluccia, 2020).

Archibald Leitch was one of the pioneers of sport infrastructure in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was the first dedicated sports architect and provided a relevant contribution to many structures in the UK (Smith, 2017). Wood was the material of choice at the time for first generation stadiums, from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1920s (Paramio, Buraimo, & Campos, 2008). The football stadiums of that age were designed to fit as many people as possible, while safety and aesthetics were disregarded (Churchman, 1995). The resulting problem was that wood, being very susceptible to the effects of long-term exposure to water

and humidity, was prone to easily deteriorate (Laner, 2011). This was especially likely in the UK, as the weather is characterized by frequent rain (Harkness, et al., 2020).

One of the first tragedies involving a football stadium indeed occurred on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1902 at Ibrox, the stadium of the Glasgow Rangers – the most award-winning team in Scotland. The stadium was designed by Leitch himself. During an exhibition game between Scotland and England, one of the wooden tribunes, the Western Tribune stand, collapsed creating a structural breach and resulting in a final count of 26 dead and 550 injured (Frosdick & Walley, 1999).

After that first disaster at Ibrox, the wood that was used for most of the arena structures at the time was progressively replaced with concrete, leading to the second generation of stadiums, built between the end of the 1920s and the late 1940s (Paramio, Buraimo, & Campos, 2008).

Leitch quickly adapted to this change and created what was to become his signature design. Stadiums he designed were easily recognizable thanks to some recurring elements that still leap out, the most prominent being a roofed gable in the middle of the central stand (image 1) (Gotta, 2018).

**Image 1 – The gable over the East Stand of Brisbane Road, home stadium of Leyton Orient FC.**



**Source:** (Leyton Orient FC, 2019).

Another recurring feature were the diagonal steel bars that sustained part of the structure supporting the stand (Inglis, 2005). This element is still easily visible at Goodison Park, the stadium of Everton FC in Liverpool (image 2).



**Image 2 – The characteristic steel bars supporting the tribunes at Goodison Park.**



**Source:** (Populous, 2018).

The last recurring element was the outward façade of one of the stands (most frequently the main stand) being more relevantly decorated. This façade often resembled a temple more than a football stadium, and featured decorative elements for the purpose of better fitting the structure to the image of the area it was built in (image 3) (Paramio, Buraimo, & Campos, 2008).

**Image 3 – The Stevenage Road Stand of Craven Cottage, the Fulham FC stadium.**



**Source:** (Geograph Britain and Ireland, 2009).

In those years, the income of the clubs came to include, besides tickets, the pre-match programmes sold outside the stadium. Both the higher cost of building reinforced concrete

structure and the balance of two world wars (including the fact that several stadiums were damaged or destroyed during air raids) led teams to innovate and find new income sources. The number of supporters present during matches constantly increased, and stadiums needed to increase capacity accordingly (Churchman, 1995).

Again, a horrific tragedy drove the will to renovate structures in order to adapt to the increasing numbers of the audience. On March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1946, at Burnden Park, while the sixth round of the FA Cup was played between Bolton Wanderers and Stoke City, the barriers of the stands hosting Bolton supporters collapsed due to overcrowding. Even after the gates were closed, many more entered climbing over the fences. The public fell towards the pitch, trampling the people in the lower stands, in a tragic “domino effect”. The balance was 33 dead, and over 500 injured (Pajaro, 2020).

Third generation stadiums made their appearance: these structures featured crush barriers within the terraces, in addition to the reinforced concrete stands. The purpose was providing order to the flow of people in the stands during games (Paramio, Buraimo, & Campos, 2008). Side barriers were also introduced, mainly in the form of two meters tall fences on the sides of the stands (Pajaro, 2020).

During the age of third generation stadiums, from the Fifties to the late Eighties, UK football underwent a very problematic stage, with hooliganism putting safety and order management to the test, both inside and outside the stadiums (Churchman, 1995).

In order to understand the hooligan phenomenon, the ties to the Second industrial revolution should be considered. This historical period led to significant changes in the life of working-class members. The time outside working hours was used to follow football matches, leading to this sport becoming the workers’ favourite. Workers mostly felt light-heartedness and freedom while at matches, while leading a mostly monotonous and labour-intensive life. The physicality of the game also acted as a catalyst for the emotions of the audience (Pajaro, 2020).

After the second World War, the UK, while among the winning nations in the conflict, faced the decline of its colonial empire (Barkawi & Brighton, 2013). This factor, together with recurring, short-term economic crises, widened the divide between social strata. People from the working class and lower income families, especially the young ones, strongly identified in their urban context and neighbourhood, increasing the chances of being misled (Gow & Rookwood, 2008). A number of subcultures appeared, each being a “model or integrated system of existential and evaluative elements (values, knowledge, language, religion, norms and behaviours) distinguishing a particular group within society, leading to distinguishing attitudes and behaviours compared to other groups and/or the global society” (Treccani, 2021a). This opposed identities, together with a diffused feeling of marginalisation and rebellion against the establishment and the law, led to an increase in small acts of vandalism. Going to the stadium became an outlet to vent one’s frustration (Pajaro, 2020). In the football environment, these subcultures took the form of “firms”, groups of supporters tied to specific clubs (Redhead, 2009).

The problem was indeed very real, as these groups were easily able to create mayhem inside and outside the stadiums. Both regulations and structures were inadequate to the



advancing times and guaranteed neither good safety nor the required preparation of the police and stewards. Both the latter were frequently unprepared and required to take decisions that could worsen the situation they were facing (Black & Lloyd, 1994). The presence of hooligans generated the so-called “hooligan phobia” (Pajaro, 2020). According to collective thinking, some clothing styles were enough to be marked as one, especially by the police or the press. The latter frequently had it in for gang and firms, raging against these groups both for their eccentric clothing and for the ideas they held (Joern, 2009).

Public opinion in the UK and Europe branded English fans as being collectively violent, fomenting the fear of the public. Despite both this and the fact that hooliganism was indeed diffused in the UK, not all deaths occurred in stadiums were related to the issue (Pajaro, 2020). On January the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1971, again at Ibrox, the theatre of the aforementioned 1902 tragedy, following an Old Firm (the derby match between the Glasgow Rangers and Celtic Glasgow) that ended in a draw, a crowd formed on stairway 13 (Walker, 2004). The main cause was the crossing between people leaving the stadium early and Gers supporters returning to celebrate the goal that tied the game at the very last minutes. Some sources also state that a child fell from his father shoulders creating a domino effect of people falling upon each other (Pajaro, 2020). The iron barriers on the stairway did not help at all, and indeed exacerbated the problem, and in that horrible afternoon during the Seventies, 66 people lost their lives (image 4) (Walker, 2004).

**Image 4 – Stairway 13, at the exist of the Copland Road Stand at Ibrox**



**Source:** (STV News, 2021).

Fourteen years after Ibrox, in 1985, the Heysel stadium tragedy struck in Bruxelles. During the final of the Champions League Cup between Juventus and Liverpool, a group of overexcited Reds' supporters managed to breach into the sector for neutral fans (that was however mainly occupied by Juventus followers). Their presence in that area created panic and fans amassed on the opposing side of the stand, which was closed by a wall and

barriers and detached from the central tribune. No escape way was available, and several people were trampled. Those that tried to escape on the pitch were sent back by the police, thinking that they were hooligans trying to invade (Caremani, 2003). The victims were 39, together with approximately 600 injured. Despite general controversy, the game was not interrupted and “the Old Lady” (Juventus FC) won. The tragedy resulted in all English football clubs being placed under an indefinite ban from European competitions (Champions League, UEFA Cup, UEFA Cup Winners’ Cup) by UEFA. The ban was enforced until 1990 (Roggero, 2019).

A few weeks after the Heysel disaster, on May the 11<sup>th</sup>, during a game between Bradford City and Lincoln City, a match that was critical to determine salvation for the home team in the Third Division (currently League One), a large fire destroyed the whole main stand of the Valley Parade. The causes were never confirmed, although the most credible hypothesis is that a cigarette or cigar was dropped on the wooden part of the stands (Frosdick & Walley, 1999). All the audience poured on the pitch, some not even realising what was happening. The huge smoke cloud that hovered above the stadium was however a clear indication of the gravity of the situation. 56 people died and 265 were injured (Tempany, 2016).

After the fire, it was easily determined that the accident was not managed in the best possible way: there were no extinguishers available near the stands, mainly because of hooligan phobia. It was feared that the extinguishers could be used as weapons by fans (Pajaro, 2020).

Another dramatic event occurred a few years later, on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1989, the date of the semi-final of the FA Cup between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest, on a neutral pitch at Hillsborough, the home stadium of Sheffield Wednesday. The unorganized management of the Leppings Lane entrances (the tribune where the tragedy occurred), as well as the lack of coordination between the authorities and organizers, led to the overcrowding of the sector assigned for Liverpool fans. The results were 93 deaths and 766 injuries (Roggero, 2019). The match at Hillsborough was played nonetheless. At the time it was considered normal for the stadiums to be crowded, and there were no clearly defined regulations about the sale of tickets. The nominal capacity of stadiums was frequently exceeded (THE RT HON LORD JUSTICE TAYLOR, 1989). The British Government at the time, under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, appointed a commission presided by Peter Taylor and required a report to clarify the causes of the Hillsborough tragedy. The commission was also given a mandate to define clear rules about safety precautions to be enforced in stadiums, in order to prevent another disaster such as the one at Hillsborough from occurring, while guaranteeing safety both inside and outside the structures (Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019). English football had just suffered its darkest years and the resulting decline, mainly because of the troubles caused by supporters. The ban of English clubs from European competitions had led to the withdrawal of international sponsors. The introduction of the Taylor Report therefore brought an indirect economic return to football clubs, as they were finally allowed to operate on a larger scale and regained access to a market that could generate higher incomes (Jewell, Simmons, & Szymanski, 2014). The Taylor Report begun the restoration of UK stadiums in order to improve the conditions of the audience during matches (Pajaro, 2020). Both the Taylor Report and the Hillsborough tragedy will be the subject of a more detailed analysis in chapter 1.3.

The timeframe was set in the early Nineties, when the financial world and enterprises were beginning to approach new technologies that were soon to completely shift their actions and paradigms (Westerman, Bonnet, & McAfee, 2014). Sport, and football specifically, were too hit by these changes: the introduction of more detailed regulations and the advent of new technologies both contributed to turn football into a much greater market opportunity, just the same as other business sectors. Clubs therefore needed new income sources to balance the steadily increasing costs (Turner, 2014).

A further relevant source of change come in the early Nineties: until 1992, broadcasting rights were managed by the Football Association [FA] and by the English Football League [EFL], the latter being in charge of managing all leagues from the First Division to the Fourth (Roggero, 2019). Multimedia rights are the income obtained by the sale of the opportunity to broadcast matches on television to broadcasting channels. They obviously generate high returns, as geographical barriers become meaningless and the number of followers grow exponentially (Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019). The first four division in English football were (and still are) composed of 92 teams, and broadcasting rights were to be shared among all of them, with reduced returns, especially for the greater clubs. In 1988, a first attempt to create a dedicated television channel for the most successful teams of the First Division was made by ITV, however the project was blocked by the EFL (Tuttobene, 2019). A few years later, in 1992, the First Division became the current Premier League, thus separating from the EFL and FA (although without changing the system for promotion and relegation). The League gained the opportunity to negotiate autonomously both for broadcasting rights and for sponsorships (the first sponsor was Carling beer, followed by Barclays bank). The purpose of the whole operation was to increase the income of television rights, sharing the returns only between 22 teams (later 20) instead of the previous 92 clubs (Roggero, 2019; Penn & Penn, 2020).

1992 became a relevant turning point for English football, and saw the Premier League raised to the place of most followed football championship worldwide (Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019). English stadiums came to host both a greater audience and a multitude of tourists from around the world (Edensor, Millington, Steadman, & Taecharungroj, 2021).

The founding of the Premier League spearheaded the growth of football as an entertainment product globally: the English model, that had just begun obtaining greater returns from broadcasting rights, grew quickly, side by side with digital economy. As an example, the first contract signed with BSkyB (currently Sky) paid 304 million pounds for a period of five years (Pajaro, 2020). The generated income was divided as follows: 50% shared by all the Premier League teams for the current season; 25% based on the number of matches broadcasted live, and the remaining 25% divided according to the final placement (Tuttobene, 2019). The calendar of the matches underwent major changes in order to distribute the games to maximise television coverage, as well as to adapt to reference markets with different habits (i.e., USA) (Duke, 2002). The fact that Criticisms were becoming more widely known due to the new technologies determined a further advantage for the English Premiership, that came to be broadcasted in 212 countries (Tuttobene, 2019). During the following years, Sky managed to keep hold of Premier League broadcasting rights, and to increase its own income, despite the increasing competition by BT Sport and Amazon Prime Video (the first streaming platform to transmit Premier League matches) (Butler & Massey, 2019).

These facts pushed clubs, since they both needed the income and were expanding to new markets worldwide, to shift to a business management approach. The clubs themselves were managed and structured to expand their image, turning them, in all effects, into business brands (Foglio, 2018). The new sources of income from television rights provided the opportunity to invest greater sums into merchandising and marketing. This in turn favoured a virtuous circle catching the attention of new sponsors from overseas, providing a second wind (and funds) to the growth of English football. New structures were implemented to support the growth of young talents and to call in the best players from abroad. These players were able to increase the technical level of the League itself, providing better entertainment as a result (Ludvigsen, 2020).

Later on, the advent of social media further increased the opportunities for clubs to obtain new followers. This aspect became fundamental to communicate immediately, and through more creative means, the official statements of the clubs themselves, as well as to promote products offered by the clubs' stores (Beech & Chadwick, 2007). Web platforms allow to rapidly increase a club's fan base, and thus its income (as an example, 20% of the overall income of Manchester United is generated by its official store). Clubs were then able to implement customer relationship management (CRM) to identify target clients and build new customers' loyalty, studying their purchasing potential and defining marketing campaigns tailored to geographically targeted markets (Donna, Teotino, & Uva, 2014; Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019). In these terms, the building of new stadiums is designed to further extend the variety of potential income sources, as clubs diversify their activities in order to maximize their gains (Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019).

### **1.1. English Football League, Sports Grounds Authority and The Football Association**

Given the high number of teams in the UK, the pyramidal structure of English football includes a relevant number of levels. Above all is the Premier League, followed by the Championship (second division), League One (third division), and League Two (fourth division). The second through fourth divisions are managed by the English Football League (Roggero, 2019). Below the EFL, non-league championships include either semi- or non-professional. The National League (fifth division) and the National League North & South (sixth division) are still considered as professional leagues, while the lower levels are managed by the Football Association (down to the eleventh division). Other minor leagues are organized by individual FA sections divided by county (The Football Association, 2017b; The Football Association, 2006).

#### **English Football League**

The English Football League, which was founded in 1888, originally managed the First and Second divisions, and later was extended to include the third and fourth ones. Since 1992, with the separation of the First Division that later became the Premier League because of broadcasting right, the EFL manages the organization of the championships for the second through fourth divisions (currently named SkyBet Championship, SkyBet League One and

SkyBet League Two because of sponsorships) (Roggero, 2019). The EFL also organizes the EFL Cup, that is open to any club within the Premier League, and the three divisions of the English Football League's own league competitions – Championship, League One and League Two. It finally plans the organization of the EFL Trophy, a competition dedicated to League One and League Two clubs together with some U23 teams fielded by Premier League clubs (English Football League, 2020a).

The EFL is recognized to have introduced several innovations that changed the world of football, from the players' numbers displayed on the uniform to the choice of white coloured footballs to make them easily visible on the muddy pitches of the time, from the planning of midweek turns to evening matches using spotlights for illumination. (Roggero, 2019; Manes, 2016).

### **Sports Grounds Safety Authority**

In order to contextualise this research study, an introduction to the Sports Grounds Safety Authority [SGSA], the British Government authority that guarantees safety and security of English and Welsh sport venues, is critical (Government Digital Service, 2020). The SGSA was originally founded under the name of Football Licensing Authority, an independent organization subsidized by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport of the British Government following the Heysel tragedy. Its original mandate was to define all aspects concerning the management of sport venues in order to guarantee the comfort and safety required to watch a match (Pajaro, 2020). The SGSA also acts as a certifying authority and verifies the compliance of professional clubs' stadiums to all safety requirements. An approval from SGSA is required in order for a stadium to be considered ready to host matches for a local team participating in a specific league (Sports Grounds Safety Authority, 2021d).

Currently the SGSA also covers the role of guarantor for the safety of the twenty Premier League stadiums and the seventy-two EFL stadiums, as well as for Wembley Stadium and the Principality Stadium in Cardiff, hosting the matches of the English and Welsh national football teams respectively (Sports Grounds Safety Authority, 2021a). The SGSA is required to operate according to two specific acts (Sports Grounds Safety Authority, 2021c). The first one is the 1989 Football Spectators Act, a text that includes all the provisions that apply to football matches, in order to identify the causes of possible disturbances created by spectators (UK Parliament, 2021). All clubs in the first four divisions of English football are required to comply to its requirements. The second act is the 1975 Safety of Sports Grounds Act, which provides requirements for sport venues with a capacity greater than 10,000 spectators (or 5,000 if the stadium would host matches for the Premier League or EFL), in order to define whether a stadium is fit to host the competitions (Sports Grounds Safety Authority, 1989; English Football League, 2019). It should be noticed that both regulations are constantly updated by the UK Parliament (UK Parliament, 2011).

The FA covers the same role and provides requirements for stadiums to non-professional clubs. These requirements vary depending on the specific championship to which the targeted club is participating (The Football Association, 2020b).

The SGSA is the world recognized leading organization for the safety of sport-related structures. It also works in a consulting role, since its requirements and standards are considered to be best practices that can be applied globally (Sports Grounds Safety Authority, 2021a). For this purpose, the Authority also publishes the “Green Guide”, a handbook defining requirements to uphold the highest safety standards inside and outside sport venues, before, during and after an event. The guide is used for many other sports besides football (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2008). The first edition was published in 1973, following the Ibrox tragedy. The Green Guide reports references and dispositions that can be used by architects, designers and engineers in order to conceive a structure, including methods to determine the maximum capacity in relation to safety (in order to prevent overcrowding), to organize the placement of seats and separation of sectors, and to design the structure of accessways. The guide also includes several more dispositions concerning the positioning of healthcare services and the media (Sports Grounds Safety Authority, 2021b; Thornburn, 1999).

### **The Football Association**

The Football Association is the English football federation, and is the oldest such organization worldwide, being founded in 1863. During its first years, one of the members of the FA, Ebenezer Cobb Morley, solicitor from London, defined the so-called “Laws of the Game”, a set of football laws that provided rules and dispositions for football matches (The Football Association, 2013; The IFAB, 2017). The FA manages all English national teams, including the men’s team, the women’s squad and all youth levels. As for leagues, the FA controls all semi-professional and non-professional leagues, through its county federations, (The Football Association, 2020a). The FA also organizes the famous FA Cup, the English national cup, the oldest such competition in the world, with the participation of a high number of clubs from the whole nation. It also organizes the FA trophy, an English cup reserved to semi-professional and non-professional club teams, and the FA Vase, its counterpart at the amateur level (The Football Association, 2021).

The FA also manages all the female championships, such as the Women’s Super League (first division), the Women’s Championship (second division) and both the Women’s FA Cup (the national cup) and the FA Women’s League Cup. Furthermore, it runs the organization of youth football championships and all other national cups relating to the lower, non-professional levels. The FA also organizes futsal competitions (five-a-side football, often played indoors) and other inclusive programmes to engage the largest possible number of people and increase the diffusion of football and related knowledge. Greater attention is given to promote respect and fair-play among participants (The Football Association, 2017a).

Beyond coordinating the football system in England, the FA also issues regulations concerning the game and sport structures, according to the dispositions promoted by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association [FIFA] and by the Union of European Football Associations [UEFA]. The FA is indeed affiliated to both (Fédération Internationale de Football Association, 2021; Union of European Football Associations, 2021).



## 1.2. Taylor Report

On April the 15<sup>th</sup>, 1989, the semi-final of the FA Cup was being played between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. The match called a lot of attention as, at the time, those two teams were the two best ones in the First Division. In those years, the English Cup, an historical trophy with a long tradition, had a large following as it was the only alternative to league games due to the ban on English teams by UEFA competitions following the Heysel tragedy (Roggero, 2019). The match was being played at Sheffield, in Yorkshire, as the semi-finals and finals were always played on a neutral pitch (Pollard, 1986).

A large crowd rushed to the stadium. Many were delayed by works in progress along the M62 motorway, resulting in overcrowding in front of the stadium, and particularly in the area behind the Leppings Lane stand (the tribune hosting Liverpool supporters). The police were unable to filter the crowd and opened the gate to the Leppings Lane in order to let the crowd flow inside (Pajaro, 2020; Nicholson, 2016). Despite this attempt, the mass of people pushing forward put pressure on those trying to enter the sector, and the number of people begun to exceed the capacity of the stand (THE RT HON LORD JUSTICE TAYLOR, 1989). Many people tried to escape the crowd by invading the pitch, however the security staff, believing them to be hooligans, intimidated them to return to their seats, sometimes using force. The misreading of the situation caused by prejudice against the followers that entered the field resulted in the Hillsborough tragedy where 96 died (Tempany, 2016). The Liverpool team carries the number 96 on the back of their jersey since, in memory of the victims of that tragic afternoon in Yorkshire (image 5) (Liverpool FC, 2021b)

**Image 5 – The number on the back of the Liverpool FC jersey in memory of the victims, season 2021/22.**



**Source:** (Liverpool FC, 2021a).

The events occurred in Sheffield were the last straw and triggered, together with the growing business side of sports, a new wave of renovations of sport grounds in the UK (Turner, 2014).

The then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher gave mandate to the Minister for internal affairs Douglas Hurd to form an external commission in order to objectively analyse what occurred that mid-April afternoon. The commission was led by the Court of Appeal Justice Peter Taylor. Many witnesses were interviewed, ranging from supporters, to organizers, to any relevant figure that was involved in the Liverpool-Forest match (THE RT HON LORD JUSTICE TAYLOR, 1990).

### **Interim Report**

On August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1989, an interim report was issued, while the final one was completed one year later. The stated purpose was determining the cause of the Hillsborough tragedy, while avoiding any and all prejudices against the Liverpool supporters that, according to the Yorkshire Police, were culpable of creating the premises for the tragedy itself (Pajaro, 2020). The result was to highlight and recognize the basic factors that were then used to determine the causes of the disaster that occurred in the Sheffield Wednesday stadium: the police opening gate C, and failing to close it at the correct time, increased the crowding of the tribune. This led to overcrowding of the sector hosting Reds supporters, also because of insufficient signals and lack of clear indications to allotted seats (THE RT HON LORD JUSTICE TAYLOR, 1989). Later, the aforementioned fear of hooliganism led the police to send the people that escaped onto the pitch back to the stands. Supporters trying to reach safety by moving to sectors adjacent to Leppings Lane were also stopped. According to the interim report, this flow, if allowed, could have saved a considerable number of lives (Pajaro, 2020). These were critical mistakes made by the police, which was accused of being unable to manage a limited group of overexcited fans, and to be mixing apples and oranges by considering all presents as possible hooligans, a frequent occurrence in the past (Bazell, 2015). Indeed, the large number of people escaping the overcrowding by fleeing onto the pitch were sent back and considered as hooligans by the police (Pajaro, 2020).

Although the Taylor Report never criticised the Hillsborough structure, and even less the organizers that should have managed the flow of spectators, the fact that stricter regulations were needed in order to avoid further tragedies was evident. Both the interim report and, later, the final report, provided a list of best practices to prevent overcrowding on the stands, as well as a set of dispositions designed to increase the safety of the stadiums (Roggero, 2019).

The British Government therefore agreed to provide a strict regulation concerning sports venues. The introduction of new rules led clubs to change their stadiums in order to improve security and safety, or at least to renovate their current grounds, replacing most or all of the existing structures (Black & Lloyd, 1994).

The Taylor Report defined several critical points that should be immediately addressed beginning in the 1989/90 season (the one following the tragedy). These points would have led to a radical change to English football:

- Supporters wishing to go to matches were required to subscribe membership with their chosen club, in order to obtain seats issued to their names, thus avoiding ticket scalping and the entrance of people without a proper ticket.

- The stadium owners were required to eliminate terraces and turn their structures into all-seaters. This aspect was tied to a reduction of nominal capacity by 15%.
- A maximum number of seating places was defined for each sector, and all gates were required to be closed once the set limit was approached.
- The sale of alcoholic beverages was completely forbidden inside the venues.
- The club hosting the match and the local police force were required to cooperate and coordinate the best possible management of the crowds.
- Barriers separating the tribunes and the pitch were required to be painted a different colour nearby the exit routes. Furthermore, these gates were required to be left open during the full permanence of members of the audience on the tribunes. Relatedly, the hosting club was required to equip its staff with bolt cutters to breach the barriers in case of danger.
- A critical point of the Taylor Report was the requirement to install CCTV cameras both inside and outside the stadium.
- Club stewards and the police force were required to be equipped with handheld transceivers in order to improve communication and to coordinate any required action.
- Finally, the fire and rescue service vehicles and ambulances in the area were to be informed about details of the scheduled game (location, date and time). For matches with at least 5.000 people present, at least one ambulance was required to be kept on site.

Furthermore, all followers that were part of previous troubles were banned from stadiums, both within the UK and abroad (Pajaro, 2020).

## **Final Report**

The final version of the report was however the one that thoroughly determined that, in order to avoid similar tragedies in the future, clubs would need to upgrade their stadiums (Roggero, 2019). Where the interim report focused on excessive crowding, the second report expanded the overview to a more general context and stated that “deficient services lower the standards of conduct, while more functional structures improve the behaviour of the audience (especially in terms of safety)” (Pajaro, 2020, p. 174).

Because of these observations, the key points of the intermediate report were extended in the final one to include further regulations for the purpose of refurbishing and renovating the structures and determining how clubs would need to adjust their buildings (Black & Lloyd, 1994).

The most relevant point was eliminating hooliganism and all factors supporting its propagation, such as the position of stadiums in run-down areas (where hygiene would often be lacking), the unregulated sale of alcoholic beverages, and the presence of barriers between sectors. Those barriers tended to increase the animosity of visiting spectators, secluded in the aforementioned “cages” towards the remaining audience (Black & Lloyd,

1994). The containment effect that was the original reason of the protection indeed had the opposite effect on the audience in those sectors. Initially the barriers, which often featured spikes at the extremities, were set at a height of 2.2 meters; however, Taylor later allowed municipal authorities the option of completely removing them (image 6) (THE RT HON LORD JUSTICE TAYLOR, 1990).

**Image 6 – Barriers in UK stadiums in the first half of the nineties. In the image: Portsmouth Fratton Park in 1989.**



**Source:** (Taylor, 2020).

On the other hand, the need to avoid the possibility of pitch invasions remained, therefore attempting to enter the playing field was made prosecutable by law (Pajaro, 2020).

Everything changed when all stadiums were required to become all-seaters by the 1994/95 season, and tickets paired to numbered seats were introduced, thus defining more accurately the sectors from which the audience would be allowed to watch the game (THE RT HON LORD JUSTICE TAYLOR, 1990). This decision was reached for two specific reasons: seated spectators would be granted a predetermined place that was considered to be much safer than a standing spot subject to shoves; placing seats, despite reducing the number of supporters, would also have facilitated the recognition of hooligans through security camera records (Pajaro, 2020). Furthermore, the use of numbered seats paired with electronically controlled tickets allowed the recognition of who was actually in the stadium, an evaluation of the filling status of each sector and, should the owner of a ticket stub have committed an infraction, the immediate apprehension of the same (Brick, 2000).

In order to organize the people inside the stadium, Taylor advised clubs to avoid delegating the management of public order to the police force, instead hiring stewards that would have

undergone specific training before entering service, with the purpose of better organizing the audience and satisfying possible requests from supporters (THE RT HON LORD JUSTICE TAYLOR, 1990). The merit of such an operation was that clubs would have saved relevant sums as the police force would have been employed only to manage vehicular traffic and visiting fans, as well as to provide an additional presence in high-hazard games (such as derbies) (Pajaro, 2020).

Additional relevant measures were taken to optimize the season calendar to anticipate or postpone some games, and especially the riskier ones, either to early Saturday afternoon or Sunday (traditionally, games in the UK are held on Saturday afternoon), avoiding evening schedules. Chants with racist themes, throwing objects on the field and tickets scalping were also declared criminally indictable (Brick, 2000).

New generation stadiums were to evolve in terms of technology as well, since structures would have had to include electronic scoreboards and large video displays (Church & Penny, 2013).

This in turn would have necessarily led to an increase in the prices of tickets (Turner, 2014). This increase was indeed expected, especially as the total cost of the application of the requirements of Taylor's report was approximately 750 million pounds sterling, shared by the individual clubs, since stadiums were at the time the property of the clubs themselves and were for most part extremely old structures from the Forties. As an example, The Den (or The New Den) of Millwall FC, located in Bermondsey (London), the first stadium built according to the regulations of Taylor Report (completed in 1993), was also the first new stadium built in London since 1937 (Millwall FC, 2019; Pajaro, 2020). Part of the expenses was clearly covered by a specifically created fund and supplemented by EFL and by UK betting organizations, as well as by a reduction of taxes by 2.5% for each club requested by the FA to the Government (Black & Lloyd, 1994).

Although the objective was to relatively contain the pricing of tickets in order to bring families and people with disabilities back to the stadiums, the increase could not be completely neutralized (Pajaro, 2020). Prices were raised: this factor nonetheless proved advantageous in dissuading hooligans from participating in football events, as they mostly hailed from lower social strata (welfare beneficiaries receiving economical support as part of low-income families) and the cost of admission tickets was therefore less sustainable (Turner, 2014).

## 2. Research query

The purpose of this thesis is to determine the reasons that would require a football club to change or renovate its home stadium in the digital era. The case study provided is the one of football clubs in the Greater London area: London indeed counts a total of 13 professional clubs within the first four divisions of the English football system, as well as many (approximately 100) teams in the semi-professional or non-professional leagues.

The peculiarity of the London area is determined by the fact that the city isn't represented by a single team or two. Instead, each borough and neighbourhood (they are 33 within the Greater London area) has its own club. This is the cause of exceedingly strong ties between the team and its local fan base.

As mentioned in the introduction, the first stadium that met all the requirements of the Taylor Report was indeed opened in London, in 1993. During the following three decades, more clubs complied and planned moves that would have allowed for greater visibility and earnings. Investigating the link between transference to a multi-functional venue and the resulting validation by social media and the web is particularly interesting. The relevance of digital media is indeed growing more and more interesting, both in terms of additional earnings – since in football, clubs need to diversify their income sources to improve – and for the favourable opportunity to expand a brand and reach to new market locations.

The research query is therefore the following:

**How does a change of stadium impact the digital communication of football clubs? A case study on London football clubs.**

This query was articulated through six key actions:

- Analysing the reference literature for the change of venues by football clubs.
- Identifying the clubs in London that faced this phenomenon and analysing each case.
- Analysing the level of interaction on key social media.
- Analysing the frequency of related queries on web browsers.
- Identifying the critical factors and the possible benefits of a change of venues.
- Providing possible recommendations to clubs that are considering a change of venue.

Analysing in depth the past events that led clubs to need such a change is required. At first, the reasons mostly concerned safety, while later motivations shifted to increasing income and amplifying the physical and digital presence of the brand.

A supporter, following a marketing logic and the rationales of digital economy, is turned more and more into a customer for services (i.e., the match) and products (i.e., merchandising).



Nonetheless, it is fundamental that a supporter also keeps being a follower, sustaining a deep tie with the sport club that is not rational in nature and mostly relates to emotions.

### 3. Method

As per the aforementioned objectives, a search was performed for all available information concerning the reference context (England) and the related literature was analysed. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected through secondary sources, using dedicated databases and textbooks to pinpoint the relevant material. In order to obtain additional information, a search was conducted on the websites of the English football federation, on those of individual clubs, and on the “Companies House” UK governmental website.

The introduction and historical contextualisation were fundamental to the construction of this thesis. The information about history and the causes behind specific events were indeed the foundation upon which the research work was built, thus explaining the extended introduction. As previously mentioned, since the early Nineties, most English football teams renovated or changed their home stadiums. Due to lack of time and the complexity of the analytical process, this research is limited to the clubs in the Greater London area that either renovated or changed their home stadiums between 2005 and 2021. The time frame was selected in order to provide an in-depth analysis of the chosen cases, as well as to allow a comparative analysis of the effect on digital platforms.

The specific work concerning the involvement of clubs on digital platform was designed to clarify whether the transfer to a new venue, or the renovation of the current one, could determine an increase in online visibility for the club or not. The consequence of such an action would include the football club promoting a more professional approach to its followers, in order to extend its fan base and increase the chances of financial returns. The research work for some clubs and some specific social media (especially Instagram) was extremely difficult. Nonetheless, the study of listed cases was performed trying to keep track of all available data (i.e., including other digital media) as well as the information available in literature, with the purpose of highlighting the reasons for the increase of following that a club obtains by transferring to a new structure.

The in-depth analysis of the case studies allows to better define the possible methods applied by football clubs (transfer to a new venue, expansion of the existing stadium, or ground sharing with other teams), as well as the merits, flaws, possible benefits and critical issues faced by teams. The main case studies considered in this work were those of Arsenal FC, Barnet FC, Brentford FC, Fulham FC, Tottenham Hotspur FC, West Ham United FC and AFC Wimbledon. Each case includes a history of the transfer process, thus allowing a better comprehension of the reference context and a full immersion in the analysed situation. This in turn allows to better understand the real necessities and the constraints faced by each considered club.

At first, while planning the thesis, the idea of performing interviews or proposing a questionnaire to supporters of specific clubs that recently went through a change in stadium was considered. The objective was to gauge the opinion of the public and analysing the opinion of supporter groups. Another proposal was to interview a manager from one of the clubs considered (i.e., a marketing director) to obtain detailed data concerning the change of

venue and the impact on the fan base. Due to time constraints and logistical difficulties, however, the choice was made to favour obtaining necessary data from secondary sources: reference literature already provides a wide range of data and clear, precise references.

The closing portion of the present work concerns the possible indications and recommendations for clubs that are considering a change of stadium. It includes a collection of material provided by scientific publications, by pre-existing initiatives from previous club transfers and by key points determined throughout this thesis.

## **4. Financial and non-financial perspectives**

This section presents the financial and non-financial issues, respectively, that lead football clubs to either change their stadium or renovate the existing one.

### **4.1. Financial considerations**

As discussed in the previous chapters, the main drive for football clubs to change venue or to renovate the existing stadium is to increase their revenues. Despite the income from ticket sales still providing relevant gains for football teams, clubs indeed need to differentiate their income sources in order to stabilize their long-term financial balance and reach a sustainable, self-supporting business structure (Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019).

In terms of possible diversification, the income sources of a football club can be fundamentally divided in three categories: media (broadcasting) rights, ticket sales, and earnings from merchandising and other commercial activities (Di Maio, 2015). Media rights include both live and recorded broadcasts, and can be further divided between traditional broadcasting rights (radio and TV) and innovative ones (online streaming, mobile broadcasting, etc.). Multimedia rights display the advantage of communicating the team brand to a wider public and therefore attracting a large number of followers worldwide. They are currently the main income source for football clubs (Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019).

The second most relevant source is given by overall match day earnings, including tickets, season passes, food and beverages sold during the event, and corporate hospitality, the latter being a combination of entertainment and gastronomic services, for sponsors (usually in executive boxes) and private customers (in specific hospitality areas). Corporate hospitality is also useful for networking, creating ties between people that came to watch the match by turning the situation into an informal business venue (Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019).

The third voice in terms of profit is given by commercial activities. This voice represents the sum of the use of commercial rights and the concretization of sponsorship deals (Di Maio, 2015). Commercial rights include merchandising, provided services and licensing the club logo and name to third party commercial products and services (Foglio, 2018).

Clubs are hoping to further promote and monetize their brands. Changing or renovating sport venues is an operation that can help in this regard. A higher capacity, more modern stadium can both increase match day revenues and widen the range of available commercial activities, thus providing a larger spectrum of opportunities for the club, both during match days and on separate occasions (Paramio, Buraimo, & Campos, 2008).

Teams are motivated to change their stadium also due to space constraints: British stadiums are required to be all-seaters, without any standing places. Since a seated place occupies more space than a standing one, staying in a pre-existing venue requires accepting a loss in

overall capacity, and the ensuing reduction in revenues from ticket sales. Moving to a new location is therefore a plausible solution from a financial standpoint (Bulley, 2002). It's obvious that having a higher capacity leads to the expectancy of selling more single match tickets and season tickets, with the consequent increase in returns from the investment. A more efficient placement of the seats because of the larger tribunes also allows for a wider range of sale options (tickets, passes, corporate hospitality, etc.) and a more diversified price range (Di Maio, 2015).

A modern stadium concept is also designed and built in order to be used for other events and special occasions (allowing for service contracts and collaborations with other subjects outside of football), instead of being specifically bound to football matches as in the past. This increases the efficiency of the structure as well as the income it can generate (Paramio, Buraimo, & Campos, 2008). For the club, the possibility of having a higher overall capacity and, more importantly, dedicated spaces such as executive boxes, hospitality areas and multifunctional spaces, presents the opportunity for the sale of a more dynamic and profitable product package (Foglio, 2018).

New infrastructure allows an expansion of commercial activities as well: besides the development of new gadgets, it is also possible to create additional services that are provided inside the structure (i.e., credit cards bearing the club logo, etc.) and outside match days (insurance services, bank services, etc.) (Foglio, 2018). These options provide emotionally charged services to supporters. A follower buys and uses these services and products to increase their sense of belonging to the football club, thus generating a direct financial income and spreading the image of the sport club as well, leading to the acquisition of new, loyal supporters and increasing real time communications with the audience (Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019).

As for customer retention and loyalty building, the fact that football clubs should avoid "stealing" each other's customer, as opposed to normal competing policies in other sectors, should be mentioned. In football, customers are supporters and are therefore bound to their chosen club to strong emotional ties. Only a severe negative occurrence can ruin such a relationship. In such a case, customer acquisition is meant to convince new people that do not already have a favourite team to follow the club, as opposed to "acquiring" followers from competing clubs (Foglio, 2018; Di Maio, 2015; Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019).

Being able to rely on a modern and hospitable structure is necessary to attract new visitors and tourist to the stadium. Eventually, tours and interactive museums can be organized. Some structures include a dedicated village with adjacent hotels, allowing to provide sojourn packages (examples include Chelsea FC and Reading FC) (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2017; Reeder & Adams, 2010).

Licensing also becomes particularly relevant in view of a transfer to a new venue: the name of the structure itself (naming rights for the stadium) is something that many companies would be willing to pay relevant amounts for, even for a limited time frame (Di Maio, 2015). When implementing new structures allows the club to widen its target market, new sponsors willing to fill publicity slots for banners are attracted. A modern structure also provides additional slots for such banners. Clubs obtain an additional advantage by becoming image vectors for sponsor companies, and, as long as contracts are managed correctly, are

guaranteed safe mid- and long-term returns (Millward, 2013). In order to achieve all this, a club needs a clearly and precisely defined internal structure, with separated administration (ordinary club management), sport management (team enrolment and preparation) and commercial (pursuit of market opportunities and financial gains) departments. This management structure is optimal to face the rapid changes of the sport sector while keeping fixed objective and strategies (Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019; Di Maio, 2015).

The social media aspect is another factor to be considered when a club decides to further its brand reach. These instruments provide the chance of reaching a relevant number of people and to creatively expand content in order to transmit the club's beliefs, history and origin (i.e., through videos and images), while allowing to promote the club's sponsors (Maderer & Parganas, 2018). The public image of a contemporary club also includes the stadium in terms of architectural design, as well as its presentation during construction or renovation. These elements attract the public and provide a sense of constant inclusion, supporting a system of relationship between demand and offer that can enrich info-communication flows (Foglio, 2018).

In most UK cases, stadiums are owned by individual clubs. This means that clubs obtain an immediate return from the sale of the terrain of an old stadium. The previous location is usually demolished and the location is often used to build new residential or commercial structures (Donna, Teotino, & Uva, 2014). Furthermore, football clubs can sell (usually through organized auctions) memorabilia of the old structure, usually generating a relevant return that can integrate the available resources, and allowing supporters access to unique items and thus strengthening the bonds between clubs and supporters (Spencer, Cuneen, & Schneider, 2003).

## **4.2. Non-financial considerations**

A new or renovated stadium is usually part of a wider requalification project that impacts both the economy and the social interaction of the surrounding neighbourhood (Brown, Crabbe & Mellor, 2008). While gains may be the main objective, clubs are supported by and made of people. It is necessary to keep a positive relationship between a football club and the people that spend time in the area surrounding the stadium.

A particularly relevant factor is the engagement of the neighbourhood community: the stadium then becomes an important centre for the life of children, adults and the elderly. They can be involved in club activities proposed through dedicated foundations or other associations, such as supporters' clubs or neighbourhood associations hosted within the structure.

The presence of a stadium (especially a large one) often has some negative impact as well for people leaving in its immediate surroundings (i.e., noise, traffic, lack of parking, risk of clashes between supporter groups). The perception of clashes between supporters is still linked to the times of hooliganism, between the Fifties and the late Eighties. Despite the starting diffidence, especially from people that are uninterested in football, the presence of a modern, functional and well-organized structure can be an advantage for residents (Bale,



2000). Schools can organize activities on the grounds of the structure, ranging from courses to support study to football schools. The elderly could participate to lunch gatherings or events organized to favour social inclusion and promote local charities. In order to perform such activities, however, a stakeholder engagement approach is required. Such an approach should be based on the support and development of the neighbourhood community, which would in time increase trust towards the football club. An example of this strategy is the case of Brighton & Hove Albion FC. In 2002, in view of the construction of the Brighton Community Stadium, the club developed a project to provide inclusive programmes for sports, health, training and education, including activities for people with disabilities. The project was paired with the development of a health centre, supported equally by volunteers and by trained professionals employed by the club itself. The purpose of this project was to turn the stadium into an equally welcoming area for supporters, for players and for the local community (Sanders, Heys, Ravenscroft, & Burdsey, 2014).

Indeed, many football clubs were originally created as neighbourhood support organizations, at the time of their founding, in the guise of recreational groups for workers, school teams or ecclesiastical associations (Brown, Crabbe & Mellor, 2008).

## **5. Advantages and disadvantages of relocating**

The following chapter exposes the possible points in favour and disadvantages of the transfer to a new venue, listing the main considerations provided by scientific literature concerning this subject.

### **5.1. Advantages of a relocation**

Besides the aforementioned financial returns, an advantage for clubs moving to a larger, more modern stadium is given by the chance of reaching a wider public and thus a larger potential market, permitting an expansion of the company's brand. This factor, if proactively managed, grants a competitive lead in order to increase followers and the overall customer base that could spend to support the club itself. Increasing the public is fundamental in order to finance the costs of building the new structure or renovating the existing one. This income compensates the additional expenses for the club and allows a healthy economic and financial balance to be kept; nonetheless some sacrifices in other sectors are usually required, usually by moderating operations on the football players market and players transfers to logically sound moves, avoiding excessive expenses (Cohen, Coval, & Malloy, 2009).

A second advantage is the access to a more technologically advanced venue, often unattainable in older stadiums due to structural limits. The increased use of daily digitalization requires structures where innovations could be implemented and optimized. For this reason alone, modern stadiums (smart stadiums) tend to become "living innovation laboratories" (Yang & Cole, 2020). Technology provides to multifunctional stadiums the opportunity to provide a wide spectrum of services and therefore allows to satisfy the expectations of supporters (Di Maio, 2015). Indeed, since construction, new structures include spaces designed to tie the physical experience of assisting to a football event to a paired digital experience: the presence of screens, internet access and consumer services built around applications, as well as the implementation of advanced security systems, allow to increase connectivity and to share the experience between all subjects that visited the structure (Yang & Cole, 2020).

Furthermore, data analysis (products, beverage and food sales figures, number of accesses to specific services) allows the sport club to improve the level of the existing services for visitors, as well as creating targeted advertising to encourage followers to choose specific, desirable products (Yang & Cole, 2020). Clearly, the key difficulty is to manage such activities from afar, when a supporter leaves the stadium (Yang & Cole, 2020). This factor is strongly correlated to social media and their relevance to football clubs. Sport clubs manage these platforms, and the instruments and functions they provide, in order to constantly send stimuli to their supporters (Dima, 2015).

Finally, a cutting-edge stadium also provides a flexible structure apt to improve facility management services, by facilitating maintenance and logistics that are required to keep the structure in ideal conditions and easily convert it to a different purpose to meet the requirements of hosted events (Di Maio, 2015).

The renovation of a structure or the transfer to a new stadium evidently provide several benefits to the surrounding area. Several stadiums, especially the newest ones, are built in neighbourhoods that the local administration's urban management plans wish to redevelop (Dejonghe, 2008).

It is a well-known fact that England, and specifically the City of London, pursue the requalification of specific neighbourhoods that historically have a bad reputation. Many of these urban areas originally had a role in the Second industrial revolution, being either the location of heavy industry (manufactories, factories, shipyards), or the surrounding residential areas for workers and their families (Arnold A. J., 2003). In the course of time, and especially after the bombing raids during the two world wars (the Second World War in particular), industries and workers moved elsewhere (Garside, 1997). These areas were therefore abandoned or used to provide residential solutions, most often to the lower income strata of the populations and to foreigners seeking fortune in the UK (Wessendorf, 2013). Over time, these neighbourhoods, often providing cheap lodgings, progressively became a den for criminality and degrade. Local administrations faced increasing difficulties in managing the related problems, economic or otherwise, and the issues became greater and harder to solve (Gotta, 2018). An example is the area currently hosting the London Stadium: the area was renovated in view of the 2012 Olympic Games, and its growth is still in progress (Watt, 2013). This specific case will be analysed further in the chapter detailing the West Ham United FC case.

The construction of a new stadium in such a location, provides an opportunity to promote the commercial development of the surrounding area, while the stadium itself acts as a catalyst to promote further investments in the neighbourhood (Bulley, 2002)

One of the essential consequences is the impact on transportation. The construction of new stadiums in areas that are to be redesigned, without residential structures in the immediate vicinity (a situation that often occurred with the old structures) allows to facilitate the transportation of supporters. Reaching the stadiums becomes much easier due to public transport availability and to larger parking lots, and avoids potentially conflicts with local residents (Bulley, 2002).

The architectural aspect is also relevant, and is specifically tied to the development of the surrounding area. Many stadiums can appear as a "cathedral in the desert", but are instead the starting point for a complete renovation of the surrounding area. Indeed, while generating new jobs, they contribute to the financial growth of the area through satellite activities (i.e., shops and pubs), they attract people to visit the complex because of its design, possible features of interest and iconic elements, or due to unconventional architecture (Coates & Humphreys, 2011; Ahlfeldt & Kavetsos, 2011).

One of the indirect effects of the presence of a new stadium is the increase in prices and rents in the adjacent neighbourhood. This is caused by the increased benefits to the area

provided by the presence of the stadium itself. As it has been mentioned, the area gains an increase in overall attention in financial terms, as the stadium generates economic activity. Furthermore, the neighbourhood (which often is located outside the centre of the city) benefits from an overall requalification, gaining new parks, more space and more modern infrastructure. The increased flow of people also contributes to turning the area into a somewhat exclusive neighbourhood, often linked to key nodes of the public transport network. Nonetheless, there is also a negative fallout of the closeness to a stadium, (i.e., traffic, noise). These negative points, when compared to the benefits, are however balanced or become negligible depending on the context (Ahlfeldt & Kavetsos, 2011).

## 5.2. Disadvantages of the transfer

The greatest disadvantage for teams transferring to a new stadium is the loss of defining features of the pre-existing one. New stadiums are often considered to lack an identity, as they are most often all similar by an architectural design viewpoint, and are not characterized by the individual, unique peculiarities that most old stadiums had. They overall lack a certain atmosphere (image 7) (Bazell, 2015).

**Image 7 – Griffin Park, home of Brentford FC until 2020. It was the only stadium in the EFL to feature a pub at each corner of the structure.**



**Source:** (BRNTFRD, 2017).

Especially in the UK, ties to a team are particularly strong: the maxim “support your local team” is a mantra in the British football philosophy. It means that the club is part of everyday life for its supporters (Garino & Pajaro, 2015). This is caused by a sense of belonging and integration that is linked to the city or neighbourhood. This sense is passed down from generation to generation both for prominent clubs and smaller ones. These clubs can also count on a relatively consistent fan base. The origin of several clubs is tied to the local

working class, for which football was an occasion to vent parochialism and rivalries towards other cities or neighbourhoods. It was the only diversion available that, by supporting a club, allowed people to achieve a sense of identity, as well as to forget, for a few hours, the hard life that was common for workers in the manufactories of the Victorian age after the Second industrial revolution (Holt, 1989).

This concept is strongly tied to the territory and local community, and is rooted in the stadium as structure placed in the original area the club is raised from. Indeed, most clubs stay in the same stadium for a long time, sometimes for over a hundred years. The weight of history created over such a long presence, and the affection between supporters and the location (friendships, acquaintances between fellow supporters, common remembrances), are both strongly felt, especially when a club decides to change its location (Coluccia, 2020).

According to British supporters, foreigners looking at the so-called English model have a distorted perception of what could at first sight be considered as a virtuous system. British supporters miss the feelings and attachment they perceived in the old stadiums. Both aspects have been declining since the Nineties due to the diffusion of television broadcasts and the following construction of new structures, lacking the heat of supporters, while clubs turned into more financial oriented companies (Bazell, 2015). The fast evolution undergone by the sport sector (football in this case) and by other financial sectors was inevitably linked to the advent of new technologies and globalization. Football was therefore turned into a veritable “product” offered on the global market, and supporters were changed into customers benefitting from sport as a service. This led to “a loss of passion as opposed to an increased propensity for consumerism” (Garino & Pajaro, 2015, p. 233).

The evolution of the football sector in general, and particularly so in Europe, is associated to the American way of perceiving sports (basketball, American football, baseball and ice hockey) and the match as entertainment shows. Spectators are more detached and less visceral as compared to other sport traditions, such as those of Europe and South America. (Duke, 2002). The concept of treating sport as entertainment like in the USA is not natural for football, as it is not a common habit for the local (Turner, 2014).

The home team advantage, or “pitch factor”, is a relevant element of the old stadiums and factors aspects such as the amount of people packed close to the pitch itself, physical features of the stadium, and location. All these facets contribute to a distraction for visiting teams during matches (noise, closeness of the stands to the pitch, etc.). Furthermore, playing in a familiar setting (seeing the same faces and following an established pre-match routine) is favourable to the mental condition of the players. Secondary factors such as playing in a suitable terrain, on a pitch of a specific size, under good weather conditions, and obtaining more favourable refereeing due to audience pressure, all bear an effect on the performance of athletes (Pollard, 2002). Another disadvantage is given by the expectations and enthusiasm generated by the novelty of the new stadium during the first games. Such a response can easily decrease over time, leading to a loss of ticket sales during season matches (Howard & Crompton, 2003).

The lack of team spirit and atmosphere in the new structures can also determine less impressive results for the home team: performance on the pitch can lower ticket sales and increase instability in terms of number of following in the stadium, thus impacting income.

Followers obviously like watching a winning team. (Turner, 2014). Nonetheless, winning performances always have a lesser impact on club earnings than the effect of a new stadium. Actions such as promoting followers' loyalty and improving the experience in the new structure are critical, as they have a much greater effect than the club's actual results (Rascher, Brown, Nagel, & McEvoy, 2012).

While discussing the possible difficulties that a sport club may face while moving to a new stadium or renovating the existing one, logistic concerns should also be taken into account. Moving all items required by the daily operations of the club from the old seat to the new one, meeting the deadlines set for construction (to avoid the possibility of having to play on a neutral pitch), and withstanding the loss of ticket income caused by open construction areas are all issues that a club should carefully consider. Possible delays in construction work can negatively impact contracts signed between the club and other organizations that are supposed to use the new structure, but may need to find alternative solutions (Di Maio, 2015).

The construction or renovation of a stadium require huge investments up front for work that may exceed the schedule. The expected financial return is, instead, long-term. Such a choice is a risk; on the other hand, a new stadium is a requirement to compete with high level clubs and to satisfy the expectations of supporters, both during the match experience and during other visits.



## **6. Possible methods used to change venue**

The following chapter illustrates the possible methods used by football clubs to reach the “next level” and increase their financial returns by optimizing the use of their stadiums.

### **6.1. Renovation**

Renovation is in the present case meant as a partial or complete overhaul of the existing structure or as an expansion of the structure. This choice is the one most commonly made when a club cannot sustain the cost of transferring to a new area (this option is usually cheaper), when a new, more suitable location is not available, or when there are difficulties in decommissioning the pre-existing structure. Renovation is also an option when the current stadium already meets relevant requirements (i.e., acceptable capacity, possibility of hosting other events apart from football) (van Dam, 1999; Black & Lloyd, 1994). Clubs would need to prepare more extensively to face a full transfer, both by acquiring financial support and by accurately managing income sources and existing assets in view of a potential move.

A positive factor tied to renovation is the opportunity to extend the regeneration project to the surrounding area, rebuilding the adjacent residential structures to fit the new tribunes and creating new commercial spaces. In such cases, the club and its stadium become the main drive pushing for growth of the local economy and the requalification of the surrounding neighbourhood (Putra, 2019).

Despite the fact that most clubs choose to change their location in order to obtain a stadium with a significantly higher capacity, clubs that opt to remain in their current seat for many years often need to renovate the structure in order to adapt to the continuous evolution of the football market, thus keeping up with competitors in terms of brand expansion and income generation (Paramio, Buraimo, & Campos, 2008). Clubs can therefore offer a more satisfying customer experience as, by remaining in their original location, they can count on the history and atmosphere of the structure, and preserve peculiarities and unique features (image 8) (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2017).

**Image 8 – Edminson Drive, the main stand at Ibrox, in Glasgow, has been declared a protected building by Historic Environment Scotland (Historic Environment Scotland, 2021).**



**Source:** (Historic Environment Scotland, 2021).

Often, stadium renovations begin as minor updates to the existing structure, focusing on a specific part of the building (i.e., a single tribune stand). They later extend to the rest of the building, leading to a full renovation and to the development of additional indoor areas (van Dam, 1999).

The disadvantages of renovation are mainly tied to compliance to regulations and limits posed by local authorities. Complaints by people living in adjacent buildings (i.e., due to the stands blocking out light during daytime, or due to the brightness of spotlights during late night matches, etc.) can create obstacles to the project as originally conceived by the club (Black & Lloyd, 1994). Furthermore, the schedule of the matches and the increase of non-football related events require the employment of a large safety staff. Long-term, the progressive diversification of activities held within the stadium may lead to conflict with the neighbours and stronger pressure towards a relocation (Chase & Healey, 1994).

Clubs that may resist these pressures and try to find an agreement are those that already invested large sums into renovating the current stadium (Chase & Healey, 1994). Nonetheless, there is a risk that these pressures may require compromises between the club and the neighbouring community, such as not hosting events other than football related ones, to minimize discomfort to the local residents, as occurred with Arsenal during the expansion of Highbury Stadium in the early Nineties (Black & Lloyd, 1994).

Clearly, a stadium was designed and built to different specifications in the past. Some were built in areas that, during the years, saw the structure surrounded by residential buildings.

Today, this turns into a structural limit, as the club faces several problems while trying to increase the capacity of the structure. The main problems of a renovation however concern the attempt to turn the stadium into a multifunctional facility: the presence of more frequent events and the related affluence could cause severe transport problems more often during the week, and therefore negatively impact life in the adjacent residential areas (streets close to the structure may be overcrowded) (Black & Lloyd, 1994).

Several risk factors should be considered, including the economic situation, financial and real estate market trends, the involvement of other subjects (sponsor, investors, real estate companies, politics, etc.). The latter could impede a specific project if the deadlines aren't met, further impairing the building schedule through appeals. Any football club deciding to renovate its current structure would find useful to prepare a detailed plan considering all possible restrictions (both regulatory and structural ones), the involved subjects and their individual needs (Black & Lloyd, 1994).

## **6.2. Relocation**

As previously mentioned in the subchapter detailing renovation procedures, the relocation of a team to a new structure mostly occurs due to the structural restrictions posed by the location of the old stadium. In order to obtain a larger audience, clubs also tend to choose larger areas with greater accessibility, and spaces that may present greater opportunities to tie the stadium infrastructure to other commercial activities (i.e., shopping centres, cinemas, restaurants, etc.) (Bulley, 2002).

A transfer to areas outside the neighbourhood where the team played for many years is useful to avoid carrying over possible negative feelings from the residents of the houses surrounding the stands. According to a study carried out in the mid-Nineties near Portman Road, the Ipswich Town FC stadium, most residents (approximately 65% of the people living or managing a commercial activity near the stadium) agreed that 25 matches per year were far more bothering than two rock concerts (Chase & Healey, 1994).

Relocation can be used to bring the usage of a stadium from 50 to 500 hours per year, creating alternative purposes for the structure and several attraction factors for sponsor and commercial investors (Bulley, 2002; van Dam, 1999).

The requirement for seating places, which require more space than standing ones, as mentioned in previous chapters, implies that, should a club wish to maintain or increase the capacity of the structure, a change of venue and move to a new structure is required. Clubs also aim to increase the number of areas for corporate hospitality: this requires tribune stands with a larger volume to host such boxes, and relocating is therefore the most likely option (Bulley, 2002).

Teams that change their stadiums can also rely on new generation projects, often designed by globally renown architects, in order to gain eminence and obtain greater visibility (Bulley, 2002).

Concerning the possibility of relocation to a new, larger area, this is not always productive: should these wider spaces be the location of green areas, the club may be blocked from transferring due to protective restriction from local authorities. Similarly, should the local administration be opposed to or resist the requalification of the chosen area, it may constitute an obstacle to the construction of a new stadium.

Further problems could be caused by the lack or limited presence of suitable infrastructure (roads, public transport, sewers, electrical grid infrastructure, etc.) in specific areas. The number of aspects that need be considered in view of a relocation is relevant, and clubs should strive to provide a solution that is in agreement with the needs of local authorities. The structure of the new stadium should be planned not to excessively distress the surrounding environment (image 9) (Bulley, 2002).

**Image 9 – The project for Eco Park, the future home stadium of Forest Green Rovers, designed by Zaha Hadid. The structure will be almost completely built with wood. It will become the most ecologically sustainable stadium worldwide, and as such will be built in an area that is coherent with the concept (Forest Green Rovers Football Club, 2019).**



**Source:** (Forest Green Rovers Football Club, 2019).

Despite the possible limits, local authorities can provide dispensation to build stadiums in the so-called green belts, mainly for cases where an alternative location cannot be found, or in order to meet more restrictive requirements posed by the same authorities on behalf of the citizens. In those cases, the borders of green areas and the related urban plan can be redefined. A public presentation of the project by the club and the following public consultations are therefore critical: a multitude of subjects can take part in the decisional process and therefore generate an effect on the project's development, and, in sub-order, on its completion schedule (Black & Lloyd, 1994).

Football clubs design the plans for a new stadium based on four pillar concepts: financial targets (investments in order to build the structure and to guarantee its continued use,

focusing on the offer of services for the spectators), social objectives (the project requires to avoid limiting visibility and needs to be functional, in order to maximize customer satisfaction by providing an engaging experience to followers watching the match both on site and from afar), environmental concerns (locating the stadium in an appropriate context benefits both territorial aspects and financial returns) and physical features (increasing the comfort level, overall accessibility and the availability of specific services) (Di Maio, 2015).

New stadiums built are obviously designed to host a wider range of events. This requires two specific supporting activities: facility management, in order to adapt the structure to specific contexts while and maintaining optimal conditions, and the ability to accurately define marketing activities (planning objectives and defining actions required to create positive returns to the club, both in terms of direct income and in terms of customer satisfaction, the latter inducing customers to return more often) (Di Maio, 2015).

### **6.3. Groundsharing**

Groundsharing is the practice of sharing a common structure with other sport clubs (Frost, Lightbody, Halabi, Carter, & Borrowman, 2016). In the UK, this is not a commonly chosen option, whereas this practice is strongly rooted in the rest of Europe (Bale, 2000). In the UK, the widespread resistance to sharing the ownership of a location can be attributed to historical reasons (Tranter, Williams, & Wagg, 1991). During the past century, rugby clubs (the most common partner for groundsharing operations) were often seen as the most relevant sport clubs in the city or region, relegating other sports teams to a secondary role, a fact that discouraged football clubs from sharing their structures as they would be disadvantaged by local authorities (Arnold A. J., 2016). Groundsharing was considered an option only for clubs that either couldn't find a location to build their own stadium or had severe problems in the project phase (Black & Lloyd, 1994). Today, several clubs opted for a groundsharing strategy due to the unavailability of their own stadium (because of ongoing construction or renovation works, financial problems, etc.). The "oldest" groundsharing case was the one of Wimbledon FC: the team played at Selhurst Park, the Crystal Palace stadium, for twelve years between 1991 and 2003 (Cook & Anagnostopoulos, 2017; Duke, 2002). The Premier League is currently hosted almost exclusive in stadiums where a single team plays, and at the start of the 2021/2022 season the only two shared structures were the Brentford Community Stadium and the London Stadium (Penn & Penn, 2020; London Irish Rugby Football Club, 2020; E20 Stadium LLP, 2019).

A trend change was expected after the publication of the Taylor Report: clubs should have been incentivized to opt for groundsharing due to the extreme costs of building a stadium. Despite this expectation, a limited interest in sharing a stadium was observed, mostly because of conflicting views in deciding the possible location and the financing options of the new building. Many clubs had diverging internal structures and management styles as well (Black & Lloyd, 1994).

Two options are available for groundsharing: in the first case, a stadium is shared between two football clubs, while in the second situation, the structure is shared with a team tied to a different sport such as rugby (Duke, 2002).

The most relevant advantage of groundsharing is the expansion of the club brand: interacting with other sport clubs and their followers allows a club to reach potential followers from different sport sectors and attract them. Expanding and improving areas that can be given in concession to different sport teams is therefore an opportunity for football clubs to increase socialization, leading to a stronger identity and brand equity (Junghagen & Lillo, 2017).

The chance to optimize the use of the structure, thus improving its efficiency, is another point strongly in favour of groundsharing (Duke, 2002). By sharing a stadium, the offer of sport events can be increased, providing an advantage to the audience as well. Clubs would at the same time observe a reduction in the fixed cost for maintenance and a decrease of losses caused by lack of use, as both risks and benefits are shared by the two teams (Frost, Lightbody, Halabi, Carter, & Borrowman, 2016).

The fact that playing in a stadium that is not originally owned by the club, tends to attract less team supporters and more neutral public, can be seen as both an advantage and disadvantage. The decrease in support is balanced by the opportunity to reach and attract a large number of new followers (Clarke, 2005).

The most relevant disadvantage of a similar situation is the loss of returns that the hosted club (the “tenant”) faces as a large part of its income is redirected to pay rent (Cook & Anagnostopoulos, 2017).

Another disadvantage is given by the effects of groundsharing on the local community and residents, as the more frequent use of the structure (with home matches being played weekly instead of every other week) increases the presence of large crowds (Bale, 1990). A related study performed in the late Eighties and early Nineties, where 55% of 4.597 interviewed people lived within 500 meters from Selhurst Park stadium (in Croydon, South London), over 80% of responders reported being unhappy about the impact of groundsharing between Crystal Palace and Wimbledon FC, unfavourably comparing the effects to those observed when Palace was the only resident team. Of course, most concerns at the time were about hooliganism rather than other impacts, and were exacerbated after the Taylor Report was published (Bale, 2000).

Finally, as previously remarked, a stadium can also be useful to the local community. In this view, groundsharing does not allow to use the structure as an exclusive vector to engage the residents. A good example is the case of United of Manchester FC, a club founded in 2005 by Manchester United supporters that were unsatisfied with the acquisition of the Red Devils' majority by the Glazer family (Brown, 2008). Between 2005 and 2014, United of Manchester played at Gigg Lane stadium, the home of Bury FC. United of Manchester is a club with less interest in profit, as opposed to most football organizations, and mostly focused on supporting and unifying the local community. In order to reach these objectives, the club was in need of its own home stadium, from which to perform activities and events in favour of the local community (the new stadium, Broadhurst Park, was opened in 2015) (Sanders, Heys, Ravenscroft, & Burdsey, 2014). The distance between the original founding location of a club and the stadium it eventually plays in, can therefore turn in a barrier between supporters and the club itself, and can increase the risk of losing its identity and the audience's sense of belonging (Clarys, Reilly, & Stibbe, 1992).



## 7. Case studies

The following chapter discusses the individual case studies of teams in the Greater London area that changed or renovated their stadiums between 2006 and 2021. The analysed teams are Arsenal, Barnet, Brentford, Fulham, Tottenham Hotspur, West Ham United and Wimbledon. The history of the relocation or renovation is presented in detail and the financial effects and social media impact of the situation are analysed.

### 7.1. Arsenal Football Club

Arsenal FC was founded in 1886 in Woolwich, on the south shore of the Thames. The original club's name was Dial Square, after the name of the sundial that was at the entrance of the Woolwich Arsenal Armament Factory, a manufacturer for the British Army, where the first players of the team worked. The name was soon changed into "Royal Arsenal", and the team began to wear the now famous red shirt thanks to a few players moving in from the Nottingham Forest team (red was that team's colour as well). The "Gunners" originally played in Plumstead, but moved to Invicta Ground by their fourth season in 1890. In the meantime, the team obtained its first successes and turned professional, changing its name in "Woolwich Arsenal". After some movements in the Woolwich area, the club found itself in a financial crisis. The club was taken over by Henry Norris (also the owner of Fulham FC), who moved the team to North London, in Islington, a more populated area that could provide a larger number of supporters. Furthermore, the stadium Arsenal was to play at was close to a station of the London Underground (Black & Lloyd, 1994). In 1913 the club changed its name to its final denomination, "Arsenal Football Club" (Arsenal FC, 2017b).

At Highbury, Arsenal became one of the most successful teams in England, with the "Gunners" (the team's nickname) becoming English champions for 13 times, conquering the FA Cup 14 times (Arsenal is currently the club that won the highest number of them), winning 2 League Cups and 16 Community Shields. At the same time, the club won a UEFA Cup Winners' Cup and an Inter-Cities Fairs Cup (Arsenal FC, 2020b).

While staying in the same location, the club was guided by many players and managers that made the history of British and foreign football. Herbert Chapman, the Arsenal manager from 1926 to his death of pneumonia in 1934, brought several innovations to playing tactics and physical training, as well as new ideas that would provide a strong identity to the club (he was the one that added white sleeves to the original team shirt, invented the nickname "Gunners" and renamed the underground stop from "Gillespie Road", the name of the street in front of the "Home of Football", the fans' nickname for Highbury Stadium, to "Arsenal". This made Arsenal FC the first team to have an underground station named after itself). He won three league championships (including the first ever for the club in 1931), a FA Cup and three Community Shields (Gotta, 2018).

George Graham, the manager between 1986 and 1995, won two league championships, a FA Cup, two League Cups, a Community Shield and a UEFA Cup Winners' Cup. His most iconic success was winning the title in 1989 after 18 years. During the final, Arsenal faced Liverpool at Anfield. Arsenal needed to win by at least a margin of two goals in order to bring a victory home. The match ended with a score of nil to two, thanks to a goal scored by Michael Thomas at the very last second. Arsenal won its ninth title and the victory was immortalized by Nick Hornby in his book "Fever Pitch" (Marchese, 2020).

Another important part of the history of the club was the one of French manager Arsène Wenger. Wenger transferred from Nagoya Grampus Eight, a first division Japanese team, and managed the club from 1996 to 2018, over twenty years of successes. Under his management, the "Gunners" won three English titles, seven FA Cups and 8 Community Shields (making him the manager that won both the latter in the same season the highest number of times) (Wenger, 2020). The thirteenth, and, to date, last season title won by Arsenal, in the 2003/04 season, is the most known success of the Wenger era. The team took the lead in the season with 26 victories and 12 draws over 38 matches, becoming the new "Invincibles" (they totalled 49 games without losses between the end of the 2002/2003 season and the beginning of the 2004/2005 season) after beating the previous record streak set by Preston North End in 1889 (27 games) (Marchese, 2020).

The presence of Wenger was also fundamental outside the pitch. During his stay, Arsenal became one of the most followed teams in the world. Wins were of course a reason for this, however the relocation of the Gunners to a new stadium also played a role in increasing their following. Highbury (or Arsenal Stadium) was an iconic multifunctional stadium, designed by Archibald Leitch. The stadium hosted Arsenal matches from 1913 to 2006, and other events as well, including the recording of the film "The Arsenal Stadium Mystery" in 1939 and the second boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Henry Cooper in 1966 (Plumb & Coton, 2017; Glynn, 2018; Arsenal FC, 2017a). Highbury Stadium went through several transformations during its history, two of which were the most relevant. The first one occurred between 1932 and 1936, when the West and East Stands were rebuilt in art deco style, as was the trend between the two world wars (Smith, 2017). This style mirrored the optimism that followed the First global conflict through designs that used different materials (metal, plastic), were inspired by several cultures (Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe) and were influenced by several historical styles (Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, etc.). Similar concepts were applied to buildings, clothing, furniture, common object and art (Duncan, 2009). The outer façade of the Highbury East Stand, and the upholstery of the West Stand remained untouched after the stadium was closed. The latter is however covered from view by the terrace in front of the former stadium and facing Highbury Hill, the tree-lined road starting from the "Arsenal" underground station (image 10).



**Image 10 – The façade of the East Stand at Highbury.**



**Source:** (The Firms, 2013).

The second relevant transformation undergone by Highbury Stadium occurred during the Nineties, in order to comply with the requirements of the Taylor Report. The Clock End (the stand where the famous Highbury clock had been ticking since 1935) and the North Bank were completely renovated (and roofed), raising the capacity of the stadium to 38,000 (Plumb & Coton, 2017). During the project phase and construction work on Highbury Stadium, which was mainly surrounded by terraced houses and shops, Arsenal proposed to integrate more services within the new stands (i.e., new lavatories, new food and beverage shops and a museum). The club however had to change its plans several times, as the Islington borough administration had many concerns about the modifications to the structure and their possible negative impact on the urban plans for the area, and blocked most of the proposed changes (Black & Lloyd, 1994). The local community was worried that the size of the stands proposed by the club would be excessive, as Highbury Stadium, despite sitting in an urban context, already loomed over the surrounding Victorian and Georgian houses, to the point that neighbours observed a drop in television reception and lack of sunlight. They also worried about the disturbance that the renovation would have caused. The general indecision of the Arsenal administration about possibly changing location did not help (image 11) (Smith, 2017).

**Image 11 – Highbury Stadium viewed from the roof of the new Emirates Stadium, in May 2006, the date of its closure.**



**Source:** (Wood, 2006).

Finally, an agreement was reached to allow Highbury to be renovated in compliance with the requirements of the Taylor Report, however the stadium was limited to only host Arsenal matches (Black & Lloyd, 1994). This stipulation was a crippling blow for the football community of London, as rival teams had the opportunity to host more people. As an example, the “Old Trafford”; the stadium of Manchester United FC, after its renovation in the early Nineties reached a capacity of 80,000 people (Plumb & Coton, 2017).

The Gunners’ decision to relocate to a new stadium was finalized in 1999, when Arsenal identified a possible venue at Ashburton Grove, approximately 500 meters from Highbury, on a terrain that was at the time used to process garbage (see cover picture). The previous proposal was the acquisition of Wembley, and sharing it with the English national team (Coluccia, 2020). The grounds at Ashburton Grove were bought for 128 million pounds, and the construction project had a cost of 428 million more. Arsenal also had to manage the relocation of companies that operated on the grounds of its future stadium at the time, and bore those cost as well (Wenger, 2020).

The stadium was built between 2004 and 2006, at a cost of over 390 million pounds (Paramio, Buraimo, & Campos, 2008). It was a modern futuristic structure able to host 60,000 people, thus satisfying the growing demand to watch Arsenal matches live. The waiting list for tickets at Highbury had grown so much during previous years that the club was almost unable to grant access to all season ticket holders (image 12) (Wenger, 2020)



**Image 12 – Emirates Stadium, home of Arsenal FC since the beginning of the 2006/07 season.**



**Source:** (Stadi.online, 2013).

As for Highbury, Arsenal decided to convert the old stadium into a 400 apartments complex that was built inside the old stands, in order to preserve the external façades, with the old pitch turned into a park for the residents (image 13) (Donna, Teotino, & Uva, 2014).

**Image 13 – Highbury Stadium, now the Arsenal Stadium Square residential complex, or Highbury Square.**



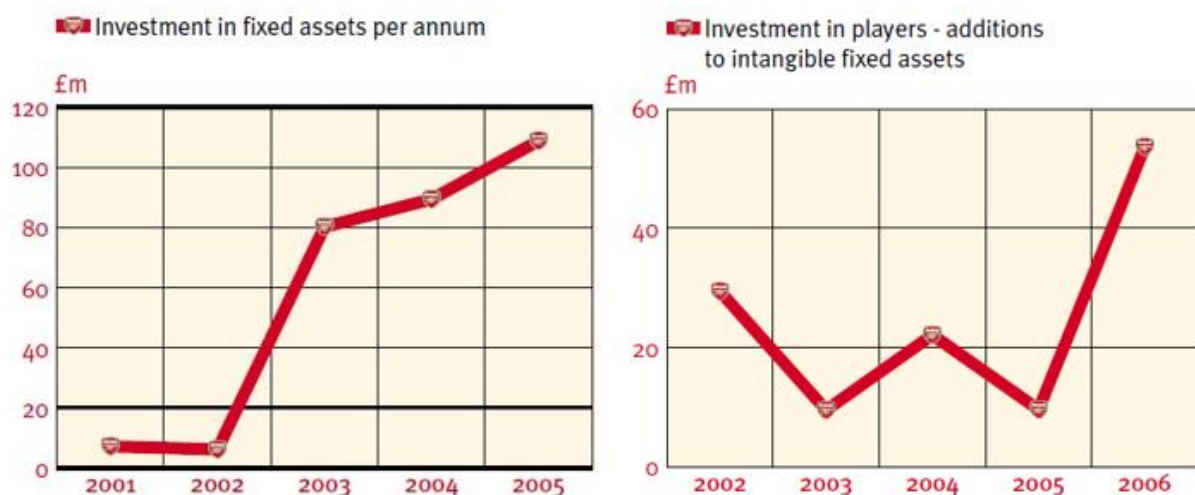
**Source:** (The Telegraph, 2009).

The last match played at Highbury stadium was on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006, when Arsenal had to win, while in the meantime hope in fellow team (as they were also a North London club) Tottenham Hotspur FC would lose or tie in the derby match against West Ham, in order to qualify to the following edition of the UEFA Champions League. The stadium was decorated to the nines and filled with public, but at the half time Wigan (the Gunners' opponent) was leading two to one. During the second half however Arsenal managed to win, thanks to Thierry Henry, at the time a leading player of the Gunners, scoring three goals and granting the team the desired qualifications, as the Spurs were beaten two to one at Upton Park (Sides, 2006). A mix of happiness and sadness overcame the fans, but the symbol of the day

was Titi Henry, the last man to score at Highbury who, after his penalty goal sealed the score at 4 to 2, he kneeled under the Clock End, and kissed the pitch, then raised his hands towards his fans, his people, and his home. That unforgettable day crowned Henry, as his talent and genius closed the Highbury era (Arsenal FC, 2016).

The relocation of Arsenal FC from Highbury to Ashburton Grove was an incredible, high risk financial operation, as the Gunners became, between the transformation of their old stadium and building the new one, a real estate giant: the sale of the residential complex was needed to finance the construction of the Emirates Stadium, but the 2008 property market crisis hit the club hard (Wenger, 2020). Arsenal was therefore forced to sell many apartments at a lower price than expected. Nonetheless, once the crisis passed, the club was able to sell the remaining apartments and all the other terrains it owned at Highbury, obtaining over 322 million pounds (graph 1) (Donna, Teotino, & Uva, 2014; Smith, 2017).

**Graph 1 – Real estate investing of Arsenal FC increased with the acquisition of the terrain where the Emirates Stadium was to be built, while their investments in the players trading market decreased in the years preceding the relocation.**



**Source:** (Arsenal Holdings PLC, 2005; Arsenal Holdings plc, 2006).

The club had to obtain considerable loans from banks, in exchange for a reduction of the overall wages of club employees to 50% of the available budget and the warrantee that Arsène Wenger would have kept managing control for five more years (Wenger, 2020).

The Emirates Stadium, the opening ceremony of which was held on July the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006 in occasion of the friendly match between Arsenal and Ajax, attracted a large audience. The match was the farewell for Dutch player Dennis Bergkamp, won by the Gunners 2 to 1. Despite the financial balance of the team being still relatively unstable due to heavy investing in the structure, the Emirates Stadium was filled to capacity for every match in the first few seasons, doubling ticket revenues from 63.6 to 134.6 million pounds per year (Donna, Teotino, & Uva, 2014).

The Gunners had to severely limit wages (the highest cost item for the club), which were reduced from 67% to 45% of the income between 2002 and 2004, also because of the lower expenses on the footballer market (graph 2) (Arsenal Holdings PLC, 2005).

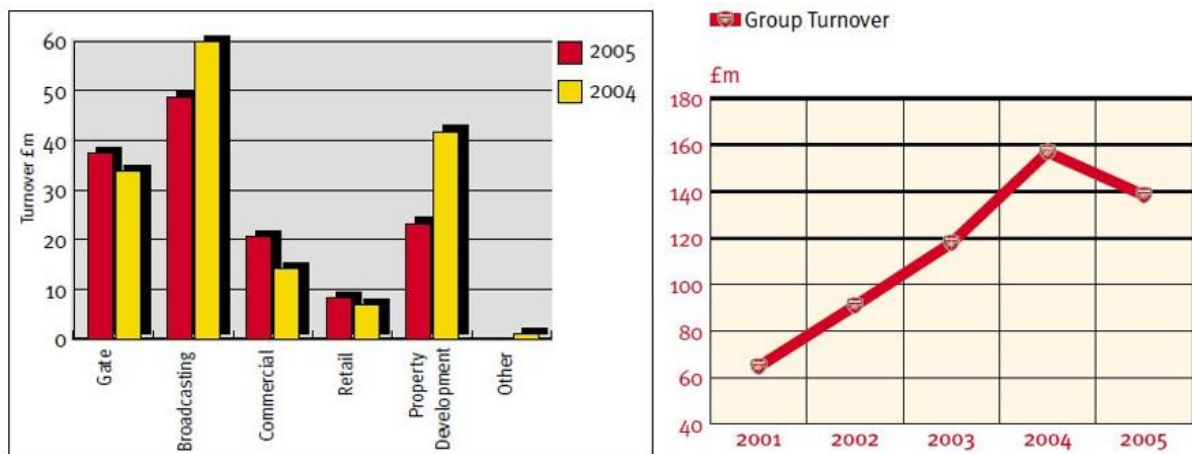
**Graph 2 – The structured expenses of Arsenal FC between 2002 and 2004. Staff wages began to raise again after 2004.**



**Source:** (Arsenal Holdings PLC, 2005).

The income of the club was mostly from broadcasting rights and ticket sales, but at the same time, the Gunners needed to constantly qualify for the UEFA Champions League in order to obtain a larger number of bonuses for sport achievements (Wenger, 2020). Indeed, during the Highbury years, Arsenal was improving its overall income. Nonetheless, the resulting income was still fairly limited, and in 2005, was almost even with the aforementioned property investment (graph 3) (Arsenal Holdings PLC, 2005).

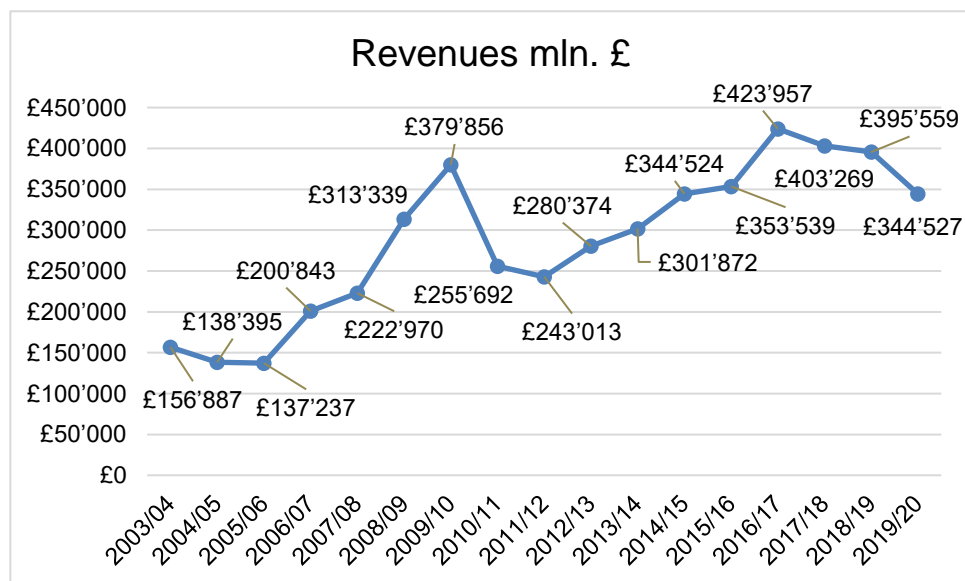
**Graph 3 – Arsenal FC, sources of income and increase in revenues from 2001 to 2004.**



**Source:** (Arsenal Holdings PLC, 2005).

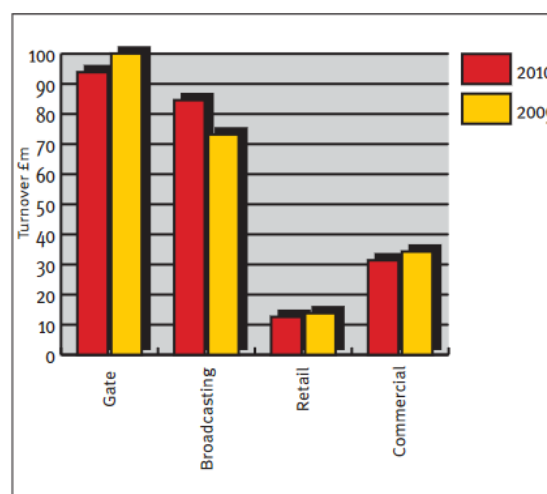
The sacrifices made by the club were immediately repaid when the relocation to the Emirates Stadium was completed, as ticket sales hugely increased the income of the club, repaying the efforts made during the last years at Highbury and tripling the club's business volume (graph 4 and 5) (Arsenal FC, 2020a).

**Graph 4 – Income trends of Arsenal FC between the 2003/04 season and the 2019/20 one.**



**Source:** author's elaboration based on Arsenal FC income data (Companies House, 2021b).

**Graph 5 – Due to the higher capacity of the Emirates Stadium, gate income surpassed broadcasting rights after the relocation.**



**Source:** (Arsenal Holdings plc, 2010).

A relevant factor was the sale of naming rights for the stadium to the UAE airlines. The company, in 2006, invested 100 million pounds in order to obtain said rights for 15 years and to appear on the team's jerseys, replacing the telecommunication company O2 (Di Maio, 2015). The contract between Emirates and the Gunners was later extended to 2024 for the jerseys and to 2028 for the name of the stadium (Emirates Airline, 2018).

A relevant contribute to the expansion and, in actuality, to the financial growth of the club, was given by the change of the team's crest made in 2002. The new version was more dynamic and had a greater visual impact (Bazell, 2015). In the history of Arsenal FC crests, cannons were always shown as a symbol of the club's origins, together with an identifier of the club's location, the coat of arms of Woolwich at first, and later Islington. The crest was



redesigned immediately before the relocation to the Emirates Stadium: the reference to Islington was removed, and the direction of the “Cannon” was changed Eastward. This allowed the club to register and protect its crest, partly due to a law suit between Arsenal FC and an independent manufacturer of retro jerseys selling gadgets with a crest similar to the Arsenal one and with the cannon facing left (eastward, as per the origins of the club in Woolwich, South East London) (image 14) (Routledge & Wills, 2018; Yang & Sonmez, 2005).

**Image 14 – On the left, the previous crest with the coat of arms of the Islington Borough in the lower field. On the right, the new crest.**



**Source:** (Sports Logo History, 2011).

The new club crest, the new stadium, and the team’s successes allowed Arsenal FC to expend also on the digital level. Clearly, the transfer from Highbury to the Emirates Stadium in 2006 did not have a relevant impact on social media, as Facebook was created just two years before and wasn’t as widely known yet, and other social networks were not started yet (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). However, although with a lesser impact that would occur today, the relocation from Highbury to Ashburton Grove led to an increase of searches for “Arsenal Football Club” on Google (graph 6) (Google, 2021a).

**Graph 6 – Trend of the number of queries relatable to Arsenal FC on Google in the 2004-2021 time frame. As highlighted by the red mark, the number of searches increased between March and May of 2006.**



**Source:** (Google, 2021a).

The advent of social media and the increased use of mobile phones in everyday life completely changed the standards and allowed people interested in a club to be closer.

During the 2013/14 season, the Arsenal FC website was the most visited among the ones of European football teams from the five most relevant leagues (French, British, Italian, Spanish and German), a relevant fact. The website was also the 3,768° worldwide in terms of daily visits (Donna, Teotino, & Uva, 2014). Attracting traffic to websites is an operation that currently is more easily performed through social media applications: the level of interaction and the overall involvement generated by these applications allow to reach a much larger audience, creating long-lasting relationships, performing marketing activities to promote club merchandising, and segmenting the followers in order to better understand their characteristics and preferences (McCarthy, Rowley, Ashwort, & Pioch, 2014). The Arsenal, as an example, already uses a segmentation based on geographical location in order to better organize the locations of exhibition matches in the summer in the pre-season, and to reach potential sponsors worldwide (image 15) (Di Maio, 2015).

**Image 15 – Arsenal FC sponsors for the 2015/16 season, with headquarters across all the continents.**



**Source:** (Arsenal Holdings plc, 2016).

The fundamental factors to promote search queries and public involvement on digital platforms are, on one hand, the team's performance and successes, and on the other the use of social media instruments and a presence on the most recently founded platforms. These aspects also grant the opportunity of a greater interaction between club websites (Maderer & Parganas, 2018). Popularity built over years and recent success also have a positive effect in the attraction of new followers on social media (Di Maio, 2015). In this regard, a relevant fact about Arsenal FC is that the club (having its most recent successes between the early 2000s and the beginning of the past decade) was, in 2018, the third in terms of overall followers across various social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Weibo) of all the Premier League teams, with a total of approximately 70 million followers, behind Chelsea (79 millions) and Manchester United (approximately 125

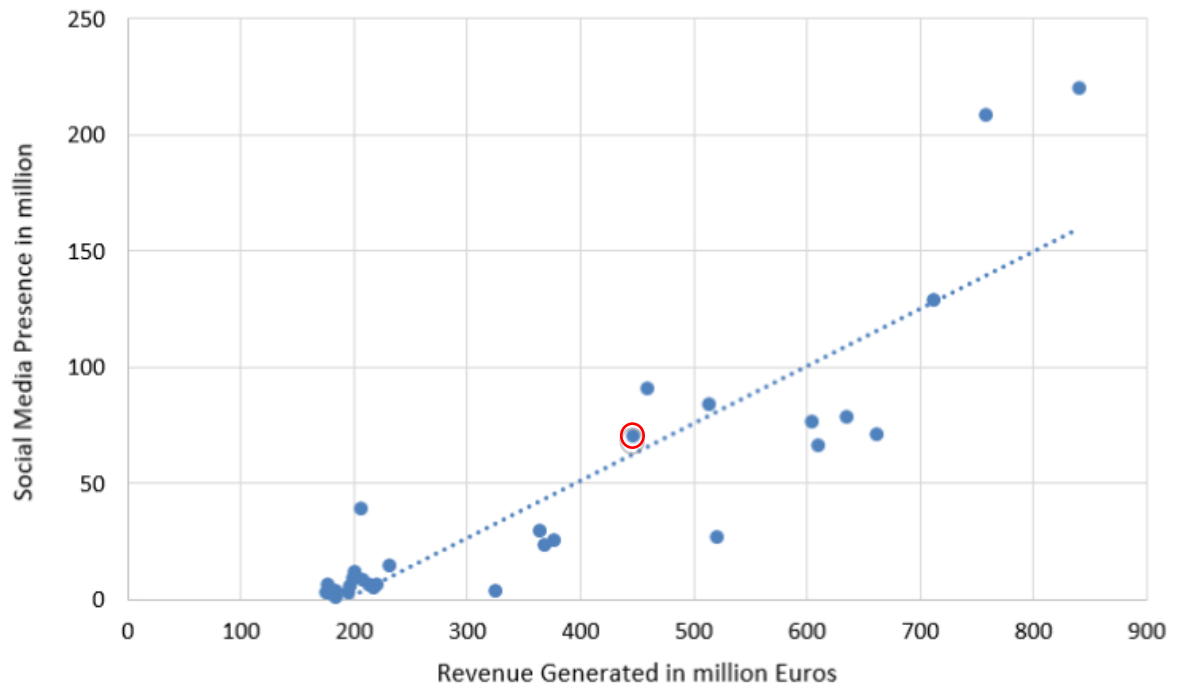


millions), and surpassing Manchester City (62 millions), Liverpool (55), Tottenham (20), and Leicester City (just over 10 millions) (Newton Insight, 2019).

Despite this, Arsenal dropped in the 2019 charts, losing two positions to Manchester City and Liverpool: in this case, the loss of resonance caused by the absence from Champions League matches took its toll: the club participated until the 2017/2018 season, and failed to qualify the following year. The opposite occurred for Liverpool, raising from fifth to second place in terms of followers after taking part in two Champions League finals between 2018 and 2019, and winning one, after a few seasons of relative obscurity (KPMG Sports Advisory Practice, 2020). This data correlates with the number of social media contents posted in 2018, when Arsenal placed sixth with 15,864 posts, behind Manchester United (16,904), Liverpool (17,100), Manchester City (19,040), Tottenham Hotspur (20,568) and Chelsea (23,370) (Newton Insight, 2019).

A club can capitalize on digital platform as income sources because sponsors are willing to pay to be included in a post published by the club, as it provides the opportunity to reach a large and diversified customer base (Helleu, 2017). Through social media, both the promotion and the sale of products is possible. This generates revenues and profit from social networks that are progressively more relevant in the overall income of football corporations. There is a strong correlation between increase in social media presence and growth of monetary returns (Raipurkar, Raizada, & Kasera, 2020). As an example, during the 2018/19 fiscal year, Arsenal generated an overall profit of 395 million pounds, 183 million from broadcasting rights, 110 million pounds from commercial returns, 96 million from gate sales, approximately 4 million from the footballer market and 829,000 pounds from estate properties (Arsenal Holdings Ltd, 2019). A search query performed using the 2018/19 season data highlighted a relatively strong correlation between the financial returns generated by the clubs and their presence on social media (overall number of followers across several media). A linear regression analysis performed on these data provided a correlation coefficient of 0.8874, close to the maximum achievable coefficient of 1. It is therefore clear how, in general, an increase in financial returns is derived from a greater exposure to a larger reference public (graph 7) (Raipurkar, Raizada, & Kasera, 2020).

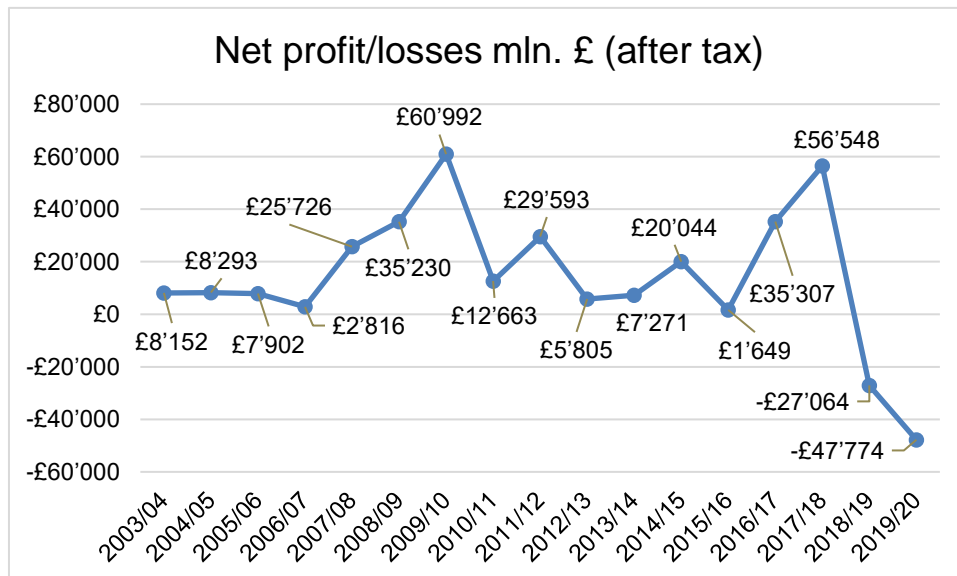
**Graph 7 – Linear regression of the income to social exposure ratio provided by the study. The results of Arsenal FC, marked in red, lie almost exactly on the regression line.**



**Source:** (Raipurkar, Raizada, & Kasera, 2020).

The correlation between income generated and social media presence is particularly relevant, as sport performances are still a critical factor for the fiscal balance of a club. The Gunners managed to reach a positive balance until 2018 (Arsenal Holdings Limited, 2018), when they were able to play in the UEFA Champions League, but the following fiscal years were impacted by the lack of successes, especially in the 2018/19 and even more so in the 2019/20 season, when the losses were compounded by the lack of tickets sales due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced teams to play part of the season behind closed doors as required by the British Government (Bond, et al., 2020; Arsenal Holdings Ltd, 2019; Arsenal Holdings Limited, 2020). In this regard, the overall financial results (after tax deductions) should be considered. They were also increased after the transfer to the Emirates Stadium, but were still influenced by the sport performances and by the maintenance costs, which had a severe impact on the final balance over time (graph 8) (Arsenal FC, 2020a).

**Graph 8 – Trend of the net financial results of Arsenal FC between the 2003/04 season and the 2019/20 season.**



**Source:** author's elaboration based on the net financial results of Arsenal FC (Companies House, 2021b).

Despite many still considering the soul of Arsenal FC to reside at the “Home of Football” (Highbury Stadium), the relocation to the Emirates Stadium was a net positive in financial terms.

## 7.2. Barnet Football Club

Barnet FC is a North London club (High Barnet) that currently plays in the National League, the fifth division of English football. During most of its history, which begun in 1888, Barnet was a non-professional club. It later entered the professional leagues in the Sixties. After many years in the lower leagues (non-league), the “Bees” debuted in the Football League in the 1991/92 season. After two seasons, Barnet FC achieved the best result in its history, when during the 1993/94 season he managed to be promoted to the third division (Barnet FC, 2020a).

From 1907 to 2013, Barnet FC played at Underhill Stadium in High Barnet, a structure with a capacity of approximately 6,000 people (at the time it was closed). Underhill had two peculiarities. First of all, the pitch was slanted, as it was built on a slope (Gotta, 2018). The pitch went downhill, and the stands were built with a decreasing height according to their position along the side-lines. Furthermore, the former Barnet FC stadium was built to include seven different stands, as the structures hosting the fans were not identical (Barnet FC, 2012).

In the Nineties, Barnet FC started to flirt with the Football League, obtaining a promotion to League Two several times. It was therefore necessary to obtain a stadium in compliance with the requirements posed by the EFL (minimum capacity of 5,000 seats) (English Football League, 2019) and by the National League (capacity of at least 4,000, and the obligation to

raise it to 5,000 in the following years) (The Football Association, 2020a). The stadium underwent several renovation works in order to improve the overall capacity, but the Underhill (refurbished in the Sixties) had severe space limitations preventing further expansion, as it was surrounded by parks and by the gardens of adjacent houses. To compensate for the proximity of residential buildings, the stadium had a protection net behind the lower stands, in order to avoid footballs hitting the houses (image 16) (Gotta, 2018).

**Image 16 – The North Terrace, on the left, with its protection net for the houses in front of the stadium.**



**Source:** (Football Wiki, 2012).

The maintenance costs required to continuously improve the structure kept raising and became difficult to bear, so the club, between 2002 and 2003, prepared a proposal to the Barnet Council for a relocation to Copthall or South Underhill (Barnet FC, 2005). The local administration however rejected the club's plans, specifying that the South Underhill zone was part of a green belt where construction was forbidden (Plumb & Coton, 2017). Later, the Barnet municipal council and the club failed to reach an agreement for the renovation of Underhill Stadium that would be satisfying for both. On the other hand, the club could no longer wait, as the dispensations by the football organizations that allowed Barnet to keep playing at Underhill were about to expire: the relocation was necessary, and the club took the chance to change and transferred to another borough (Plumb & Coton, 2017).

The last match at Underhill Stadium was played on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013, when Barnet faced the Wycombe Wanderers in the second to last game of the League Two season. The Bees achieved a 1-0 victory that was critical to avoid relegation (although they were still relegated to the National League the following week in Northampton based on the goal difference). During the match, which was delayed by 15 minutes, Barnet had several opportunities, but

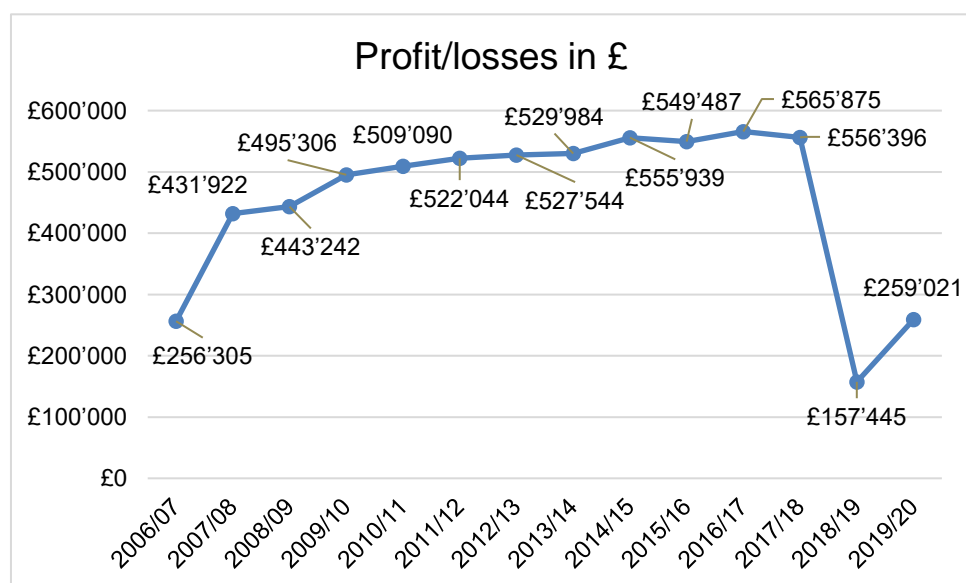
only managed a goal at the 81<sup>st</sup> minutes, made by Jake Hyde on an assist by Luke Gambin. Well within injury time, the Wycombe's forward Bruno Andrade was downed and given a penalty. The following silence was broken when the Bees' goalie Graham Stack managed to read the striker's intentions and blocked Joel Grant's shot, sealing the Barnet's farewell to the old stadium with an adrenaline filled victory (Barnet FC, 2013b). After the last season played there by Barnet FC, Underhill Stadium was used for two more years by other sport clubs (rugby and football) and was later demolished in 2018 to leave enough space for a middle school and a centre for youth educational services (The Pavilion School Barnet, 2020; Ark Pioneer Academy, 2020; Plumb & Coton, 2017). The departure of Barnet FC from Underhill had a negative impact on the surrounding pubs, which were usually filled to capacity during match days. Since the neighbourhood was otherwise a solely residential zone, the pub "The Pavilion", where orange and black supporters used to meet, had to close. The "Old Red Lion" another pub and gathering point for Bees supporters, followed in 2015 (Plumb & Coton, 2017).

The relocation was not taken well by Barnet supporters, as they saw their team moving over 10 km Westward, at Edgware, in the Harrow borough, which the team had been using as a training facility since a few years before. The Hive Stadium was a structure with a 6,500 people capacity, integrated within a modern, multi-purpose sports centre that included thirteen football pitches in different sizes (for 5 players, 7 players and 11 players football), including two synthetic grass pitches in regulation sizes (FIFA Quality Pro standards, the highest quality level according to FIFA requirements), as well as 14 changing rooms, a fitness centre, a medical centre and meeting and conference rooms (the largest had a capacity of 500) (The Hive London, 2021). The structure also included a restaurant and bar (Barnet FC, 2021c). The stadium was built in an area surrounded by small houses and meadows, and was reachable through the underground as it was in walking distance of the Canons Park and Queensbury stations. It also featured a large parking lot (Barnet FC, 2021a). Concerning transportation, Barnet FC provided a shuttle service for its supporters during the first season played in the new stadium. The shuttle left from Underhill and reached Harrow, at the Hive (Barnet FC, 2013c). The first match at the Hive was an exhibition one played with Ipswich Town on July the 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013, which the Bees lost nil to one (Barnet FC, 2013a).

During the first years at the Hive, the thought of going back to Underhill was still present (the club hoped to obtain a positive response from the Barnet municipal administration to renovate the old stadium). Later, Barnet FC had the opportunity of sharing the Hive with their female counterparts, the London Bees, playing in the FA Women's Championship (the second division of English Women's football) and with the Barnet FC Academy, the youth section of the club (Barnet FC, 2021c). A few years later, the women's team of Tottenham Hotspur FC also joined in (The Hive Foundation, 2021). Furthermore, the presence of the new stadium led to a further development of the "Hive Foundation" (previously known as Barnet FC Community Trust), an organization that provides recreational activities to support the resident community, the local schools and the youth from Harrow, Barnet and the surrounding areas (The Hive Foundation, 2019). From early 2014 to the end of 2015, Barnet shared the pitch of the Hive with the London Broncos, a rugby club, too. The same team also previously played at Underhill (London Broncos, 2019).

Despite the fact that the difference in capacity between the Underhill stadium and the Hive was less than 500 people, the chance of playing in a stadium that would provide future financial perspectives to Barnet FC was relevant to its decision to relocate (Barnet FC, 2005). To better understand this case, it is fundamental to understand that income from broadcasting rights has a limited role in the financial balance of smaller clubs. They are however relevant, if at all present, as every single income voice has a great weight on the overall financial health of these clubs (Donna, Teotino, & Uva, 2014). Barnet FC played in the EFL divisions for a single season, at the time when television and radio broadcasting rights were still shared among 92 teams. After 1992, this income was shared by 70 clubs only, but the number of channels willing to broadcast lower league games were even lower, as broadcasters competed for the right of higher league matches signed contracts with the new-born Premier League (Roggero, 2019). The minor leagues still observed a difference, as relevant as the one between the Football League and the National League, and this is the reason behind the financial results of Barnet FC being partially influenced by the club's successes between 2006 and 2020. The club was promoted to League Two again in 2005, and relegated again in 2013. In 2016 the Bees returned to the fourth division and stayed there until 2018 (graph 9) (Barnet FC, 2020a).

**Graph 9 – The financial results of Barnet FC in the 2006-2020 period.**



**Source:** author's elaboration based on the net result of Barnet (Companies House, 2021c).

The essential income for a small club is given by gate sales and, even more so, by collaborations and events organized with other companies within the club's stadium, together with the support provided by sponsorships (Foglio, 2018). Thanks to a set of campaigns, the relocation to The Hive Stadium allowed the club to obtain greater financial collaterals, as opposed to the situation during the last few years at Underhill, when the conflictual relationship with the Barnet borough administration blocked the growth of the club to the point of menacing its very survival (Plumb & Coton, 2017).

A clear example is given by the innovative sponsoring solutions developed by Barnet FC: until 2016 the club was sponsored by Toshiba (known for its consumer electronics), which had a medical division at Barnet's stadium. Toshiba decided to sell this division to Canon (a

medical instrument and technology manufacturer that also took over sponsoring the club). Specifically, the first “Medical Imaging Academy” was opened: a structure designed to host radiology specialists. This allowed The Hive to be used for other events than football related ones, extending the service offer to days that do not feature any matches of the Bees, and creating a virtuous circle to the benefit of the whole local community (in terms of jobs, training opportunities, and improved healthcare services). Barnet FC also benefitted from this opportunity: usually clubs and sponsors sign contracts for sponsoring and the related returns based on the visibility that the football team provides. In the case of the Barnet FC-Canon agreement, cooperation was founded on the trade of structures provided by both companies (suitable position of the location on one side, high technological standard on the other), focusing the attention on the service they provided (Cockayne, 2021). This choice allowed Barnet FC to reach its financial goals through its social commitments, trying to create a network of several groups to provide a benefit to all involved parties, and favouring long-term financial, social and administrative sustainability (Cockayne, 2021).

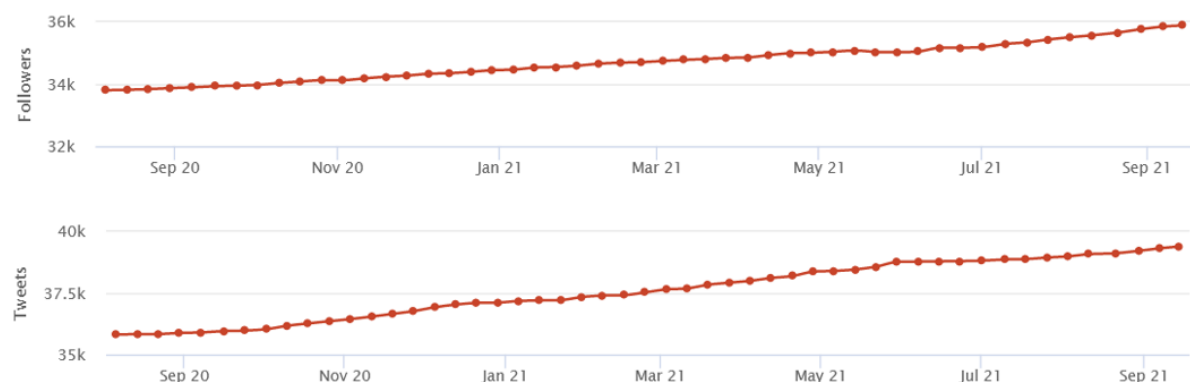
As for digital content, a short film was recorded at Underhill and released in 2014, discussing the bonds between the club, its supporters, and the small structure in High Barnet (Barnet FC, 2016). In 2016, the film was shown at the 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the International Football Film Festival in Berlin (International Football Film Festival Berlin, 2016).

The performance of Barnet FC on social platform is dependent on the presence of its team in the EFL, because, as a small club with a limited fan base, the changes in the number of supporters have a greater impact on its total following. As an example, during the last relegation to the Vanarama National League in 2018, the orange and black club notices a drop in the monthly subscriptions to its YouTube channel (from an average of twelve people per month between February and May 2018, to less than ten in July) (Social Blade, 2021e).

The club therefore decided to expand its interaction with the public through digital platforms, on which Barnet FC constantly offers captivating content, in view of a strategy for a greater involvement of its supporters worldwide (All Interactive, 2018). Indeed, despite a trend on Twitter similar to the one observed on YouTube, again because of a strong impact of the club's sport performances, the Barnet FC profile saw a growth of its followers tied to the increase in parallel to the increase of discussions about the club on the same social media, from 34,000 followers in August 2020 to 36,000 in the same month in 2021. This growth can be attributed to a novel communication approach by the club, which allowed Barnet to increase the engagement of its fans, as well as to the number of overall tweets that discussed the club, growing from 36,000 in August 2020 to 39,000 in August 2021 (graph 10) (Social Blade, 2021d).



**Graph 10 – The increase in followers and in the number of discussions about the club between August 2020 and August 2021.**



**Source:** (Social Blade, 2021d).

In 2021 the club created a new layout for its website, with a more functional structure thanks to the mobile phone version (Barnet FC, 2021b).

Another relevant factor to involve the public with the club is the future of The Hive and the increase of the capacity of the stadium. In 2016, an expansion of the South Stand and part of the East Stand was prepared to raise the overall capacity to 8,500 people, paired with an upgrade of the parking area of the centre (AndArchitects, 2016). Four years later, however, an alternative project was approved, planning the construction of a new building in addition to the four stands, in order to host a university campus and other spaces for sports (Barnet FC, 2020b).

### 7.3. Brentford Football Club

Brentford FC is a West London club, from the Hounslow borough. Brentford is a town on the river Thames, and always held a special connection with the river. Houseboats are still a defining characteristic of Brentford: narrowboats decorate the shores of the Thames and provide an alternative housing solution. The most practiced outdoor activity there was originally rowing. Indeed, it was the Brentford Rowing Club that begun promoting football in the area (the alternative would have been founding a rugby club) in order to keep their associates in shape during the winter season (when the river froze over), founding the Brentford FC in 1889 (Gotta, 2018). After playing in several pitches in the Brentford area, the club reached an agreement with the Brentford Local Board, the township administration at the time, and was granted a space on what is nowadays Clifden Road, next to the administration offices, to be used as a playing pitch (Brentford FC, 2017).

In 1904, Brentford FC moved a few hundred meters eastward, to a terrain that was, before that, an apple orchard owned by Fuller's (called Griffin Brewery at the time, due to the griffin on its crest), a local brewery (Marchese, 2020). The pitch was therefore named "Griffin Park". At first, when the Braemar Road Stand was still being built, the changing rooms for the players were next to the public lavatories on Clifden Road (Clegg, 2011). The distinguishing



feature of the Brentford stadium in the following years was that it was the only stadium among all the 92 EFL teams had a pub at each of its four corners. Those were the Princess Royal (between Ealing Road and Braemar Road, where the club offices were placed between 1889 and 1929), the Griffin (between Braemar Road and Brook Road), The Royal Oak, also called “The Brook” (between Brook Road and New Road), and the New Inn (between New Road and Ealing Road) (Marchese, 2020).

Brentford FC, since its debut in the professional leagues, always played in the first four divisions of English football. The club reached its culmination between 1935 and 1947, when it was promoted to the First Division (even reaching fifth place in the 1935/36 season). After that, the start of World War II ended the club's presence in first division (the First Division was not played between 1939 and 1946) (Galleri, 2014). During the war, Griffin Park was also damaged by the German bombing raids. Later, Brentford mostly played in the second, third and fourth divisions (Gotta, 2018). In 1967, part of the management tried to sell the club, due to financial difficulties, to the Queens Park Rangers, another club of West London, from the Hammersmith and Fulham borough. QPR were planning to move to Griffin Park. The sale was thwarted by the Bees' supporters, and the club was saved with the help of local entrepreneurs (Marchese, 2020). On May the 11<sup>th</sup>, 1983, a fire caused by faulty electrical wiring enveloped part of the Braemar Road Stand. Mercifully, there were no victims. The fire started at night, no matches were being played, and Griffin Park gardener, who was sleeping in a room next to the stand, was saved by one of the Bees' players and his wife (Brentford Football Club, 2020d). The damage was extensive, also because of the proximity of private houses to Griffin Park. About twenty families had to be evacuated (Lane & Croxford, 2020).

During the following years Brentford FC attempted to climb up to the Championship, but did not manage to until between 1998 and 2006, the club was taken on by Ron Noades, a businessman who previously owned Crystal Palace. During that period, the financial management begun feeling the need for a stadium able to generate income even while the team wasn't using the structure, as well as during match days. Griffin Park was not suitable (Gotta, 2018).

Griffin Park was one of the very few stadiums that still featured a terrace at the time it was closed. The stadium was in the middle of a residential neighbourhood of detached houses: the only sign of the structure, from afar, was the presence of its four floodlights. For this reason, any plan to expand the existing stands would have been impossible to complete (Marchese, 2020). The fact that player busses stopped right between the adjacent houses, and players had to stroll on the sidewalk, in front of the windows of tea-sipping elderly residents, in order to get to the changing rooms, provides a clearer idea of the context. Several possible solutions for terrains that were still within the borders of the Hounslow borough were proposed. All failed because of on-going misunderstandings between the club and the borough administration. Noades even considered the possibility of sharing a stadium with Fulham or Queens Park Rangers (image 17) (Lane & Croxford, 2020).

**Image 17 – The small wall separating the walkway in front of the Braemar Road Stand and the houses surrounding Griffin Park.**



**Source:** (McPherson, 2019).

In 2001, Brentford supporters decided to get involved, and founded the Brentford Independent Association of Supporters (BIAS) with the specific purpose of facilitating an agreement between the club and local authorities. The proposal of building a stadium in Feltham (west of Griffin Park) was made. In the meanwhile, however, the financial situation of the club became unstable, and the football team took disproportioned loans, to the point of being on the brink of foreclosure (Bees United - BFC Supporters' Trust, 2020b). Before moving to Feltham, Noades found a possible temporary seat for the club in Woking, at Kingfield Stadium, sharing the structure with the local club bearing the same name. The BIAS however opposed this choice, as fans saw this as a loss of identity. Supporters took the chance to make their complaints heard at a friendly match between Woking FC itself and the Bees in the 2001/02 pre-season, when Brentford supporters deserted the stadium and remained outside in protest (Bees United - BFC Supporters' Trust, 2020b).

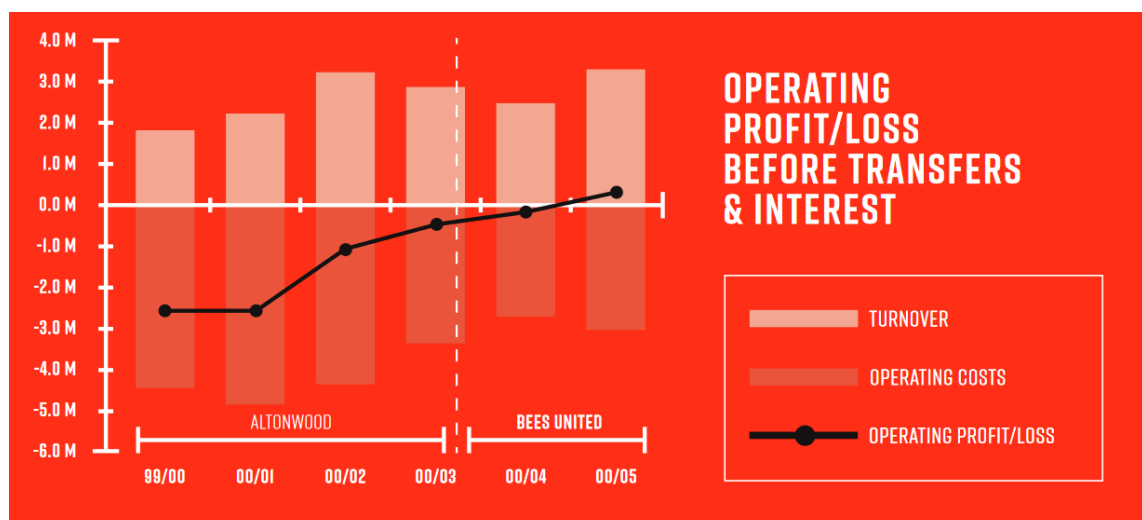
The relocation to Feltham never occurred, and the Hounslow local council kept being uncooperative towards the club. The BIAS therefore decided to establish a political party, aptly named "TheABeeC Party", in view of the local elections that were to be held in the 2002 spring. The operation was similar to what was previously done by the supporters of Charlton Athletic FC, another London club, in the early Nineties, managing to join the municipal council and approving the plans for the renovation of their stadium "The Valley". The goal of "TheABeeC Party" wasn't having representatives elected in the local council. They instead wished to explain to the local population the severity of the situation of the club, and how much a new stadium was needed in order to replenish its coffers (Bees United - BFC

Supporters' Trust, 2020b), while also showing how important Brentford FC was for the local community. The response given by the residents was positive, and the BIAS managed to shake things up (and getting a council member elected), but Noades was adamant about selling Griffin Park to an estate agent and move to a temporary, shared structure while evaluating the possibility of building a new stadium in the future. The administration of the club was not unanimous in moving the Bees somewhere else. It was at this time that Martin Lange, the director and former owner of Brentford FC, who still held 25% shares in the club and a “golden share” allowing him to veto the sale, spoke up. He blocked the sale, and confirmed that the club would continue to play at Griffin Park until a terrain to build a new stadium would be found (Lane & Croxford, 2020).

In 2001, the BIAS founded Bees United, a trust for Brentford supporters with the purpose of raising money to support the club and the local community. The relevance of BIAS had grown so much that, in April 2003, Noades resigned, and three representatives of BIAS joined the board of directors. At the same time, BIAS made an offer to buy the majority share of the club to Noades. The sale was finalized in January 2006. Club supporters focused their efforts on finding the location for a new stadium, while at the same time trying to improve the financial administration of the club (Bees United - BFC Supporters' Trust, 2020b).

A terrain close to Lionel Road, less than one kilometre eastward of Griffin Park, was found. The lot belonged to the Rail Authority, that was at the time reselling some of their properties. The work of Bees United was felt, also thanks to the fact that the municipal council supported the club and was favourable to the relocation to Lionel Road. The location had previously been evaluated by the club, but was originally discarded as too small. Acquiring the terrain, defining the project and creating the partnerships for indoor commercial businesses took several years. Under the management of Bees United, the club managed to recover almost immediately thanks to the financial contribution and support of its fans, and covered the losses caused by the previous ownership (graph 11) (Bees United - BFC Supporters' Trust, 2020b).

**Graph 11 – The financial balance of Brentford FC improved with the advent of Bees United.**



**Source:** (Bees United - BFC Supporters' Trust, 2020b).

In 2012, Bees United transferred its shares of the club to Matthew Benham, a businessman who was both the owner of Midtjylland (a Danish football team) and a Brentford FC supporter. He already had provided financial support to the club in the previous years, before obtaining its ownership (Bees United - BFC Supporters' Trust, 2020b). This was a moment of great importance for the club in sports terms, as Benham was a specialist in the betting sector and founder of a counselling company for professional gamblers, Smartodds. The company made reliable predictions about the results of matches using statistical studies concerning goal averages (the xG philosophy, based on precise algorithms and mathematical equations). Benham applied this method to football to identify underestimated talents, in order to increase their value and sell them for much higher prices than the original cost. He exploited this data to build the team (the so-called “moneyball”) (Lewis M. , 2004). Under Benham, the Lionel Road project was expedited, and in 2013 the Hounslow administration provided the authorisation to requalify the area. The terrain was cleared during the 2015/16 season and the construction begun in 2018. By the 2020/21 season, the team was ready to debut in the newly completed Brentford Community Stadium, a structure able to sit 17,250 people (Marchese, 2020).

The farewell to Griffin Park occurred in extraordinary circumstances. Originally, the last match to be held there, with Barnsley FC, was scheduled for May 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic (due to which English football was put on hold from March to June of 2020) and the fact that the team managed to qualify for the playoffs added a few months to the life of that stadium. Brentford FC played there for the last time on Wednesday the 29<sup>th</sup> of July, 2020. The Bees won 3 to 1 against Swansea FC in the return match of the Championship playoffs semi-final (Lane & Croxford, 2020). The Brentford FC B team was the one that played there for the last time, on August the 26<sup>th</sup>, winning 6 to 3 over Erith Town in the London Senior Cup semi-finals before shutting down the four spotlights for the last time (Brentford Football Club, 2020c). Griffin Park was later sold to the EcoWorld London development company. Where the stadium stood, the company will build residential structures around a park commemorating the 116 years of existence of Griffin Park (EcoWorld London, 2021).

Brentford FC inaugurated the pitch at the Brentford Community Stadium on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, for an exhibition match with Oxford United that was tied 2-2, exactly 116 years after the first match that they played at Griffin Park (again, a 1-1 draw against Plymouth Argyle) (Brentford Football Club, 2020a). The Brentford Community Stadium benefits from being close to an important commercial complex for and has much better access to public transportation, as it lay just in front of the Kew Bridge station. In comparison, Griffin Park was harder to reach, as it wasn't near any railway station, and was only close to a bus stop (hence the famous motto of Brentford supporters, “we're just a bus stop in Hounslow”) (Lane & Croxford, 2020). The new stadium was shared by Brentford with the London Irish rugby club, a professional team playing in the English first division (London Irish Rugby Football Club, 2020).

As previously remarked, since the Nineties, Brentford needed a stadium that could generate more income aside from match day tickets sales. The Bees are fundamentally a neighbourhood team, with a very passionate but limited market: in this sense, the team's successes and performances are very important to attract more people, as is common for

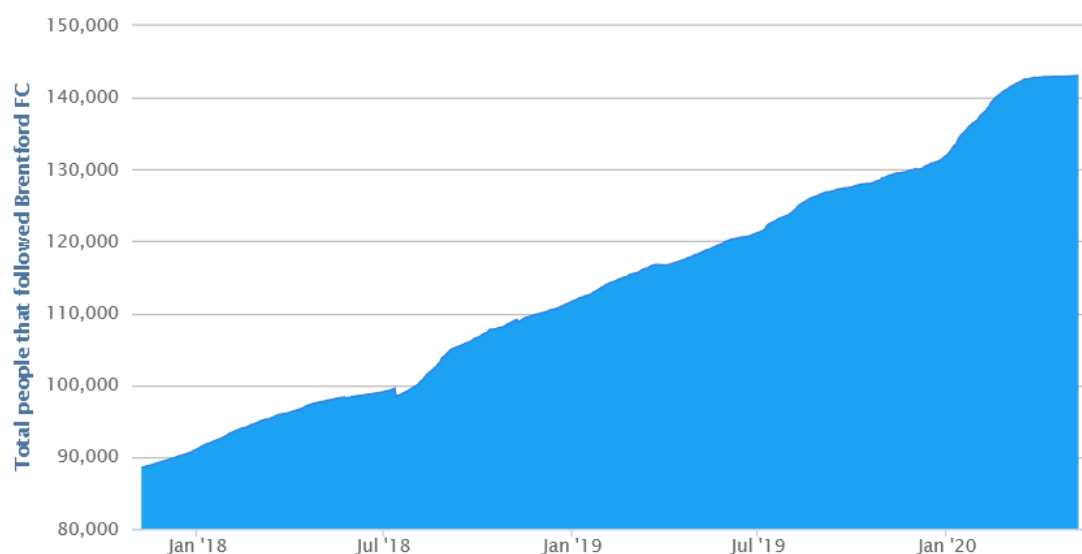
smaller clubs with limited financial options. Nonetheless, Brentford managed to successfully grow its brand through a process based on the sense of togetherness and identity that the team symbolizes for the borough community. It is for this reason that, at Brentford Community stadium, the relocation of the team was not limited to mere logistics, as it concerned the entire history of human and social relationship with the community built over the 116 years at Griffin Park (Bird, 2020). The team built a very strong bond to the local community over those years. This bond was solidified through the Brentford FC Community Sports Trust, an organization supported by the club to provide several types of projects and initiatives (education sport, health, etc.) designed to involve the residents of the area (Brentford FC CST, 2019). The creation of the “BFC Family” website broadened this offer, promoting family-oriented initiatives for children and teenagers that desired to watch Brentford FC matches (Brentford FC, 2018). Brentford was already recognized as an exemplary community club at the EFL Awards, and in the 2019/20 season was granted the EFL Family Excellence Gold Award for its role in involving families and young supporters in the “match experience” (English Football League, 2020b). The club is one of the more socially oriented and inclusive football teams in England, framing its actions around the slogan “BeeTogether” (Brentford FC, 2021a).

In business terms, one of the first ideas that was implemented by the club to increase its profits was to exploit the roof of Griffin Park, despite it being just a small stadium able to host 12.000 (the second smallest in the 2019/20 Championship season). The structure was visible from the sky, and the small green pitch was likely to catch the sight of people watching from plane windows as they flew from or to Heathrow. In 1981, the Dutch airline company KLM had a striking marketing idea, and had the New Road Stand roof painted with the phrase “Next time... fly KLM”, turning the structure into the largest billboard in Europe (Gotta, 2018; Brentford Football Club, 2020d). In the following years the roof over the Braemar Road Stand was also turned into a publicity board for companies that wished to address potential customers while in flight. Another innovation implemented by the club was the new design of the Brentford FC badge introduced in 2016. The new crest was inspired by the “Brentford Football Supporters Club”, a fan club that was founded in the Sixties, and the prominent bee on its crest. This symbol was chosen because of a local legend, according to which a Brentford supporter, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, invited a classmate from Borough Road College to a match. During said match, the boy spurred the people on the stand to shout his school motto, “buck up b’s”, to incite the team. The next day however, newspapers erroneously reported it as “Buck up Bees”, a nickname that took and was later depicted on several versions of the club’s badge (Marchese, 2020). In 2016, an independent study showed that the Brentford FC crest was the least recognizable among classic London football ones. Brentford was also searching for a logo that would be more suitable for digital platform, and allowed the public to express their opinions about possible designs (image 18) (Routledge & Wills, 2018).

**Image 18 – The previous Brentford FC crest and the current one.**

**Source:** (MyLondon, 2016).

Concerning social media, the trends of Brentford FC pages on social networks show an increase in the number of followers at the same time as discussions about the club leaving Griffin Park for the Brentford Community Stadium started to rise. Relatedly, Griffin Park was one of the very few “old school” stadiums left in the British football leagues, a fact that drew the attention of people worldwide as the news were rerun by several sources. Furthermore, the 2019/20 season saw Brentford qualify for the Championship play-offs final that would have granted the team access to the Premier League. That dream was crushed after extra time, when Fulham, the opposing team, scored twice over the Bees. During the same year, Brentford FC also drew the attention of the press because of the so-called “BMW” trio, the three fronts Benrahma, Mbeumo and Watkins, scoring 59 times in 50 matches between the Championship season, the FA Cup and the League Cup (graph 12) (Bees United - BFC Supporters' Trust, 2020a)

**Graph 12 – Brentford followers on Twitter going from 88,000 at the end of 2017 to approximately 143,000 in mid-2020.**

**Source:** (Trackalytics, 2020a).



The increase in followers bears an interesting correlation, besides the one to the relocation and aforementioned sport performances, to the amount of contents posted on social media. As an example, on Twitter, the club made 24,000 posts between November 2017 and May 2020, which amount to almost a half of the overall posts it made before 2017 (graph 13) (Trackalytics, 2020a).

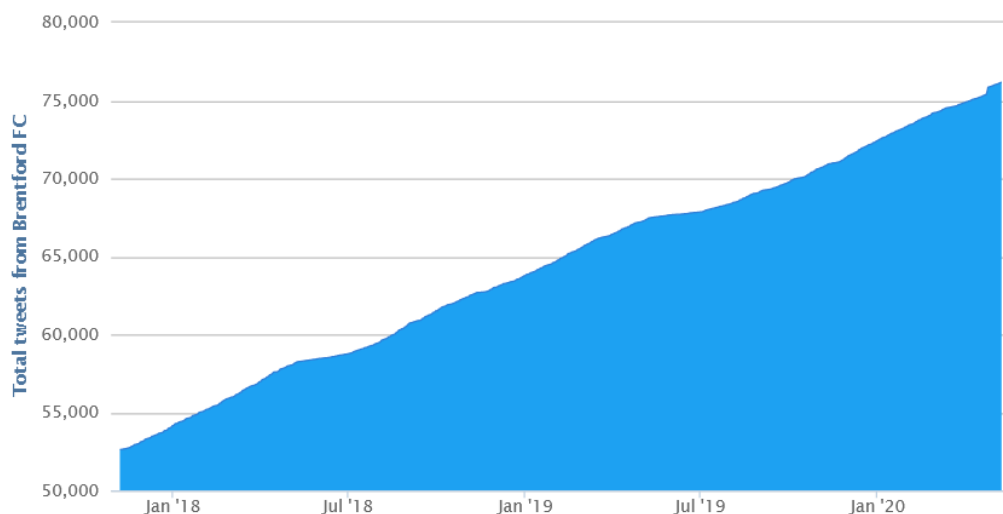
**Graph 13 – Number of Twitter posts made by Brentford FC between the end of 2017 and summer 2020.**



**Source:** (Trackalytics, 2020a).

The same can be said for Facebook, where the number of likes and discussions about this small West London club skyrocketed during the 2019/20 season. The peak was reached between September 2019 and February 2020, with an increase from 152,000 to over 156,000 likes and Brentford being mentioned from 4,000 to 8,000 times. The numbers slightly decreased in March 2020, when matches were put on hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic (graphs 14 and 15) (Trackalytics, 2020b).

**Graph 14 – Trend of the number of “likes” on the Facebook page of Brentford FC between November 2017 and March 2020.**



**Source:** (Trackalytics, 2020b).

**Graph 15 – Number of club-related interactions on Facebook between November 2017 and March 2020.**



**Source:** (Trackalytics, 2020b).

The following of Brentford FC clearly grew even more during the 2020/21 season, which finally resulted in the club's promotion to the Premier League, under the arch of Wembley Stadium, after losing seven previous playoff finals (Brentford currently holds the record for this in the Football League). On May the 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Brentford won over Swansea City 2-0, and, after a wait of 74 years, returned to the top flight (Brentford FC, 2021b). This victory provided great financial support and visibility, as the prize money for the promotion allowed Brentford to recoup the cost of the new stadium, and the ascent to Premier League brought the West London club to the global scene. In August 2021, the Bees played their first Premier League match at the Brentford Community Stadium, and won 2-0 over Arsenal FC (Premier League, 2021).

## 7.4. Fulham Football Club

Fulham Football Club is a club from the borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, in West London. Being founded in 1879, it is the oldest football team in London. The club was started by members of the Anglican Church of St. Andrew, on Star Road in Fulham, and was originally named St. Andrew's Sunday School (Marchese, 2020). At first the team always played in the area, until in 1894 an abandoned terrain was found on the shore of the Thames. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the terrain was the residence of baron William Craven, who had a cottage built in the previously wooded area where Anne Boleyn, wife of King Henry the Eight, went hunting in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The area was sorted out and Fulham started playing at Craven Cottage in 1896 (Fulham FC, 2019c). The president of the club at the time, Henry Norris, was strongly advocating the development of Craven Cottage in order to raise the club among the contenders for the English first division (Christensen, 2013).



Craven Cottage acquired some fame during the years as a classic English stadium, with the stands right next to the field and a vintage atmosphere. These features were made particularly prominent by the presence of the Stevenage Road Stand, designed by Archibald Leitch in 1905 (Marchese, 2020). This stand is still well preserved, with the original wooden seats, and is combined with the “Pavilion”, a reproduction of the original residence of baron Craven that burned in a fire in 1888. Leitch still choose to integrate the cottage in the structure of the stadium in honour of the baron. The cottage stands at the corner of the Stevenage Road Stand and Putney End, with the changing rooms in the lower floor and a balcony above to watch the matches (image 19) (Gotta, 2018).

**Image 19 – The Pavilion at one corner of Craven Cottage.**



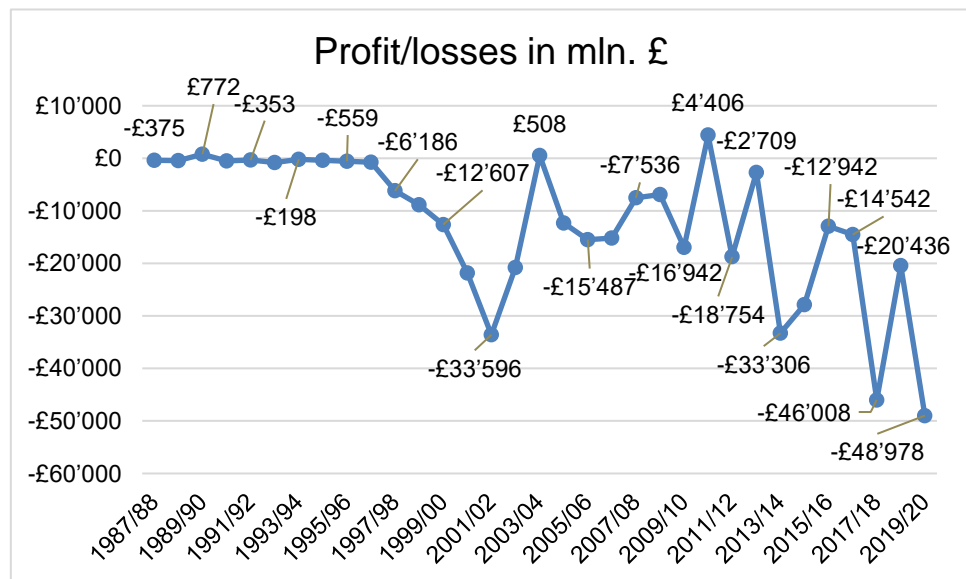
**Source:** (StadiumDB, 2010).

Fulham always played in the first two divisions, except for twenty years of hardships between the late Seventies and the end of the Nineties, when the team was demoted to League One, and briefly to League Two as well. The idea that the club could move from Craven Cottage was proposed several times during the history of Fulham FC (during the Thirties, plans were made to move to the opposite shore of the river, but the move was blocked by the Great Depression). In the early Nineties, when the club was going through the worst times of its history, suffering from both financial difficulties and poor performances on the pitch, and with fewer and fewer people on the stands, the administration considered leaving Craven Cottage to make room for something else (Galleri, 2014). In 1997 however the club was bought by Mohamed Al-Fayed, the owner of Harrods, who brought new life to Fulham. In 2001, he introduced a new modern and simple crest to symbolize the identity of the club and attract the new generations of followers (the previous badge incorporated the crest of the Hammersmith and Fulham borough) (Routledge & Wills, 2018; Fulham FC, 2019b). Al Fayed also decided to renovate the stadium, and between 2002 and 2004 Fulham had to play at

Loftus Road, the home of Queens Park Rangers (Fulham FC, 2019e). During the early 2000s the Cottagers were again promoted to the Premier League and solidified their presence there, with adventurous, alternating results, between barely avoiding relegation to the Championship in the 2007/08 season at the last match at Fratton Park against Portsmouth, and reaching the Europa League final in 2010. In 2013, the club was sold to entrepreneur Shahid Khan (owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars, an American football team playing in the NFL). Fulham FC was relegated from the Premier League in 2014, and returned four years later. Since the 2017/18 season until the 2020/21 one, Fulham was relegated and promoted twice, going back and forth between the Premier League and the Championship (clubs doing so are usually known as “yo-yo clubs”). (Marchese, 2020).

As it has been already said, Fulham went through financial difficulties, mostly because of its poor performances: in the early Nineties the club was in a bad situation, but under Al Fayed it managed to turn back into a serious competitor in the higher leagues. In the meanwhile, the football sector was going through great changes, as management costs tended to constantly rise over the ones of the previous years. In this sense, being out of the Premier League meant losing a great share of potential incomes, while the expenses required to make the team competitive in order to achieve a promotion again and then remain in the highest league were still high. This weighed heavily on the finances of Fulham FC in recent times, a trend that has been confirmed by the results of the 2010/11 season, which was profitable. That season followed the 2010 qualification to the Europa League final, which determined greater incomes due to the prize money tied to the performance in Europe (Fulham Football Club (1987) Limited, 2011). The following decade saw constant financial losses for the club due to its permanence in the EFL Championship. The 2018 promotion to the Premier League helped reducing these losses by approximately 25 million pounds (the club won over Aston Villa in the Championship playoffs final, which is also the match with the highest return in sports, with a prize of over 100 million pounds for the winner), reducing them from 46 million in 2018 to 20 million in 2019 (Fulham Football Club Limited, 2019; Deloitte UK, 2020). The financial balance took another dip with the 2019 relegation, just one year after Fulham FC went through a particularly expensive footballer market season and had to invest in the Riverside Stand. Returning to the Championship also reduced gate sales and merchandising returns (Fulham Football Club Limited, 2019). The club is still able to uphold its income, also because of parachute payments (teams relegated from the Premier League receive approximately 90 million pounds spread over the following three years in order to soften the financial blow of the resulting lower income) (Fulham Football Club Limited, 2020; Plumley, Serbera, & Wilson, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the lack of returns as fans were not allowed access to Craven Cottage for most of the season. Long term investments and reliable properties however guaranteed the survival of the club and its further development, and will continue to do so (graph 16).

**Graph 16 – Trend of the net financial results of Fulham FC from the 1987/88 season to the 2019/20 season.**



**Source:** author's elaboration based on the published net financial results of Fulham FC (Companies House, 2021d).

Fulham itself is an elegant and quiet borough, a fact that contributes to Craven Cottage being a unique stadium. In spring 2003, the new owners begun discussing the renovation work required to keep up with competing teams in terms of income (Gotta, 2018). The most relevant problem with Craven Cottage was always its position, as the stadium is locked between a residential area, two parks (Stevenage Park and the famous Bishop's Park) and the Thames (Galleri, 2014). The stadium is also a defining feature of Fulham, as one of the oldest in London and because of its defining architectural features (especially the Stevenage Road Stand, right next to residential buildings) are completely integrated into the urban plans of the borough (Christensen, 2013).

Despite these difficulties, Fulham FC intends to continue its history in the home stadium it has inhabited for over a century. The only way to do so is to renovate the stands and increase their capacity. In July 2012 the plans to rebuild the Riverside Stand, the one on the shore of the Thames, were approved. The project however was revised in 2017 by Populous Architectural Design. In March 2018, the new plans were approved by the Hammersmith and Fulham borough administration, and the construction begun in June 2019 (Fulham FC, 2019g). The purpose of the renovation of the Riverside Stand (which will be completed and opened in Summer 2022) is not limited to increasing the capacity of the stadium, but to provide fans, visitors and residents an innovative, long-term sustainable structure (Fulham FC, 2021b). The new stand brushes on the shore of the Thames and allows a connection between the Putney Bridge underground station and Hammersmith through a promenade built at the base of the structure (image 20).

**Image 20 – The project of the new Riverside Stand.**



**Source:** (Fulham FC, 2021b).

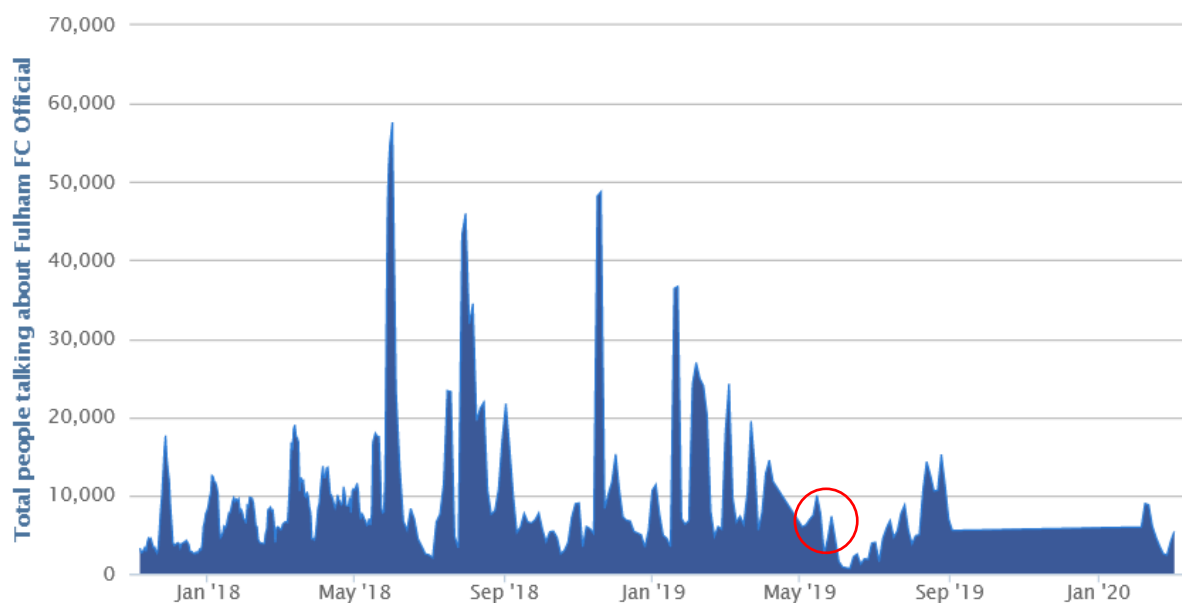
The new stand will increase the capacity of the stadium from 25,700 to 29,600 places, although the number of seats has been limited to 19,359 between the 2019/20 season and the 2021/22 one because of the construction work. (The Football Association Premier League Limited, 2020). In addition to the increase in capacity of the stand (which will rise from 4,689 seats to 8,650) and the promenade, integrated spaces will be built for restaurants, bars, a fitness centre, a spa and pool, venues for events and new spaces for corporate hospitality. The structure will also feature 9 residential flats (Fulham FC, 2019f). The spaces for new activities will be accessible 24 hours a day (Fulham Pier, 2019). The new Riverside Stand therefore requires expanding the two adjacent stands as well (Putney End and Hammersmith End). The roof of the stands was previously used as a publicity board for people flying over London, but the new construction project plan to install photovoltaic panels instead. During the Riverside Stand transformation process, the club upheld close relations with the Fulham Supporters' Club and the individual season ticket holders that had their seats in that stand until the 2018/19 season, moving them to the adjacent tribunes for the three following seasons (Fulham FC, 2019d).

The Riverside Stand will be a social gathering location also outside of match days: since the location of Craven Cottage is incomparable in terms of its direct access to the river Thames, it was proposed to build a stop for ferries as well. This option would also provide an alternative to road and railway access to the stadium, favouring more diversified options for transportation. The club begun the operation by defining the parameters of the project: during this first stage the idea was proposed to build a pier with natural materials, and fully integrated in the surrounding vegetation. At the same time, the club is collecting public opinions about the possibilities for this structure (Fulham FC, 2021c).



On social media, the club updates their fans monthly by publishing pictures and video updates about the construction of the Riverside Stand. Fulham FC specifically posts a YouTube video every month where workers discuss the development in the renovation of the stadium and work that has been done since the previous update (Fulham FC, 2021d; Fulham FC, 2021e). Comparing the data about social media interactions with the Fulham FC announcement (published on May the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019) concerning the renovation highlights that, on Facebook, it did not generate relevant traffic. On the other hand, the team's performances caused much greater supporter involvement (graph 17) (Trackalytics, 2020c; Fulham FC, 2021b).

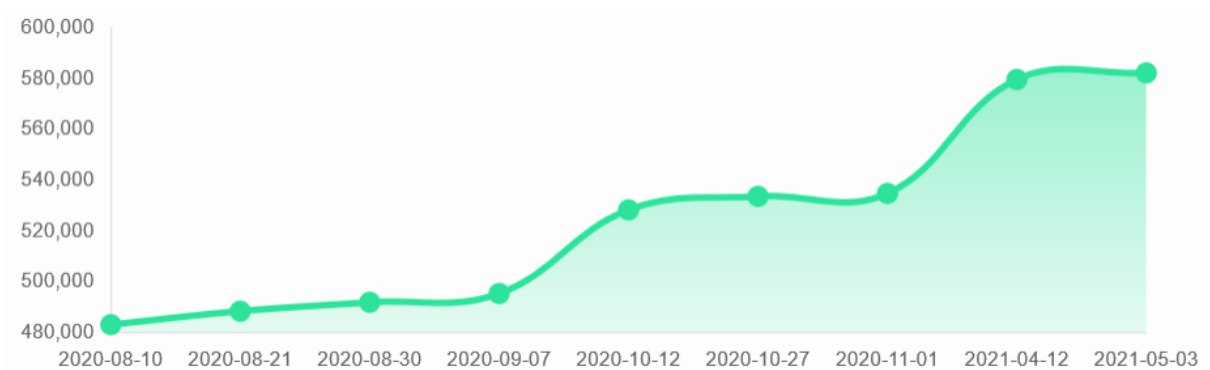
**Graph 17 – Number of Facebook interactions with Fulham FC between the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2020.**



**Source:** (Trackalytics, 2020c).

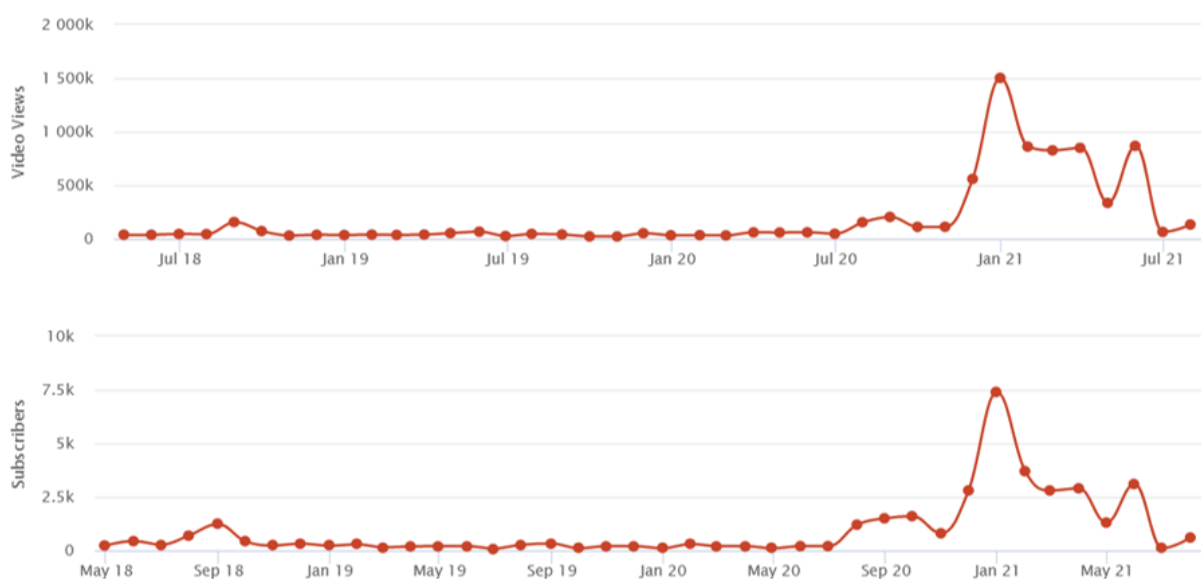
A slight increase is visible during August 2019, when the work to dismantle the old stand began, but that date also corresponded to the start of the 2019/20 Championship season. The trend was still tied to sport performances, as highlighted by the trends in Facebook discussions between November 2017 and the end of February 2020. Peaks were observed in May 2018 (approximately 58,000 posts in occasion of the promotion to the Premier League), before September 2018 (three peaks above 20,000 posts, when Fulham FC invested in the footballer market attracting a lot of attention), and during the season played in the Premier League (between September 2018 and May 2019, showing a decreasing trend given the relegation of the club) (Marchese, 2020).

A similar trend was also registered on Instagram, where the club's followers increased from approximately 483,000 in August 2020 to slightly above 582,000 in May 2021. It is on this platform that the club publishes pictures showing the process of the renovation and the perspective that the Riverside Stand provides on the river Thames. This increase, however, is likely to be attributed to the fact the Cottagers were playing in the Premier League in the same time period (graph 18) (Fulham FC, 2021a).

**Graph 18 – The growth of Fulham FC followers on Instagram.**

**Source:** (Speakrj, 2021).

As opposed to the other media, the interest in the new construction generated a strong increase of the number of visitors to the official Fulham FC channel on YouTube. Fulham already had a large audience because of its presence in the Premier League, but since December 2020, the club began posting update videos concerning the renovation of the stadium (previously the updates were only uploaded to the club's official website). The YouTube channel exponentially grew, showing an increase in the number of monthly subscriptions (from 800 in October 2020 to approximately 7,400 in December) and monthly views, the latter increasing from 111,000 in October 2020 to one and a half million in December of the same year. Another increase was observed between April and May 2021, when the new structure began taking shape (graph 19) (Social Blade, 2021f).

**Graph 19 – Trends in monthly views and subscriptions on the Fulham Football Club YouTube channel.**

**Source:** (Social Blade, 2021f).

The new structure therefore raised the attention of followers, and the club is counting on it to expand and update one of the most historical and iconic stadiums in Europe, while at the same time trying to build a reliable team project in order to permanently return to the Premier League.

## **7.5. Tottenham Hotspur Football Club**

Tottenham Hotspur FC is a football club from the neighbourhood of the same name in North London, in the borough of Haringey. The club was founded in 1882 by a group of students at St. John's Middle Class, a Scottish presbyterian school. The group was inspired by Sir Henry Percy Hotspur (in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the second Earl of Northumberland and Lord of Alnwick, later portrayed in Shakespeare's works: he was nicknamed "Hotspur" in tribute of his speed in attack, spurring his horse forward, as well as for the habit of tying small spurs on the legs of fighting roosters). The boys created a cricket team named "Hotspur Cricket Club". Football was however becoming increasingly popular at the time, so they decided to found a football team as well in order to keep in shape during the winter, with the support of Mr. Robert Buckle, their grammar teacher. The "Hotspur Football Club" was founded on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1882, under a streetlight in Tottenham High Road, where the boys gathered in order to begin this activity (Marchese, 2020; Tottenham Hotspur Travel Club, 2021; Gotta, 2018). Two years later the club was renamed as "Tottenham Hotspur Football Club" in order to avoid confusion with the cricket team (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2021d).

Tottenham grew much in the following years, until in 1888 it became the first club to win a FA Cup while not yet being affiliated to the Football League. It was also the first team in London to win both the league championship and the FA Cup in the same year (a so-called "double") in the 1960/61 season, and the first British team to win the UEFA Cup Winners' Cup in the 1962/63 edition. In the course of its history, Tottenham spent most seasons in the highest division, except for a relegation to the second division between the Twenties and Fifties and in the 1977/78 season. Tottenham is one of the "big six" clubs (one of the six greater clubs in England, together with Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City and Manchester United), and a very well-known club due to its many triumphs: two league championships, eight FA Cups, four League Cups, seven Community Shields, two UEFA Cups and a UEFA Cup's Winners' Cup. Tottenham was also the first football club to be listed on the stock exchange, in 1983 (Cohen, Coval, & Malloy, 2009).

In its early years, the club played at Park Lane in Tottenham Marshes, a small pitch on a public terrain. For this reason, the Spurs were unable to sell tickets as the audience could access the matches for free. In 1888, the club moved to Northumberland Park, but the large crowds that gathered for matches led the club to search for a different accommodation (during a North London derby against Arsenal at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one of the stands collapsed, causing some problems to the audience). In 1899, Tottenham found the ideal place to play in one of the largest vegetable gardens in London, owned at the time by the Charrington brewery, on Tottenham High Road. The structures at Northumberland Park were moved to the new site, which was known as Gilpin Park at the time. The new-born

stadium was renamed as White Hart Lane (the name of on the adjoining roads, the closest underground station, and a local pub) (Marchese, 2020; Donovan, 2017).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the stadium was renovated on a project by Archibald Leitch. A few years later, the feature was added that would become an icon, both in the history of the club and in the collective imagination of supporters: a bronze cockerel with spurs, standing on a football, was raised on the East Stand. The statue was designed by Williams James Scott, a sculptor who was also one of the Spurs players at the time, to commemorate origins of the club (image 21) (Marchese, 2020; Gotta, 2018).

**Image 21 – The Cockerel standing on the East Stand at White Hart Lane.**



**Source:** (Football.London, 2018).

The first official match played at White Hart Lane was on September the fourth, 1899, against Notts County in the league: Tottenham won with a final score of 4-1. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in order to improve the stadium, the club choose to issue bonds to raise money from supporters, in order to buy the lot (they were renting White Hart Lane at the time) and expand the structure (the rental contract was a limit to structural changes). Such an action was unheard of at the time. They then raised the capacity of the stadium from 32,000 to 40,000 (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2019b). During the years, White Hart Lane underwent several transformations and reached a final capacity of 36,550. Tottenham was also the first club to offer Corporate Hospitality packages during matches. The limitations caused by the low capacity of the stadium however became progressively less bearable in



the last two decades, when other clubs had already obtained larger, more modern structures (Cohen, Coval, & Malloy, 2009).

Daniel Levy, the current chairman of Tottenham Hotspur FC, and co-owner with Joe Lewis of the ENIC investment group (the company controls 85.55% of the shares of Tottenham Hotspur since 2001), after carefully weighing the merits and risks of building a new stadium, decided a three pronged strategy in order to grant a long-term, financially sustainable future to the club. Its three key points were the construction of the new stadium, the construction of a new, advanced training centre, and the overall improvement of the team through careful acquisitions on the footballer market (Cohen, Coval, & Malloy, 2009).

The long waiting list before each match led the club to plan a stadium with a capacity of 60,000 people. White Hart Lane could not withstand an expansion that would have almost doubled its capacity, so the Spurs decided to build a new, modern stadium (Cohen, Coval, & Malloy, 2009). The club showed interest in the foundations of the Olympic Stadium (the plan was to dismantle most of it to build a new structure), but West Ham United managed to sign a deal to rent the structure built for the 2012 London Olympic Games (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2011; Dillon & Fanning, 2019). The Spurs therefore decided to build a new structure right next to the old stadium (one of the sides of the new arena touches one of the ends of White Hart Lane) (Cohen, Coval, & Malloy, 2009). During the summer of 2016 the construction of the new Tottenham Hotspur Stadium begun, and the team had to play part of the 2016/17 season in front of an audience reduced to 32,000 as the corner between the North and East stands was demolished to make room to the first phase of construction (image 22) (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2019b; Marchese, 2020). The process to build the new structure continued for 18 years, from the project phase to the opening ceremony, partly because of delays caused by logistical problems (Warshaw, 2019).

**Image 22 – The past and, in the background, the future of the Lilywhites.**



**Source:** (The Week UK, 2017).

The last match was played at the Lane on May the 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017, when the Spurs and their Argentinian manager Mauricio Pochettino won against Manchester United two to one, thanks to the goals scored by Victor Wanyama and top goal scorer Harry Kane. The match was played under an enchanting sun, and the last ever goal at White Hart Lane was the one scored by Wayne Rooney for the Red Devils (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2017a). For Tottenham, that result meant concluding the season in second place, without losing a single one of the nineteen matches played at White Hart Lane. In the 2017/18 season, and for most of the following one, Tottenham played at Wembley, sharing the stadium of the English national team that had already hosted the European competition matches of the Spurs during the last season at the Lane (Marchese, 2020).

The works for the new stadium begun halfway through 2016, and the structure was the focus point of the Northumberland Development Project, a plan for the redevelopment of the borough of Haringey. The plan, aside from the Spurs' stadium, included several residential structures with approximately 579 flats, a community medical centre, a structure for extreme sports, a school, a hotel with 180 rooms, a supermarket and a public square. Several more spaces were also to be built for the club within Lilywhite House (a store, a museum and the administration offices, where the White Hart Lane Cockerel was enshrined). Three buildings were to be dismantled to make enough room for the new structures (Haringey Council, 2017). After the project was approved by the local administration in 2011, during the planning state of the operation (in Spring 2013), the local community mobilized because of several problems with the construction plan, and founded the group "Our Tottenham". Local stakeholders decided to make their opinions and concerns heard, as they felt that the operation privileged financial factors (without a care for the smaller existing shops). The Tottenham Hotspur management choose to include these observations during the next revision of the plans for the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium (which was later completed in December 2015). The club organized several meetings to provide clarity and transparency about the development plan, as well as to receive and provide any information that would be relevant in adapting the previous project to the surrounding urban context (Panton & Walters, 2018). The mobilization promoted by the "Our Tottenham" group was initially spurred by concerns about financial losses, but over time the social aspects tied to the identity of the community grew. This is explainable in part by the fact that the modern and futuristic structure built by the Spurs actually stands in the middle of one of the most financially challenged neighbourhoods in London. The area has the lowest employment rates in all London, and it's the eighth lowest in the UK. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tottenham was one of the wealthiest areas of the English capital, but the construction of the Eastern Railway caused many working-class families to move there to access that quick and cheap connection to the city. The borough was also the theatre of clashes between the police and residents, similarly to what happened in Brixton (Marchese, 2020; Philips, 2019).

After the inauguration ceremony at the new stadium, the Tottenham Hotspur management kept the channels for possible recommendations and criticism open, providing an online feedback questionnaire to the local community. The purpose was to uphold the cooperation between the club and the local stakeholders in the future (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2021a).

The Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, a structure with a capacity of 62,000 people, was completed at the beginning of 2019. The first ever match played there was between the

under 18 teams of Tottenham and Southampton, with a 3-1 win for the Spurs. A few days after the legendary match between Tottenham Hotspur and Inter, the First Team made its debut at the new stadium playing Crystal Palace on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, winning 2-0 thanks to the goals scored by Heung-min Son and Christian Eriksen (Marchese, 2020). The Tottenham Stadium, despite being conceived primarily for football, is a multifunctional structure able to host many events (both sport related and not, music concerts are an example) and provide modern and technologically advanced structures. Tottenham actually reached an agreement with the American NFL to host several National Football League matches in the UK. The defining feature of the stadium is that it is the first in the world to have a retractable football pitch. When American football is played there, the football pitch is stored in three sections under the stands. When football is played, the three sections of the Spurs' pitch are positioned over it using a system of rails (image 23) (Warshaw, 2019).

**Image 23 – The football pitch is retracted to make room for the American football one.**



**Source:** (The Times, 2019).

Tottenham Hotspur Stadium provides a wide range of services, and this offer is destined to increase in the future. This North London structure also features interesting peculiarities that were developed specifically to attract both supporters and curious visitors. Inside the stadium, along the South Stand, is the longest bar in Europe (65 metres), the “Goal Line Bar”. The name was chosen due to the position of the stand (Populous, 2020). The beer sold at the stadium is brewed within the structure as well, as Tottenham Hotspur Stadium has its own small brewery managed by Beavertown. The latter has formed a partnership with the club as the official beverage provider for the Spurs (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2018a). The architecture of the stadium also features an aerial walkway for the most fearless fans (“The Dare Skywalk”) that allows them to climb to the roof of the stadium and reach the iconic Cockerel at the top of the South Stand (image 24) (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2019c).



**Image 24 – The walkway that leads up to the symbol of Tottenham Hotspur FC.**



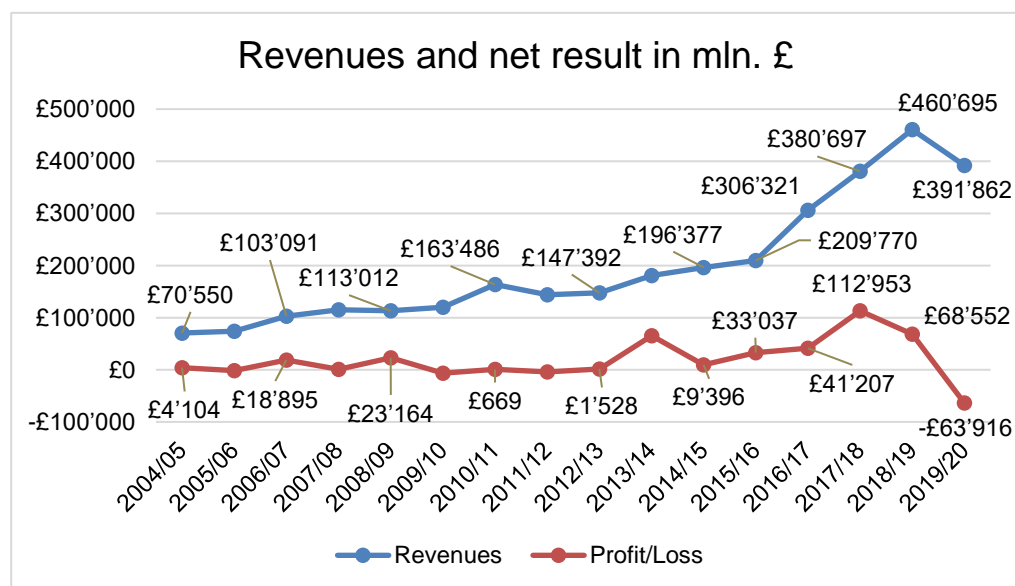
**Source:** (MTV Travel, 2021).

In 2020, Tottenham Hotspur was declared the Premier League's greenest club, finishing top in the Premier League Sustainability Table (the club achieved the same result in the previous year, but as a joint winner with Arsenal, Manchester City and Manchester United). The club's goal was to minimize its stakeholders' and its own environmental impact. The club carefully chooses the means to transport its supporters during away matches, and has to promote sustainability, involving fans in actions supporting the environment through waste sorting in the stadiums and the use reusable glasses (as a marketing side note, those are also filled using a "bottom up" system: the beverage is injected through a magnet at the bottom of the glass that is unlocked by the countertop). The stadium is also equipped with energy saving technologies to reduce consumption during times of lower activity (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2021c). The neighbouring station at White Hart Lane was also expanded during the Northumberland Development Project, providing a sustainable mobility choice to reach the stadium (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2019d).

All these initiatives were designed to open new channels to attract more people towards the club. The club hopes that, once these newcomers try the stadium experience, they will turn into regular supporters and thus generate more income. A study performed between 2004 and 2005 determined that the construction of the new structure would have increased gate sales by approximately 40%, and sponsorships by 20%. Operation costs for the structure was also estimated to increase by 14%. These estimates were made on the base of the results achieved by Arsenal during its relocation from Highbury to the Emirates Stadium (Cohen, Coval, & Malloy, 2009).

Tottenham Hotspur FC surpassed the expected gains and its turnover markedly increased after the relocation from White Hart Lane to the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, also thanks to the successes that the team had starting from the 2015/2016, when it finished second in the Premier League. The revenues reached a peak in the 2018/19 season (partly played in the new stadium) that culminated in the team reaching the UEFA Champions League final in Madrid, then losing the cup to Liverpool (Tottenham Hotspur Limited, 2019). In terms of net results, Tottenham always followed strategies to achieve long-term sustainable gains, as proved by the club's ability to close each and every year in the black despite onerous investments in the new structures (the overall sum invested in the new stadium was approximately one billion pounds). Playing at Wembley was also a cost for the club (Warshaw, 2019). On the other hand, the club always saved a lot on the footballer market, opting for careful choices in the search for new players (Warshaw, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic however had a strong impact on the club's finances, as in addition to matches being played behind closed doors, commercial activities provided by the club were also closed to the public for several months (graph 20) (Tottenham Hotspur Limited, 2020).

**Graph 20 – Earnings and net financial results achieved by Tottenham Hotspur between the 2004/05 season and the 2019/20 season.**

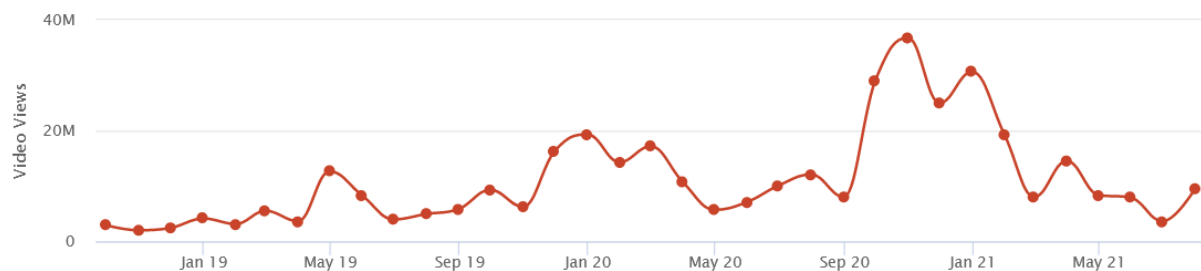


**Source:** author's elaboration based on Tottenham Hotspur FC accounting data (Companies House, 2021e).

As for the multimedia side of the relocation, Tottenham Hotspur increased its following in step with its sport performances: the second position in the 2015/16 season, the four years of amazing results under team manager Mauricio Pochettino, the relocation, the publication of the documentary "The Lane" in tribute to the old structure and the 2019 UEFA Champions League final were all factors in the growth of the Lilywhites on digital platforms (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2017b). The most relevant event that triggered popular curiosity was, however, the "All or Nothing: Tottenham Hotspur" series produced by Amazon Prime Video, recounting the 2019/20 season from the point of view of the team, players and staff. Football enthusiasts were provided a view of backstage events, from changing rooms to the training facility, from market negotiations and interviews to the swap in management from Mauricio Pochettino to José Mourinho, until the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting temporary stop to the

season (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2019a). It was an impressive look behind the curtain, as Tottenham allows moments and places that are usually completely barred to cameras to be shown. The series was launched between the end of August and the start of September in 2020, and raised the number of monthly views on the club's YouTube channel from 8 million to 36 million in October 2020 (graph 21) (Social Blade, 2021h).

**Graph 21 – The number of monthly views shows a marked peak between August and October in 2020.**



**Source:** (Social Blade, 2021h).

This trend was also repeated on other social media, as they published additional content about the series and teaser previews for the following episodes. The club's social channels all showed relevant increases attributable to the series. As an example, Tottenham's Twitter account gained 223,291 followers in September 2021, a relevant increase over the average for the previous months (graph 22) (Social Blade, 2021g).

**Graph 22 – Number of followers obtained monthly between October 2016 and July 2021, showing a peak at the time of the release of the episodes of “All or nothing: Tottenham Hotspur”.**



**Source:** (Social Blade, 2021g).

Obviously, the growth of Tottenham Hotspur FC on social media was not caused solely by the Amazon Prime Video series, and was the result of intense work that had been performed over a long time. Tottenham is one of the “big six” teams and as such benefits from a much larger fan base than other teams. It is however interesting that, according to a study that analysed Premier League teams' engagement on Facebook normalizing it to the size of their fan base (in order to remove this confounding factor), Tottenham is still the club that generated the largest number of contents per 10,000 followers in 2018 (21,854, Liverpool was second with 16,708). The Spurs were also the second Premier League team in terms of

number of posts made on social channels in 2018 (20,569, behind Chelsea with 23,370) (Newton Insight, 2019).

Tottenham also works to expand to markets in new geographical targets: as an example, in China, the Spurs in 2018 increased their number of followers on Weibo (the most used social media there) four times faster than Arsenal, obtaining 10,000 new ones every 8 days, as opposed to the 33 days needed by the Gunners to achieve the same result. During that year, the Lilywhites became one of the most followed Premier League teams on Weibo, claiming 10.2% (approximately 3,264,000 people) of the total followers of all Premier League teams (32 millions). Only Manchester City (13.2%, 4,224,000 people) and the Wolverhampton Wanderers (10.9%, 3,448,000 people) were able to surpass it (Newton Insight, 2019).

## **7.6. West Ham United Football Club**

West Ham United FC is a club from East London, founded in 1895 as a recreational workers organization, under the name of Thames Ironworks FC, by Arnold Hills, the director of the Thames Ironworks and Shipbuilding Company Ltd. The company was a shipyard that performed iron works for military and merchant ships, and in 1847 it established part of its factories and mills at Canning Town, thus becoming the largest shipbuilding enterprise in London. Hills was the first among his peers to instate 8 hours' work shifts and to promise several recreational activities for workers to relieve their routine. At the time, strikes were frequent because of the precarious situation of the workers. Cooperation between them and the company management was therefore extremely relevant, and Hills, publishing an article on the company's newspaper, the Thames Ironworks Gazette, strengthened it by announcing the constitution of Thames Ironworks FC (Marchese, 2020; Manes, 2017). The team initially played at Hermit Road, in Canning Town, then moved to Memorial Ground, a pitch owned by Hills. In 1900 Thames Ironworks FC was disbanded (because of the high cost of professional players). One month later, the club was resurrected and become a professional team in all effects, changing its name in West Ham United, in honour of the "West Ham Guardian", a newspaper that financed the club during its conversion by starting a fundraiser, as well as the name of the borough the team played in (Gotta, 2018; Marchese, 2020). Four years later, in 1904, the Irons moved again, leaving Memorial Ground (nowadays a park) for "The Castle", in Upton Park, later renamed "Boleyn Ground" after Green Street House (also known as Boleyn Castle), a residence with two turrets close to the stadium. According to a legend, its construction was ordered by King Henry VIII in 1544 as a present for his future wife Anne Boleyn, even though she never lived in Upton Park (Plumb & Coton, 2017). The pitch instead was prepared in a field that previously was used to grow cabbages and potatoes (Lewis D. , 2021). The first match at the Boleyn Ground was a derby with Millwall FC that West Ham won three to nil, on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1904 (West Ham United, 2020).

During its history, West Ham obtained several successes, stably remaining among the elite of English football, except for a limited number of seasons when the team was relegated to the second division. In this sense, the darkest times for the club occurred between the early Thirties and the end of the Fifties, almost three decades without a promotion. West Ham also collected several awards, including three FA Cups (1963/64, 1974/75 and 1979/80), a



Community Shield (1964), a UEFA Cup Winners' Cup (1964/65) and an Intertoto Cup (1999) (West Ham United, 2019). The “Hammers” are also renowned for their youth section, known as “The Academy of Football”, that launched several talents, including three players that were fundamental for England’s victory in the 1966 World Cup. The national team won against West Germany with a final score of four to two after extra time. Every goal made by England was scored by West Ham players: central midfielder Martin Peters scored once, and forward Geoff Hurst became the first player in history to score a hat-trick in a World Cup final. The Nationals’ captain was Bobby Moore, one of the best defenders in the history of football and the man that personified that victory and raised the cup at Wembley Stadium. Thanks to these three players, “Irons” supporters often repeat that the World Cup was won by West Ham (image 25) (Gotta, 2018).

**Image 25 – The World Cup Sculpture, the statue with Ray Wilson and the three West Ham players that won the 1966 World Cup. The sculpture stands at the corner of Barking Road and Green Street, close to the Boleyn Ground.**



**Source:** (Dean, 2012).

The Boleyn Ground (or Upton Park) stood in the borough of Newham, in London’s East End. It is known as a run-down neighbourhood, formerly a residential area for workers of the great shipyards on the shore of the Thames (Marchese, 2020). The locals were a tight knit community, as shown by their unity during the many strikes that occurred across the UK between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the years after the Great War. The tension was particularly strong in London (Manes, 2017). The East End was also severely damaged by the German bombing raids during World War II. After the conflict, the area had to be rebuilt, and the population was relocated to Essex. Once rebuilt, the East End saw the arrival of many immigrants from the Caribbean, South America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and became a cultural melting pot (Gotta, 2018). The East End is also known for cockney, a

dialect originally used by street vendors in East London and later taken up by the working-class residents. Over time, cockney was transformed by the arrival of foreigners influencing it with their idiom and accents (Lynch, 2018). The East End is a peculiar place, in many ways different from the rest of London, where multicultural influences create a unique atmosphere. By walking its streets and experiencing its exotic colours and fragrances, it feels like traveling around the world in the span of a few minutes (Gotta, 2018).

As a consequence, the fame of the club itself was traditionally tied to the area. Furthermore, the presence of players that grew up in East London turned the club into a representative for that part of London: West Ham boys took the pitch being well aware of the importance of teamwork, hard work and commitment (Gotta, 2018). For their opponents, playing at Upton Park was a nightmare: the people on the Chicken Run stand (the smallest of the four stands at the Boleyn Ground) blew down their necks, as followers literally stood next to the pitch. Furthermore, the stadium was sold out every time, even when the team played in the Championship, with 30,000 supporters crowding the stands at Upton Park come hell or high water (Bennet, 2016).

The Boleyn Ground underwent several renovations during its history (the stadium was also bombed by the Germans during the raids). After the structure was brought into compliance with the requirements of the Taylor Report, it was again renovated in 2001 with the construction of the new West Stand and its enclosed hotel, the rooms of which could be turned into executive boxes for match days. The West Stand, as both the newest and the largest (the largest single stand in London, actually) was the only one named after a sponsor: it was known as the Betway Stand during the last season played at Upton Park. The capacity of the Boleyn Ground was raised to nearly 35,000 (Plumb & Coton, 2017).

In the mid-2000s, Eggert Magnusson, the chairman of the “Irons” at the time, showed interest in relocating the club: the developments introduced in the Nineties after the Taylor Report and the impossibility to expand the stands because of the resistance of the residents led to the idea of relocating to Stratford (still in the borough of Newham), at the new Olympic Stadium that was to be built between 2008 and 2011 for the 2012 London Olympic Games. The idea, however, was dropped (Plumb & Coton, 2017). During the late 2000s, the club experienced some financial difficulties as the owner, an Icelandic investment company, went through a crisis. Ownership was passed to CB Holding at first, and in January 2010 West Ham was again sold to two English entrepreneurs, David Gold and David Sullivan (formerly owners of Birmingham City FC) (Marchese, 2020).

Together with Gold and Sullivan, Karren Brady also joined the club as vice-chairman. The club immediately begun working to find a new home and, in 2010, the new ownership reached an agreement to buy the Olympic Stadium (also known as the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Stadium) and relocate West Ham after the 2012 games (Plumb & Coton, 2017). The offer was made by the club jointly with the Newham municipal administration and UK Athletics, as the latter would share the grounds (West Ham United, 2010). The agreement was however blocked because of legal disputes as Tottenham Hotspur FC and Leyton Orient FC (a local team) appealed the deal, complicating the matter for West Ham (Cashman & Horne, 2013). The tenacity of the Irons was however rewarded on March the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013, as a rental agreement was announced with E20 Stadium LLP (the company managing the stadium, a joint venture tied to the local administration) for a 99-years tenancy at 2.5 million

pounds per year starting in the 2016/17 season. The stadium would be converted to host football games too (image 26) (Williams, 2017).

**Image 26 – The picture shows the transformation undergone by the London Stadium after the 2012 London Olympic Games to become the home stadium of West Ham United FC.**



**Source:** (Populous, 2017).

The Olympic Stadium, renamed London Stadium after the arrival of West Ham, is a multifunctional structure that can host football matches, athletics competitions (it is also the London venue for the Diamond League) and concerts. Furthermore, the structure has an outdoor field that can be freely used by the local population for fitness training. A covered track is available within the stadium where athletes can perform warm-up exercises before events. The stadium also hosted several matches during the 2015 Rugby World Cup, events during the 2017 IAAF World Championships and a couple of games of Major League Baseball (the highest league in North American baseball) (E20 Stadium LLP, 2019). London Stadium is a structure that easily adapts to the many events held there: the lower stands (the ones closest to the pitch) can be removed to make room for a running track, or to increase audience capacity to approximately 80,000 people during concerts (E20 Stadium LLP, 2019).

The stadium was entirely built with reusable materials, and the buildings were designed to minimize their environmental impact (Publishing service Gov UK, 2012). The surrounding area also shares this design, as the stadium stands within the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park that was designed for the 2012 Games: the creation of the park was a key element for the landscaping and commercial requalification of the Stratford and Hackney areas. The green

zone that surrounds the structures built for the 2012 Olympic Games goes on to Hackney Marshes, an area that also includes 82 pitches for football, rugby and cricket where amateurs play endless matches in the so-called “Sunday League”. The area is also crossed by two tributaries of the Thames, the Lea and the City Mill River (Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, 2021a; Hackney Council, 2021). The Olympic Park also includes several important structures for indoor swimming (London Aquatics Centre) and the multifunctional sport centre where handball, fencing, and goalball competitions were held during both the Olympic and the Paralympic games (Copper Box Arena). Other features include the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre (seat of the field hockey Olympic competition), the Olympic village (later refurbished as residential flats) and the ArcelorMittal Orbit, a steel tower inspired by the structure of DNA that offers a remarkable view of the London skyline and incorporates a spiral slide (Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, 2021b). The redevelopment of the area was also promoted by planning a second life for the Olympic structures, which were often abandoned after other editions elsewhere (Tomlinson, 2014). The London 2012 structures were already designed to build less and to evidence the usefulness and functionality they would have after the Games (Faure, 2021). The reconversion is still in progress, as new, innovative structures are built within the existing network to further develop the area, and a multitude of foundations and community service organizations flourish in the structures that were originally built for the Games (E20 Stadium LLP, 2021; Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, 2020).

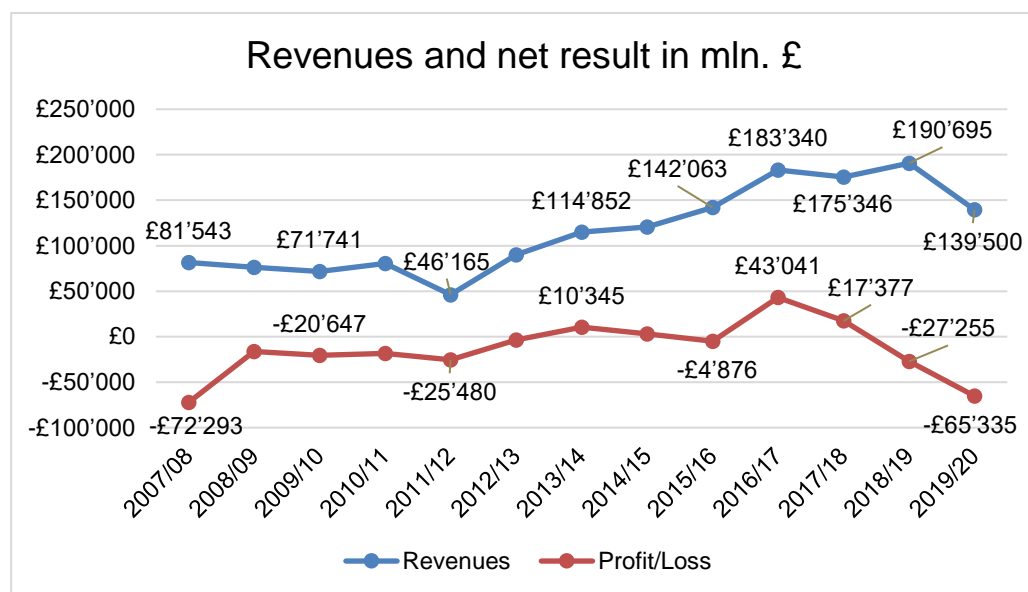
The Westfield shopping centre is also close to the new home of West Ham, near the Stratford station, an important node in the London transport network (Marchese, 2020), which provides direct access links for the public coming to watch the matches, as well as a parking facility close to the stadium for those that come by car (Bennet, 2016).

As for the destiny of the Boleyn Ground, it was sold to the Galliard Group property development company to build several residential buildings under the collective name of Upton Gardens (West Ham United, 2016c; Barratt London, 2021). The 2,398th and last match at Upton Park was played on May 12th, 2016, when West Ham faced Manchester United during the run for the European cups. Green street was overcrowded, and the match begun 45 minutes behind schedule. Diafra Sakho scored the first goal, but Martial, a star of the Red Devils, scored twice in return. The Red Devils were also runners in the race to qualify for the European cups. The final minutes were very lively, both on the stands and on the pitch, where West Ham turned the tables on their opponents with two goals scored by Michail Antonio and Winston Reid, the New Zealand fullback being the last player to score on the pitch. At the final whistle, the fans mixed joy and tears as they bid their farewell to Upton Park by singing “I’m forever blowing bubbles” (the hymn of the Claret & Blues) for the last time in the stadium. Upton Park was closed just a few hours later (Lewis D. , 2021).

After 112 years, the Irons continued their history in their new home at London Stadium, which was officially opened with a 3-0 victory over the Slovenians of NK Domžale in the return game of the third preliminary round of qualification to the UEFA Europa League (Williams, 2017). The structure’s ability to host 60,000 allowed the club to finally satisfy the approximately 50,000 people on the waiting list to watch West Ham: 52,000 season passes were sold during the first season at the new stadium (Williams, 2017; The Football Association Premier League Limited, 2021). The club reached its objective to immediately

increase gate sales and improve its financial balance, closing the first season at the London Stadium with the highest recorded profit between the 2007/08 season and the 2019/20 season (approximately 43 million £) and a net increase in revenues over the previous years (WH Holding Ltd, 2017). The club's performances are fundamental to its financial success, as demonstrated by the results of the 2011/12 season, when the club played in the EFL Championship and suffered a relevant drop in income and, therefore, much lower net results (WH Holding Ltd, 2012). In later years since its relocation to the London Stadium, the club saw its financial returns decrease, mostly because of the constantly increasing staff costs, which grew to 135.8 million pounds during the 2018/19 season, and due to the expensive acquisitions made during the summer 2018 transfer window as well (West Ham spent 107.9 million pounds during that trading season) (WH Holding Ltd, 2019). The financial situation worsened in the 2019/20 season because of Covid-19 and the related loss of gate sales. On the other hand, the player trading market investments made by West Ham during that transfer window were much more careful, resulting in lower expenses (graph 23) (WH Holding Ltd, 2020).

**Graph 23 – The trends of incomes and net results for West Ham United between the 2007/08 season and the 2019/20 season.**



**Source:** author's elaboration based on the financial data published by West Ham United FC (Companies House, 2021f).

The fact that almost one out of five of the 52,000 season ticket holders during the first season at London Stadium were under sixteen is relevant (Williams, 2017). It means that West Ham is building a brand image that transcends both generational and geographical barriers. The club indeed changed its badge at the time of the relocation to London Stadium, removing Boleyn Castle in favour of a shield that was inspired by the bow of the HMS Warrior, the first steel ship of the British Army built by Thames Ironworks and Shipbuilding Company, showing only the two crossed hammers and the word "London". The choice was made in order to increase the global appeal of the club (image 27) (Williams, 2017; Routledge & Wills, 2018).



**Image 27 – Left: the West Ham badge used until 2016; right; the current crest of the Irons.**



**Sources:** (Logos Download, 2016; Logos World, 2021).

West Ham choose a simple badge that was also designed to be more appealing on digital platforms, considering the fact that all Premier League teams went through a rebranding after 1997. The 2016/17 season tickets campaign was also designed to put emphasis on the importance of supporters, describing them as the “founders” of the new stadium, with the purpose of transferring the atmosphere that distinguished Upton Park to the Olympic Stadium (Routledge & Wills, 2018).

The fan base of West Ham United was always against the club leaving Upton Park, given the unique feel of that site, where the club represented the spirit of the East End, and considering that the feeling could not have been replicated in the new stadium (Bennet, 2016). A lot of followers nonetheless espoused the cause of the London Stadium, and West Ham managed to find many supporting voices among the public, especially since Upton Park was being left by the club after that many years. In this, too, the sport performances of the club managed to influence its following on social media and the number of search queries, and the club managed to relevantly increase public interest. This is clearly shown by the number of Google searches for “West Ham United”, which showed a positive trend between May 2016, when the Boleyn Ground was closed, and July 2016, when the team played at the new stadium (graph 24) (Google, 2021b).

**Graph 24 – The increase in interest for West Ham highlighted by Google during the last season at Upton Park.**



**Source:** (Google, 2021b).

West Ham was the first team after the big six in terms of number of comments on Instagram and Facebook, with an average of approximately 175,000 comments on official profiles on these two platforms. The distance from the six most known team is nonetheless relevant: as an example, Tottenham Hotspur FC, in sixth place, had an average of 500,000 comments on the same social medias (Newton Insight, 2019).

The new structure raised a lot of interest, but the first seasons adapting to the new grounds were rather difficult in terms of sport results. West Ham however achieved a successful campaign for the 2020/21 season, qualifying for the 2021/22 UEFA Europa League group stage. This qualification will surely contribute to the on-going growth of the club on digital platforms, as well as to its financial results and performances on the pitch (West Ham United, 2021b).

## **7.7. AFC Wimbledon**

The history of AFC Wimbledon is rather peculiar: the club described in this chapter is a “phoenix club” for a team of the same name that existed previously. The term phoenix club describes a new team created after the disappearance of a club that failed financially, but didn’t have to close for this reason. The initiative of creating a phoenix club is often promoted by the fans of the original team that gather and commit to provide the new team with uniforms bearing colours and a name that are either the same of, or very similar to, the ones of the original club (Porter, 2019).

The first Wimbledon Football Club was founded in the borough of Merton, in South West London, in 1889, and was originally named Old Central School. It was a school club, the first ever founded by a students’ group (Marchese, 2020). The club changed its name into Wimbledon Borough during its first decade and until 1911, when it became Wimbledon Football Club. During most of its history, Wimbledon was an amateur level team that played in the non-league. Only in 1977 the club was promoted to League Two (at the time called Fourth Division). After five years playing in the Fourth Division, the “Dons” managed to reach the First Division (later to become the Premier League) obtaining three promotions over four years between the 1982/83 season and the 1985/86 one (Gotta, 2018). Wimbledon is however mostly known for its appearances in the FA Cup, as it was the first club from a non-league during the past century to beat a First Division club: in 1975 at Turf Moor in Burnley, the yellow and blues achieved a 1-0 victory in the third round of the FA Cup. That year, their victory added some pathos to the cup, which is known for the exploits of “giant killers”, small teams beating much more renown ones (AFC Wimbledon, 2021b). Wimbledon is also known for the “Crazy Gang” that won the FA Cup in the 1987/88 season surpassing Liverpool one to nil. The team that lifted the cup at Wembley was named after a group of British comedians from the Thirties. It was a challenging team to face, and displayed a lot of competitive aggressiveness to intimidate its opponents (Marchese, 2020). The team players, despite being often criticized for this approach, stood together and were able to portray the collective spirit of the time at Plough Lane. They managed to write one of the most relevant pages in the history of the FA Cup, winning despite being underdogs: BBC commentator John



Motson, at the final whistle of the match, declared “The Crazy Gang have beaten the Culture Club!”, a phrase that will remain in the annals of football (AFC Wimbledon, 2021g).

The home of Wimbledon was at Plough Lane stadium (named after the street next to the structure), where the team played from 1912 to 1991. The structure was able to hold approximately 30,000 people. Before the club built its stadium there, the area was a swamp terrain. The first game played at Plough Lane was held on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1912, when Wimbledon tied 2-2 in an exhibition match with Carshalton Athletic (Dunn, 2020). Part of Plough Lane, and especially the South Stand, was damaged by German bombing raids during World War II. During the following years, and precisely in 1959, the club bought the terrain where the stadium stood from the Merton municipal administration for 8,250 pounds. The operation was considered to be more convenient than paying a fee every year (Plumb & Coton, 2017). A clause was however added to the purchase agreement according to which the local administration could have bought back the structure at any time, and at the same price, overlooking inflation and market prices. The contract also posed a limitation as the stadium could only be used for sport-related activities (Dunn, 2020). Plough Lane could therefore neither increase in value over time nor provide alternative income sources. For this reason, at the end of the Eighties, the club designed a new structure with a capacity of 20,000. The projects were approved by the borough of Merton, but the structure was never built (Plumb & Coton, 2017).

With the new safety regulation issued after the Taylor Report, Wimbledon was forced to move to a new stadium, as the club couldn't afford to renovate Plough Lane to fit the new requirements. The last match at Plough Lane was played on May the 4<sup>th</sup>, 1991, and the Dons lost it to Crystal Palace 0-3. They would later share the same team's stadium from the 1991/92 season (Gotta, 2018; Dunn, 2020). Wimbledon played at Selhurst Park in Croydon (still in South London) until 2003, when the club looked for a smaller structure because of its relegation from the Premier League in 2000. Sam Hammam, the club's chairman at the time, even thought of relocating to Dublin, but the new Norwegian owners' group (led by Charles Koppel) found a solution at Milton Keynes, a city approximately a hundred kilometres from Wimbledon (Dunn, 2020). The lack of paying audience caused by the distance from the club's place of origin weighed heavily on the club's finances, and Wimbledon came close to bankruptcy, only being saved by additional capital provided by Pete Winkelman, a former music producer from Milton Keynes. In 2004, the club was renamed as MK Dons, changing colours and fundamentally erasing its previous history as Wimbledon FC, following the same mechanics as US sport franchises (Marchese, 2020; Plumb & Coton, 2017).

Wimbledon supporters, being already dissatisfied with the choice to play at Milton Keynes, did not take well with the birth of the MK Dons, and decided to found a new club (a phoenix club) in June 2002, under the name of “A Fans Club Wimbledon” (usually AFC stands for either “Athletic” or “Association Football Club”). The new club reclaimed the badge and uniforms of Wimbledon FC, following the maxim “by the fans, for the fans” (Cook & Anagnostopoulos, 2017; Dunn, 2020). The two organizations of Wimbledon supporters, the Wimbledon Independent Supporters Association (WISA) and the “Dons Trust” (an association of fans established in 2002), both formed by volunteers, cooperated to start the new club, which had to begin its climb from the Combined Counties League Premier Division, the ninth level in the English football pyramid. The new club however immediately set its

primary objective: returning to Plough Lane (Galleri, 2014; Dunn, 2020). The two founding organizations were completely managed by fans (anyone can contribute) and were committed to preserve the original decisional processes of the club and its ties to the local community. In the first half of the 2000s, the Dons Trust was the second most relevant foundation tied to a football club in terms of number of supporters (about 2,500), behind only Manchester United (30,000 members at the time) (Cook & Anagnostopoulos, 2017; Dunn, 2020).

Wimbledon, despite losing its first match 4-0 against Sutton United, begun its climb towards the Football League, which culminated in its promotion in the 2010/11 season, winning over Luton Town in a penalty shoot-out after an exhausting National League playoff final. At the same time, the trophies won by Wimbledon FC returned to London, as the Milton Keynes Dons lost a lawsuit and had to give them back (Marchese, 2020). During the first years in League Two Wimbledon managed to remain in the division, barely avoiding a relegation during the 2012/13 season. The culmination of the team's efforts was reached during the 2015/16 season, when the Dons were promoted to League One winning over Plymouth Argyle 2-0, thanks to goals scored by Lyle Taylor and later by Adebayo "The Beast" Akinfenwa, sealing the result during extra time (Dunn, 2020).

Ever since its establishment, AFC Wimbledon played at Kingsmeadow, a small stadium with 5,000 seats in Kingston-upon-Thames (in South West London, near Wimbledon). "Womble" bought the stadium and, for several years, shared it with Kingstonian FC, and later with the women's squad of Chelsea FC (Plumb & Coton, 2017; Cook & Anagnostopoulos, 2017). The club was still actively searching for a way to return near Plough Lane. Returning to the old stadium was not possible, as the area had been transformed into a residential complex in 2008 (buildings in the complex take their names from relevant players in the history of Wimbledon FC) after being abandoned for several years while it was considered as possible location for a supermarket (Plumb & Coton, 2017).

Plough Lane was the sort of stadium where people live and breathe football, and where the public and the players were squeezed together by the proximity of the stands to the pitch. Facing Wimbledon in its home stadium definitely wasn't easy (Gotta, 2018). In addition to an almost spiritual call to its old home (Kingsmeadow wasn't part of Merton, the club's birthplace) the new club wished to create a new relationship with the Wimbledon community, and was in need of a larger structure in order to increase ticket sales and customer companies, and thus incomes (Dunn, 2020). The rise of the Dons to the Football League gave an additional push to the decision to create a new structure. Several options were considered, but the final choice was the area of Wimbledon Stadium, a location used since 1928 for horse and greyhound racing, as well as for car and motorbike competitions. The area was less than 200 metres from Plough Lane. The Merton borough administration approved the plans provided by the club for the construction of a new stadium with 20,000 seats in 2015. Wimbledon Stadium closed in 2017 and demolition works begun in 2018 (Plumb & Coton, 2017; Dunn, 2020).

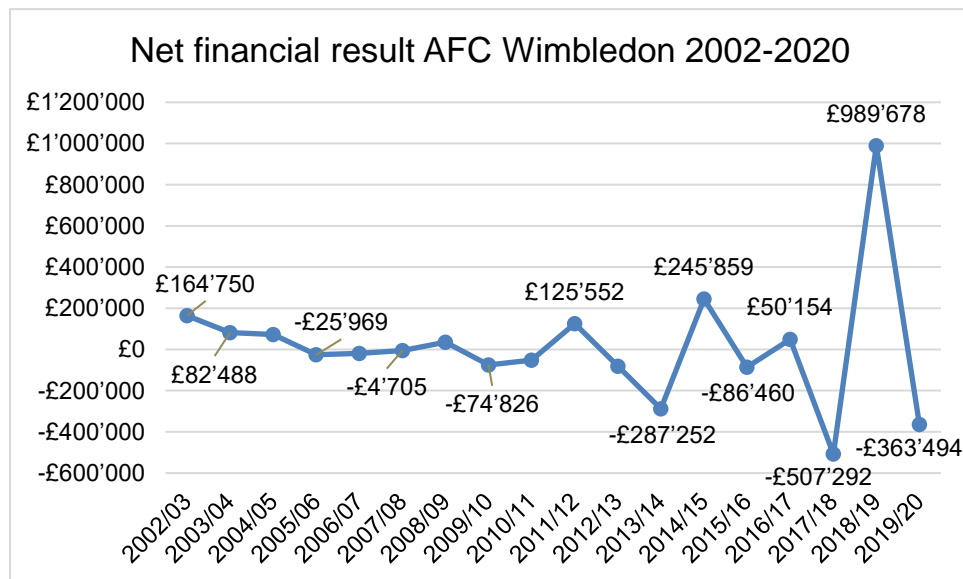
The construction of the new Plough Lane begun in January 2019 and was completed in autumn 2020. Wimbledon closed its seasons at Kingsmeadow with a 0-0 draw with the Bolton Wanderers on March the 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (the League One was then stopped because of Covid-19), leaving a stadium that would never be forgotten by the Dons, and would later

become the official home of the Chelsea FC women's team and U23 team (Dunn, 2020; Chelsea FC, 2020).

The first home matches of the 2020/21 season were played at the Kiyan Prince Foundation Stadium (also known as Loftus Road), home of Queens Park Rangers, while the debut at the new Plough Lane occurred on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, with a 2-2 tie against Doncaster Rovers. The game marked the return of the Dons to their home. The new Plough Lane structure is built within a residential complex with offices and a shopping district (the club bought the terrain lot for the stadium, while the surrounding area was sold to Gaillard Homes). The complex also incorporates several community services (Gaillard Homes, 2018). The structure is part of the Merton regeneration project, and is therefore not limited to football: thanks to the AFC Wimbledon Foundation, the structure is open seven days a week, with programmes for the local youth and the elderly. The stadium also hosts events to sensitize the population about mental health and manages the logistics of food distribution for the people in need. The foundation also promotes inclusive sport programmes for children and for local schools, using a 5-a-side pitch built next to the new Plough Lane (Dunn, 2020; AFC Wimbledon Foundation, 2020). Building a stadium that would provide community services and support for the local population was always one of the goals. The club managed to do so, also thanks to the help of a new organization founded in March 2020, the DONS Local Action Group, specifically to provide help and support to the people in the boroughs of Merton, Kingston and Wandsworth (DONS Local Action Group, 2021). The stadium also promotes renewable energy sources: 305 solar panels were built over the West Stand (Dunn, 2020).

Another relevant factor for the club was building a stadium that could hold a greater number of followers: the new Plough Lane stadium was initially sized down to 9,215 seats, but can be extended to the 20,000 planned for by the project through the use of three semi-removable stands. Together with the new executive boxes and conference rooms, Wimbledon now has the ability to increase its revenues by offering hospitality packages, allowing institutional customers (business representatives) to create new business relationships during team matches and other events (AFC Wimbledon, 2021d). Ticket sales are a critical factor for clubs such as Wimbledon, which was initially founded by fans and therefore supported financially only by volunteers. With the passing years the club rose to higher divisions, and therefore was able to increase its income, although with a matching increase in costs caused by the entrance in the professional leagues. It however managed to minimize its losses thanks to the efforts of all the people that were close to the team. The greater loss occurred after the 2017/18 season (-507,292 pounds) is mostly attributable to the investment for the new stadium, while the one incurred in the 2019/20 season (- 363,494) was caused by the lack of activities tied to the Coronavirus pandemic (graph 25) (AFC Wimbledon Limited, 2018; AFC Wimbledon Limited, 2020).

**Graph 25 – Net financial results of AFC Wimbledon between the 2002/03 and 2019/20 seasons.**



**Source:** author's elaboration based on the net results of AFC Wimbledon (Companies House, 2021a).

Since its foundation, AFC Wimbledon is also known for its sponsorship agreement with Sports Interactive (the developer of the famous videogame "Football Manager"). The team carried the company's logo on its kit, later changing it for the one of the game itself (Cook & Anagnostopoulos, 2017). Innovations such as binding a small club playing in the lower leagues to a very well-known sponsor, generally attract a lot of interest, and therefore provide visibility to the club and the opportunity to reach a wider public (Torchia, 2016). The general perception of AFC Wimbledon as a simple, genuine club created by fans contributed to attract more financial supporters (Cook & Anagnostopoulos, 2017). This trend was noticed in other countries as well: in Italy, as an example, the history of the club and the efforts made by AFC Wimbledon supporters to bring the team back to professional competitions were made known by the book "Noi siamo il Wimbledon" (We are Wimbledon) written by Stefano Faccendini in 2006 (Galleri, 2014).

If not for the pandemic, Wimbledon could have further increased its income, as the team has been stably playing in League One for five years. During the 2019/20 season, the team left Kingsmeadow to open the gates at the new Plough Lane (AFC Wimbledon Limited, 2020): in view of the relocation, AFC Wimbledon went through a rebranding operation and created a new badge, both in tribute to the FA Cup won in 1988 and to mark its return to its place of origin (image 28) (AFC Wimbledon, 2020b).

**Image 28 – The former badge of Wimbledon AFC and its new one.**

**Source:** (Footy Headlines, 2020).

Because of the impact of Covid-19 on the 2020/21 season, when the club moved to Plough Lane (most matches were played behind closed doors), AFC Wimbledon allowed fans to acquire club bonds in order to remedy the financial difficulties caused by the pandemic. One of the available options allows investors to use their bond as a permanent ticket to all home matches for a duration of ten years (AFC Wimbledon, 2020a; Dunn, 2020). The bond is however not refundable as normal season tickets: acquiring it is a choice made to support the club in case of new lockdowns during which the team would be forced to play without an audience or with a limited number of supporters (AFC Wimbledon, 2020c).

Concerning social media, AFC Wimbledon showed a growth in following in response to the many initiatives taken during the years, but more so in response to its sport performances and in view of its return to Plough Lane: the debut at the new stadium resulted in positive effects both on the web and on socials. In first place, the construction of the structure was documented on the Instagram page @plough\_lane\_stadium\_wimbledon, so that followers that could not enter the stadium because of the work in progress would be able to see the interior of the structure and track its completion status (Dunn, 2020; AFC Wimbledon, 2021f). The official profiles of the club, such as the one on YouTube, also published contents about the return to Plough Lane: in November 2020, the club gained 800 subscribers on its official channel (going from slightly above 12,100 to 13,000 at the end of the month, then continuing to grow thanks to its staying in League One) (graph 26) (Social Blade, 2021b).

**Graph 26 – Number of monthly subscribers to the “AFC Wimbledon TV” channel on YouTube between May 2018 and July 2021.**

**Source:** (Social Blade, 2021c).

The same trend was observed on the club's Twitter profile, where the number of interactions grew as fans visiting Plough Lane posted pictures of the construction of the structure and shared them on social media (Dunn, 2020). Furthermore, on Twitter, the page @bringdonshome (managed by The Dons Trust) helped the club to raise part of the funds needed to complete the construction work through a bond loan programme (The Dons Trust, 2020; The Dons Trust, 2021). This operation provided the drive for a further increase in the following on the club's official profile and, in November 2020, when the team returned to Plough Lane, it gained 800 more followers. Social media results were also strongly influenced by the team's performance (graph 27) (Social Blade, 2021a).

**Graph 27 – The trend of the number of followers gained by AFC Wimbledon on Twitter between the start of 2017 and summer 2021.**



**Source:** (Social Blade, 2021a).

Wimbledon receives positive feedback also on its website. The club's site, while the team played at Kingsmeadow, was also used to directly involve supporters in club-sponsored events or simply to clean up the stadium (Cook & Anagnostopoulos, 2017). With the years, the club evolved and implemented its own web platform, while maintaining the old website as an archive for AFC Wimbledon, renaming it the Wimbledon Heritage (AFC Wimbledon, 2021c; AFC Wimbledon, 2012),

In August 2021, thirty years after the last time they did, fans returned to sit on the stands of Plough Lane. The stadium was sold out for the match with the Bolton Wanderers, with a final score of a 3-3 draw. The roar of Wimbledon fans was heard again just a few metres from its original stands, because Wimbledon is not only a synonym of the white kit of tennis players on the Centre Court. Wimbledon is also the yellow and blue of a football shirt bearing the phrase "Back to Plough Lane" on its collar.

## 8. Recommendations for football clubs

A football club clearly performs relevant changes during its history in order to create new market opportunities and increase its financial returns. In order to provide useful advice to football clubs that are facing a change in their home structures, be it a renovation or a relocation, it is critical to consider several factors and subjects that can influence and be influenced by the club's decisions. In this regard, recommendations for clubs are made with the main purpose to promote long-term financial growth and market expansion. According to the aforementioned observations, however, a club should not forget that changes need to be done without deleting its previous history and the context surrounding the stadium (Coluccia, 2020). Recommendations are therefore split in four subsections: relational aspects, structural aspects, commercial aspects and digital aspects. Each of those includes its own secondary objectives, which, if achieved, will allow the club to reach the desired financial and market balance (see Annex 1).

### Relational aspects

Understanding the desires and requirements of the stakeholders involved in the club's relocation or renovation of its stadium is important. Even more so, in order to perform a growth process that still respects the will of all involved parties, it is critical for a club to reach to all the stakeholders, providing a constructive interchange and considering all the strength points, criticisms and open requests made (Foglio, 2018). Creating solid relationships with the specific subjects that the club wishes to involve should be a primary concern, in view of developing communication methods that are targeted and adapted to each specific stakeholder.

- Fans: those that support the club, also financially, by buying tickets, season tickets and merchandise, should be involved in the decision process. An example is the design of new kits and badges, or of specific details in the project of the stadium (Foglio, 2018). Relocating to a new stadium allows the club to expand its market, providing opportunities to reach a larger audience thanks to the increased visibility on social media, to favourable public opinions (media, the press, etc.) and to recognition in terms of architecture and construction. In this view, contacting supporters through surveys and online (performed by the club on official channels) or on site (during match days) interviews provides a mean to balance, on one hand, the necessity of expanding the club, and, on the other, the creation of a "product" that still considers the team's values and previous history (Church & Penny, 2013).
- Local administration: keeping a favourable relationship with the local administration allows a club to benefit long-term, and strengthens the bonds with the location and the neighbourhood (Brown, Crabbe, & Mellor, 2008). In order to create a positive dialogue, the local authorities should be involved since the very first stages of the decision process, promoting encounters in which the club openly expresses its plans. This allows to optimize the use of the spaces provided by the stadium, possibly setting some aside for the local community, for schools or for other local groups



(Sanders, Heys, Ravenscroft, & Burdsey, 2014). In the cases where possible modifications or further expansion could be required, by having set solid dialogue channels with the local administration, and having shown to create new opportunities to benefit the surrounding area, the club could more easily obtain an approval for more works (Bulley, 2002). A relevant factor to be considered when discussing with local administrations is that it is a “variable” entity, as its composition could change drastically with each new election, impacting the council’s approach to the club (Bees United - BFC Supporters' Trust, 2020b).

- People and subjects adjacent to the structure: a stadium built in a specific context, could bring many advantages, but could also create problems (Panton & Walters, 2018). Communication with the stakeholders surrounding the structure can contribute to both a greater use of the stadium by the resident community and the creation of new access paths, or provide opportunities for the local residents and shopkeepers (i.e., more parking space, new stops for public transport) (Ahlfeldt & Kavetsos, 2011). With neighbours, public gatherings are useful, however other forms of communication, such as interviews, polls or direct contacts, can favour a constant involvement. Publishing the discussions with the local residents and administrations on the web is particularly useful, both to optimize the use of the stadium and to prevent possible inconveniences (Walters, 2011).

A club could be confronted by many other entities, which are however outside the scope of the study being presented.

Following these methods, during the planning stage, the club can intertwine its necessities with the needs of those entities that are fundamental to its own well-being, as stable relationships under the sign of reciprocal support and collaboration are desirable. Sharing the club’s projects and, more specifically, its needs, helps the involved parties to really understand the necessities of the club (McGehee, Marquez, Cianfrone, & Kellison, 2018). Both the ideas and the concerns of these stakeholders are intended to create a dialogue that can provide opportunities, while taking the all involved interests to heart in order to satisfy all participants and favour a win-win approach (see Annex 1) (Savage, et al., 2010; Donna & Lombardo, 2015).

### **Structural aspects**

The plan for a new stadium or for the renovation of an existing one is a critical step to build the identity of the structure. Nonetheless, “structural aspects” are not meant here to include the full construction, the analysis of individual elements in architectural terms or other aspects concerning the structure’s security or capacity. In this chapter, the focus will be on those details that contribute to the atmosphere of the new structure. A new venue is often a very different structure compared to the old stadium: the atmosphere is not the same as the past, therefore it is essential to create innovation, incorporating several expedients in order to recreate that same atmosphere while giving the new stadium its own identity, fusing remembrance with new elements and thus increasing the attachment to the club (Penn & Penn, 2020).

Those structural aspects are clearly targeted to the fans and visitors (the latter including tourists, architecture and engineering students, etc.). The use of specific features facilitates the attraction of new supporters by generating curiosity for peculiar items, often tied to the history of the club (Edensor, Millington, Steadman, & Taecharungroj, 2021). A particularly interesting example can be found in Germany: an attraction of the Volksparkstadion, home of Hamburger SV, was the clock that counted the years, days, hours, minutes and seconds passed since the first kick off stroked by HSV in the Bundesliga (Hamburg was one of the founders and played in the first division of German football since the league was created in 1963, until its first relegation in its history on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018. During this time frame, HSV was the team that held the record for number of editions participating in the league) (image 29) (Hamburger SV, 2019b).

**Image 29 – The Bundesliga Uhr, placed in the North-west corner of the Volksparkstadion.**



**Source:** (RP Online, 2018).

In the year after its relegation, Hamburger SV decided that the clock would have marked the time since the founding of HSV, from 1889 to the current days. In the summer of 2019 however, the clock was dismantled as the club considered it as an element of the past, and wished to look to the future. It was replaced with the coordinates of the centre of the pitch. The clock would later be moved to the Fussballmuseum in Dortmund (Hamburger SV, 2019a; Hamburger SV, 2019c).

In the UK, the clock that stood at Highbury until 2006 should be mentioned: Arsenal moved it to the new Emirates Stadium, incorporating in the façade of the stand that looks towards Highbury (Arsenal FC, 2017d). Other possible features can include statues of people that made the history of the club, or the name of the stands (Arsenal and West Ham both kept, in their new stadiums, the same names that stands had in the previous structures) or the creation of time capsules preserved within the stadium (Arsenal buried one during the construction of the new stadium, while Tottenham Hotspur, in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, used the football on which the cockerel was standing, on the roof of White Hart Lane. Inside the football, the 1908 club's yearbook was preserved) (Gotta, 2018; Penn & Penn, 2020; Church & Penny, 2013).

Brentford Community Stadium is an example of another element that was designed to create a connection with the location the stadium is built in. The new stadium of the Bees is right next to a railway. Between 1870 and 2017, next to that railway stood a warehouse: the tiles that covered that structure were reused and integrated in the new stadium as cover for the lower part of the North Stand. The choice to recycle that material was made with the purpose of strengthening the ties with the area (Brentford FC, 2019c).

Other initiatives can be taken to create elements that are intended to tie fans to the stadium on a “spiritual” level: in September 2021, Wimbledon held the opening ceremony of “The Wonder Wall”, a space that commemorates those that contributed to the construction of the stadium by having their names engraved at Plough Lane (AFC Wimbledon, 2021a). West Ham proposed two options: for those that subscribed a season ticket for the club’s first season at the London Stadium, the club created the “Founders Wall”, with all the 52,000 names engraved; the second option was open to anyone: who wishes to do so can buy a stone tile (they are available in several sizes), and have it engraved with their name, to be placed in the space dedicated to the legends of the club in the Champions Place in front of the stadium (West Ham United, 2018).

West Ham also transferred the famous John Lyall Gates, the gates in front of the Boleyn Ground named in tribute to the former West Ham Manager, and a symbol for all the fans of the Irons. In front of that gate, at Upton Park, flowers and tributes were placed to commemorate Bobby Moore after his passing. The same was later done for young Dylan Tombides. The John Lyall Gates are now incorporated inside the club store at London Stadium, and are an additional attraction for the public (West Ham United, 2016d).

Indeed, forgetting the old structure should not be done: during the last season at a new stadium, countdown clocks can be installed to count the time or number of matches left before the relocation. Arsenal and Brentford both took similar initiatives during their last season at Highbury and Griffin Park respectively (Arsenal FC, 2006). Brentford also provided its followers the opportunity, after each home game, to update the countdown while being interviewed by the club’s press office about memories and personal recollections at Griffin Park (Brentford FC, 2019a). After the closure, commemorating the old structure is always useful in order to show the supporters how much the club cares about its past. Arsenal, Tottenham and Wimbledon (at the location of the old Plough Lane) already did, while Brentford and West Ham already planned future initiatives to commemorate their old homes. As an example, the Spurs placed a commemorative placard near their new stadium where the centre of the White Hart Lane pitch was located (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2018b).

The purpose of the structural aspects is to establish a tie between the old stadium and the new one, allowing fans a balance between the new, innovative environment and the feeling that the history of the club is preserved. Thanks to these elements and initiatives, the club can easily make the new structure feel warmer and more welcoming for its supporters and players. Creating the atmosphere can also lead those supporters that are less favourable to the change to accept the relocation or renovation (see Annex 1) (Edensor, Millington, Steadman, & Taecharungroj, 2021; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2014).

## Commercial aspects

One of the aspects that clubs focus most of their attention on when changing stadium is the commercial one. Thanks to the relocation, the club can create themed campaigns in order to sell gadgets tied to the new home. This aspect is mostly aimed at the fans, but can also become an interesting mean to attract new supporters attracted by the merchandise (Dejonghe, 2008). Sport aficionados and collectors can also be strongly attracted by this sort of items and initiatives. Sponsors also have a relevant role, as they can directly support the club's campaign in view of a critical change in its history. In order to better analyse these commercial aspects, the elements dedicated to the old stadium and the ones tied to the new one will be analysed separately.

In terms of commercial strategies during the last season played at the old stadium, campaigns aimed to obtain a strong emotional response by remembering the past are important (Scola & Gordon, 2018). A peculiar example was provided by Brentford FC: the club marked the 2019/20 season, the last played at Griffin Park, with the "Farewell Griffin Park" campaign. The phrase was constantly present on anything printed by the club (tickets, season tickets, memberships, programmes, etc.) as well as on its website and social media, on merchandise and within its structures. Furthermore, the campaign was prepared in collaboration with a selected number of sponsors (Fuller's Brewery, mostly because of its historical ties with Griffin Park, and Ecoworld London, the company that would have successively bought the foundations of the old stadium). By doing so, Brentford was able to count on consistent support from those two partners, and created a campaign in tribute of the last season at Griffin Park with the help of local companies (Brentford FC, 2019d; EcoWorld London, 2019). Another possible opportunity is the collaboration between the club and a specific sponsor in order to create an exclusive gadget: West Ham United, during the last year at the Boleyn Ground, created a set of collectible stamps in collaboration with the Royal Mail with the slogan "Farewell Boleyn" (the name of the 2015/16 campaign) in tribute of the 112 years of the club's history at Upton Park. These were a clear example of how a limited-edition product can be created to attract much interest from followers (West Ham United, 2016a).

The production of gadgets with a vintage design and celebrative shirts, both in occasion of the last season at an old stadium or for the first year in a new one, is an idea that is usually well-received by the public and provides the opportunity to create a connection with history (as an example, taking the concept of an old kit and transforming it in its contemporary counterpart) by creating special edition shirts for both the last match at the old structure and the first one in the new stadium (image 30) (Scola & Gordon, 2018).

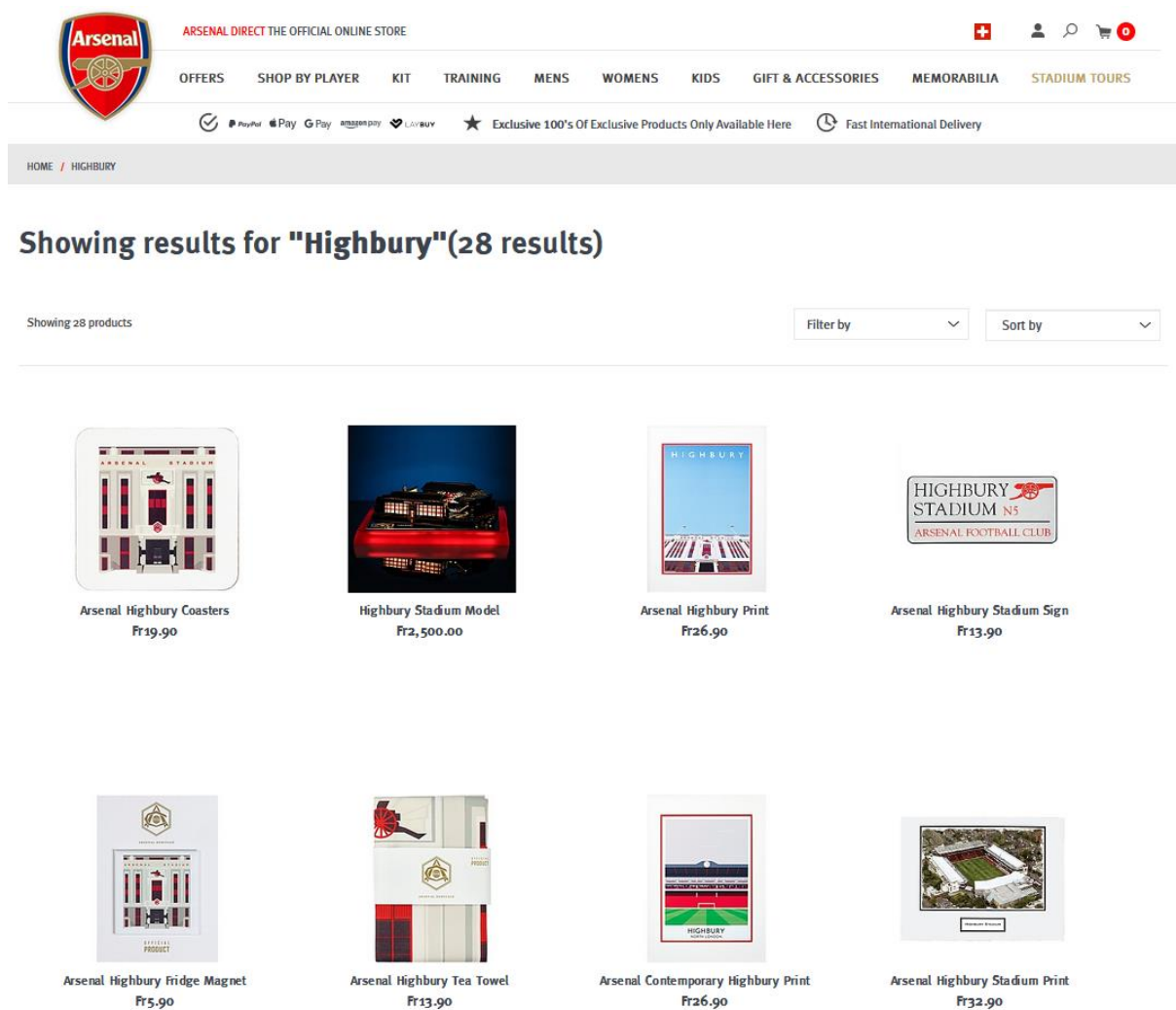
**Image 30 – The embroidery in the middle of the West Ham United shirt for the last match at the Boleyn Ground.**



**Source:** (West Ham United, 2021a).

Many teams, when leaving an old structure, hold auctions to sell many items from the old stadium. This is a way to keep up the memory in the mid- and long-term, as well as the opportunity to provide unique items to the public. A very interesting proposal was launched by Tottenham: the club recycled parts of their old stadium (the seats and grass from the pitch) to make gadgets that were added to their assortment of collectibles (Tottenham Hotspur FC, 2021b). A method to create collaborations with a wider market can be obtained by selling used items or club merchandise also on platform such as Amazon (a choice already used by Borussia Dortmund and Napoli) or through auctions on eBay, to raise funds for the club's foundation (examples include Brighton and Hove Albion, Northampton Town FC, Wolverhampton Wanderers) (Amazon, 2021; eBay, 2021). Another classic idea is the option to allowing season ticket holders to receive their seat from the old stadium, delivered at home for free: this is another opportunity for loyalty building (Arsenal FC, 2006).

Keeping merchandise tied to the old stadium in the store for a long time is critical to keep the memory alive. As an example, Arsenal FC still provides several items related to Highbury through its online store (image 31).

**Image 31 – Gadgets related to the old stadium on the Arsenal FC online store.**

**Source:** (Arsenal FC, 2021).

The bond with a place of origin is extremely relevant, especially if commemorated over time, as an example, by creating dedicated shirts: a particularly interesting example is the one of Southampton FC and its kit for the 2021/22 season, honouring the twenty years since the relocation from The Dell, the old stadium of the Saints, closed in 2001, to St. Mary Stadium (the current home of the team). The shirt is inspired by the club's DNA, and commemorates the two structures that, to date, have been most relevant in the history of Southampton FC and the name of their individual stands (image 32) (Southampton FC, 2021b).



**Image 32 – The inside of the home kit shirt of Southampton FC for the 2021/22 season.**



**Source:** (HampshireLive, 2021).

A fundamental step is creating gadgets to promote the new stadium as well. Fulham FC unveiled the new shirts for the 2019/20 season carrying the motto “Raise the roof” to honour the construction of the new Riverside Stand that begun during the summer of 2019. The same hashtag was launched by the club in order to generate more networking on social media, with supporters willing to buy the new kits and thus favouring greater visibility for the team and its merchandise (Fulham FC, 2019a).

Being able to count on a new structure and more up-to-date spaces would also provide a club the chance of building a more functional and attractive physical store. Such a shop should guide the customers through a predefined track from entrance to exit designed to better show the available merchandise, and therefore encourage more purchases (Richardson, 2010). Sport clubs, thanks to a more modern structure, could also create new spaces to host guided tours, as well as a club museum. New technologies also provide an interesting opportunity to present the history of the club and highlight its key moments. FC Barcelona, as an example, built a museum where visitors, besides being shown the trophies and other historic items of the club, can enjoy a fully interactive experience through an innovative sound system, touch screens and a small cinema to fully involve the guests in the history of the football team (Crawford, 2013). Pairing exhibiting spaces to a club shop (or placing the latter at the exit of the museum) is an interesting option to further encourage

purchases of club merchandise. The shop should also be chosen as the final stop of guided tours.

Having a multifunctional stadium with large spaces apt to host any kind of events (parties, conferences, etc.) is essential. This choice provided British club the wider, and thus safer, spaces required by the Covid-19 pandemic for changing rooms, both during the second half of the 2019/20 season and during the 2020/21 season. During the spring of 2021, many stadiums also became hubs for vaccination against the Coronavirus disease (Plough Lane is an example) (AFC Wimbledon, 2021e). This demonstrates how a new structure can be more accessible and flexible in response to sudden necessities where organization and logistic factors play a critical role.

Most of these initiatives are planned to generate more emotional involvement, and therefore having a stronger pull to attract the public: the purpose of commercial aspects is therefore to constantly increase the target market by using the image and peculiarities of both the old structure and the new stadium. Such initiatives would also create a mid-term and long-term increase in ticket sales (for both matches and guided tours), merchandise sales, and the resulting income (see Annex 1).

### **Digital aspects**

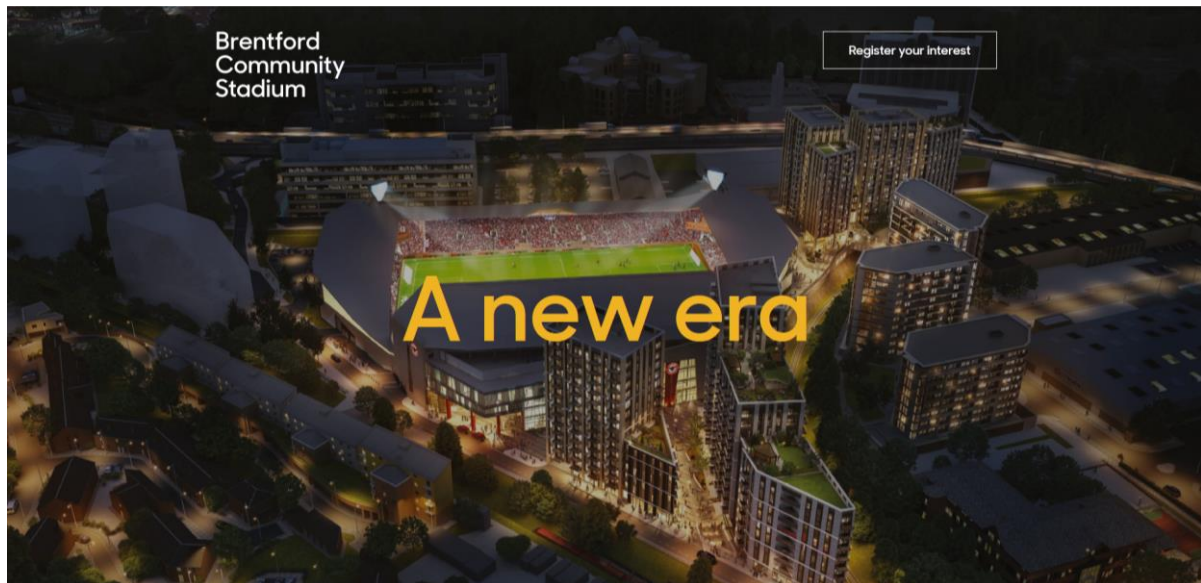
As previously mentioned during the analysis of case studies, the digital factor plays an essential role for brand expansion. Contrary to the past, people interested in the construction of a new stadium or the renovation of a structure can follow the daily advancement of the work process and all relevant steps of the relocation (Dunn, 2020). In order to exploit the digital aspect, it is critical to address both the supporters and the general public, while keeping possible sponsors that could provide financial support in mind.

Understanding how the audience that the club interacts with through social platforms, should be as varied and wide as possible (supporters, general football enthusiasts), is critical. The main advantage for a club is the possibility to define online activities and published content to its liking (Foglio, 2018). Several functionalities can be used to modulate published content: the digital platforms of a football club should always attract public interest. Several examples are available for both relocations and renovations.

As a general example, increasing the interest of supporters in view of the debut in a new stadium is useful. Inviting supporters to state their interest in acquiring a season ticket in advance is a possibility, and provides an opportunity to create a selection system for those interested (dividing those there were already season pass holders at the old stadium and those that were not), turning the product into a more exclusive one and feeding curiosity, so that the fans themselves contribute to the atmosphere of the new structure. West Ham, in view of the relocation to Stratford in 2016, defined the fans that would subscribe a pass for the first season there, and therefore contribute to bringing the team spirit to its new home, "founders of London Stadium" (West Ham United, 2015). The chance to receive an exclusive gadget when stating interest in advance is an incentive to buy the season ticket, and at the

same time allows the club to expand its fan base. Furthermore, the club can then identify the targets<sup>1</sup> that show more interest in the new structure, creating targeted campaigns to attract less enthusiast segments as well (Choi & Lim, 2020). A recent example of a similar strategy is the one provided by Brentford FC. The club created a website entirely dedicated to the new stadium, allowing fans to register their interest in view of the opening ceremony of the new structure (image 33) (Brentford FC, 2019b).

**Image 33 – The audience-targeted website created in view of the opening of the new Brentford Community Stadium.**



**Source:** (Brentford FC, 2019b).

Social media cover a particularly relevant role, as these platforms can be used by the club to reach a larger audience, partly because of the discussion that are generated by contents published by the club (McCarthy, Rowley, Ashwort, & Pioch, 2014). The possibility that people can be attracted by the products offered by the club is much higher when innovative elements are provided to attract attention. A good example of this practice is given by American sports, where the entertainment factor surrounding everything and everything that happens on the pitch is particularly important. Also, thanks to the support of the sponsors, specific campaigns and initiatives can lead the fans to revive the history of the club themselves, through storytelling<sup>2</sup> contents published on social media. These elements can then be passed along by the club's social profiles on the respective channels, in order to always keep the focus on the team's brand and promote its growth online (Laurell & Söderman, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> "... the segment of potential customers for a product, or the audience to which a publicitary message is adressed ..." (Treccani, 2021b).

<sup>2</sup> Storytelling is "... the art of writing or telling stories catching the attention and interest of the public" (Treccani, 2008). In a business context, the purpose of storytelling is to "involve the public and create strong emotional ties with the target audience of Corporate history" (Angelini, 2015, p. 17).

Brentford FC created a website dedicated to Griffin Park, where fans could read the stories shared by the team's supporters about their adventures at the old stadium. Those contents were placed in a showcase under the hashtag "#FarewellGriffinPark" (Brentford Football Club, 2020b). Marking posts by using specific hashtags can also be a mean to invite supporters to share pictures. Those can later be shown on the stadium's screens, while providing a benefit to the club by increasing its presence on digital platforms.

Southampton FC is a club that used an innovative idea to attract interest: before the 2021/22 season, the club, with the support of its technical sponsor (Hummel), created the first football shirt to include augmented reality features (increased sensory perception through electronic devices). When buying a home kit, the customer can scan several spots on it with its smartphone to access exclusive content (Southampton FC, 2021a). In another initiative, Brentford FC, on the aforementioned website dedicated to Griffin Park, shared 360° pictures taken at several angles outside and inside the stadium. The purpose was allowing fans to relive the atmosphere that was felt at Griffin Park during match days (Brentford Football Club, 2020b).

The increase in the number of users attracted by the club's initiatives allows the club to increase its revenues as well, as digital contents can be used to promote the team's own platform on the web. This in turn increases the chance of selling products and services, and creates opportunities to redirect visitors to the club's online store or ticket office, as well as to gather information about the people that are interested in the team (i.e., using contests, giveaways, etc.) (Warren, 2016).

The support of a sponsor to the club's online campaigns is always welcome, because it can be used for loyalty building towards the club and the sponsor itself. This is a critical factor, as it generates a competition among sponsors to access any space that can provide a relevant return in visibility (cooperating with the club becomes a competitive advantage for the sponsor). This competition benefits the club as it provides a wider range of sizable financial offers (Demir & Söderman, 2015).

Concluding, the possibilities mentioned above are only a small part of the ideas that can be implemented: a club can act alone, creating new initiatives, or can select a tailored, interesting mix of already proven ones, with a different twist. The world of sport is constantly growing, and the sector feeds this continuous evolution by providing more and more new ideas to incite the emotions of the audience, as it is well understood that, once captured, a fan's loyalty is hard to change. Furthermore, loyal supporters would spread the word and convince more people to support a team, perpetuating the bond with the team for years and to future generations (Cataliotti & Fabretti, 2019). The intermediate objective of the digital aspect is to promote the increase of the audience on online platform through activities to generate mid- and long-term appeal, thus promoting financial returns (see Annex 1).

Managing the four aspects mentioned above can allow a club to ride the wave of enthusiasm created by changing stadium for a longer time. By choosing a suitable approach to all interested subjects and defining proactive strategies based on their proposals, a club can achieve four partial objectives. Those in turn, if pursued using suitable, even and harmonious methods, lead to the primary objective: achieving a balanced growth of both incomes and market base (see Annex 1). This is useful to network the needs of the club and the

necessities of the supporters and stakeholders with which it has day-to-day relationships, reaching a mid- and long- term balance, and building a structure with the contribution of all and benefitting everyone involved.

## Conclusions

Although occasionally some fringes of the audience can create inconveniences, today such events are readily controlled. Both the club and the involved authorities gained experience through the years, and the regulations are always updated and in step with the times.

Relocating to a new stadium or renovating the current structure is now planned for the purpose of increasing the income: it is a mean to expand the club's market by increasing its target customers. The strong bonds that fans create with the club also help it to further increase its following, as they actively persuade more people to support it. Proactively managing every touch point with its customer base is therefore essential for a club, as, by doing so, it can obtain long-term loyalty.

As described in the recommendations section, a club has to stay on the front line in order to grab the opportunities provided by the change, while at the same time minimizing the risks of such a delicate and fundamental moment in its history. By using a more professional approach as compared to the past, a club can correctly identify the peculiarities of its supporters and modulate its offers according to their requests: customer relationship management (CRM) systems are critical in these cases.

This factor is also essential to manage digital platforms, which are the future pathway to expand the image of the club and to update followers worldwide. Reaching a larger audience allows the club to increase its financial returns: by constantly introducing innovative channels to sell products and offering new consumer products, the club can generate higher returns. For this reason, football clubs need to adapt their communications in order to optimize using the functions provided by new technologies and extend their presence on every available platform, promoting online contents in suitable ways for each one.

Moving to a new stadium or renovating one is a difficult and expensive operation, and requires sacrifices. A club however can obtain great long-term advantages from it, and benefit from a flexible, innovative structure suitable to satisfy the ever-changing necessities of its customers. It is interesting that clubs can actually obtain positive effects by changing stadium, as long as the change is performed protecting the club's values and respecting the stakeholders. Trying to be as flexible and as open as possible towards all involved parties is the key.

During 2020, in England, York City FC and Boston United FC, both clubs playing in the National League North (sixth tier) also decided to relocate. They left, respectively, the old stadiums Bootham Crescent and York Street, and moved to the more modern LNER Community Stadium and The Jakemans Community Stadium. In England, as well as in the rest of Europe, several clubs are currently considering changing their stadiums in the coming years (i.e., Everton FC). In the Greater London area, projects for future operations were made by Crystal Palace FC, Luton Town FC, Millwall FC and Queens Park Rangers. All intend to relocate or to renovate their existing structures. These four clubs are certainly not the only ones evaluating a similar choice, however, as it has been shown in the previous



chapters, the time required between the project phase and the opening of a new structure can be long, as both uncertainties and the need to find the best possible solutions tend to slow the decision process. Depending on the specific experiences of every single club, such an operation is an open context: each project provides the opportunity to learn new strategies. It is an interesting, constantly evolving path (Crystal Palace Football Club, 2018; Queens Park Rangers Football Club, 2018; Luton Town Football Club, 2021; Millwall FC, 2020).

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## Annex 1: Recommendations for football clubs

	Relationship aspects	Structural aspects	Commercial aspects	Digital aspects
Targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporters</li> <li>• Local administrations</li> <li>• Stakeholders close to the structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporters</li> <li>• Sponsors</li> <li>• Visitors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporters</li> <li>• Sponsors</li> <li>• New customers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporters</li> <li>• Sponsors</li> <li>• New customers</li> </ul>
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surveys, interviews to supporters (stadium, badge, ...)</li> <li>• Public meetings with the stakeholders</li> <li>• Constant feedback from the stakeholders</li> <li>• Meetings and constant communication with the local authorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of attraction focuses in the new stadium</li> <li>• Creation of a small memorial in the location of the old stadium</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Campaign for the last season in the old stadium</li> <li>• Merchandising, auctions and sales of items from the old structure</li> <li>• Creation of gadgets for the new stadium</li> <li>• Construction of functional physical stores and expansion of online sale platforms (gadgets and tickets)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of websites dedicated to the old structure and/or new stadium</li> <li>• Use of social media functions</li> <li>• Use of augmented reality</li> </ul>
Partial Objectives	Continued and lasting relationships with the stakeholders through a win-win approach	Building a functional structure for the club and preserving the atmosphere	Constantly increasing mid- and long-term ticket sales and club merchandise sales	Increasing the audience on digital platforms and resulting financial returns
Common Objective	Long-term financial growth and customer base increase for the club			