

## NOSTALGIA

# Ups and downs at Belle Vue...

Belle Vue was the north-west's premier leisure park for decades. Tears were shed when its circus finally closed in February 1982. Nostalgia looks back on its history

**T**HE dogged protesters of the Belle Vue action group knew there was little chance of a reprieve when they paraded their placards outside Manchester town hall in September 1981.

Families, friends and former workers unfurled a banner aimed at stopping the proposed housing development on the park site. A 50,000 signature petition was handed in too.

But it was to no avail. The 165-acre park, which attracted more than two million visitors a year in its heyday, had seen attendances falling for decades.

The zoo had closed down in September 1977 and the animals rehoused in parks across the country and beyond.

The amusement park struggled on at summer weekends until 1980 and the annual circus carried on in the Kings Hall until 1982.

The circus survived for a few years more in the Kings Hall car park and then in a marquee opposite the main gates on Hyde Road.

The Belle Vue site was finally cleared in 1987. All that remained was the greyhound stadium and a snooker hall built in the stadium car park.

It was all very different in the years just after the war when Belle Vue was at its peak. Easter weekends were especially popular, with 250,000 visitors walking through the gates.

Our photo shows the fun fair in August 1949, with the Scooter and Caterpillar rides in the foreground and the ever-popular Bobs roller coaster looming large in the distance. The Bobs – so called because it cost a shilling to ride – reached speeds of 60mph.

Pictures of joy were replaced with scenes of devastation when fire ripped through the park in January 1958.

The Ballroom Block was obliterated. The studio of park residential artist Syd Lane was destroyed along with 50,000 musical scores belonging to orchestra leader Fred Bonelli.

The blaze started as a small fire but quickly spread through the ballroom's wooden structure. By the time the fire brigade arrived it was already too late to save the building.

Our photo shows all that was left of the York restaurant and the Coronation Ballroom – little more than a smouldering wasteland.

While most of Belle Vue has now disappeared, greyhound racing has

survived. The Belle Vue stadium hosted the first race round an oval track in Britain on July 24, 1926.

More than 1,700 witnessed the 440-yard race which was won by a greyhound called Mistletoe.

Crowds of more than 70,000 a week were common in the 1920s and 30s. Belle Vue's success encouraged other greyhound stadia to spring up around the country.

The stadium was continuously remodeled. Our 1989 photo shows the track's assistant manager Colin Delaney with plans for a new stadium complex. Demolition of the old stand is taking place in the background.

Greyhound racing was a popular pastime for Manchester celebrities. Our photo shows Freddie and the Dreamers' frontman Freddie Garrity enjoying a night out with singer Kathy Kirby in July 1966.

The Kings Hall, opened in 1910, was the scene of many sporting events, including major boxing bouts.

British champion Henry Cooper defended his Commonwealth titles there against Blackpool's Brian London in February 1964.

Cooper's training work on the punchbag paid off as he won by a technical knockout in the fifth round.

The Kings Hall was so named because two kings – George V and Edward VII – were on the throne during its six-week construction period. It could seat 7,000 people after being extended in 1928.

Hundreds of leading artists and bands played the venue before its demolition in 1987. Memorable concerts included the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, The Who and Led Zeppelin.

The Kings Hall also hosted the Halle Orchestra in 1942 after the Free Trade Hall was badly damaged in the Manchester Blitz.

The Rolling Stones played the Kings Hall as part of their 1973 European Tour, but a singer who made one of the biggest impacts was teen idol David Cassidy.

The global superstar, who died in November last year, came to Belle Vue in March 1973.



Happier times – Belle Vue fun fair during the August Bank Holiday, 1949



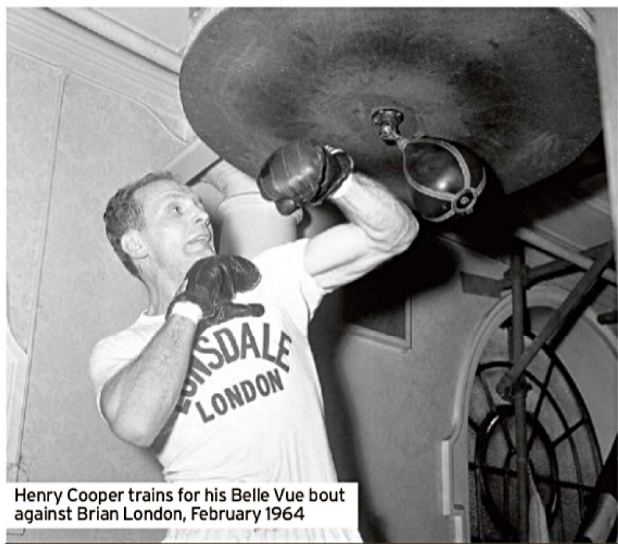
Fans go wild for teen idol David Cassidy at the Kings Hall, March 1973

Fans went wild over the American singer who was carving out a hugely successful solo career after starring in the TV show *The Partridge Family*.

At one point Cassidy's fan base was colossal. His official fan club was the largest in pop history, exceeding both the Beatles and Elvis Presley.

● To mark Valentine's Day, *iNostalgia* has produced a special David Cassidy commemorative mug bearing the title of one of his greatest hits – *I Think I Love You*.

● A donation will be made to *Dementia UK* for every mug sold. To order your mug, please check out the advert on page 5 or visit the *iNostalgia* website.



Henry Cooper trains for his Belle Vue bout against Brian London, February 1964