

Tight and demanding . . . the Crystal Palace finally succumbed to

No room for error

THE CRYSTAL Palace was built for the 1851 exhibition and subsequently moved from its first site in Hyde Park to the grounds in south-east London that it occupied for some 80 years.

It was destroyed by fire in November 1936 although one of the twin towers remained standing until the late 1950s.

As with Alexandra Palace, which also suffered severe fire damage in 1980, Crystal Palace was involved with television and even today its tall mast dominates the surrounding suburbs and can be seen for miles.

The race circuit opened only five months after the fire when a car meeting was held in April 1937. Three weeks later the first motorcycle races were run and events continued up to the start of the war.

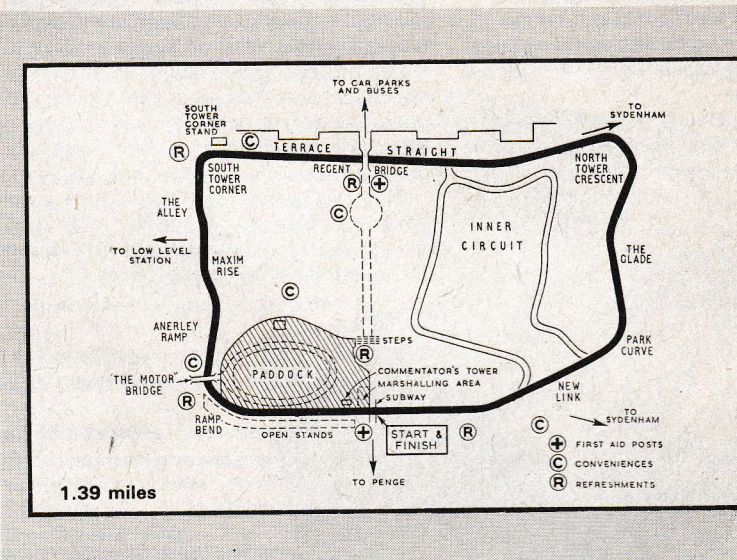
Prior to this the Streatham Club had run path races in the grounds in the early 1930s on loose surfaces.

Silencers had been compulsory and falls were frequent while speeds were low. From 1937 the races were all run on a two-mile circuit which was made more complex than the post-war one by an inner loop which had the effect of giving competitors six extra corners to negotiate.

After the war the London County Council, forerunners of the present GLC, took over the grounds from the start of 1952. They decided to go ahead with racing at the circuit but with the deletion of the inner part by a New Link.

This cut the circuit length to 1.39 miles and pushed lap speeds from nearly 60 to 70mph. Even with fewer corners competitors still had to work hard on the track.

The start and finish line lay on the Penge side of the course in those days and was sensibly located some way before the braking point for the first corner, Ramp Bend. This was a right



hander with an approach that curved the same way so that the corner tightened up on the rider.

With a solid wall on the left this made the peel off point hard to locate and the problem was made harder by a bridge over the circuit at the apex of the corner.

This gave access to the paddock on the inside of the circuit and was reached via a narrow awkward track in the grounds that ran past the boating lake.

The exit from Ramp Bend was uphill and out of sight until the rider had committed himself to his line. From the corner the road climbed in a series of bends, left, right, left, all very close together and hard to overtake through without a real speed advantage. The wriggles through Anerley Ramp, Maxim Rise and the Alley terminated in South Tower Corner, a slow right with no room for error for anyone who left their braking too late.

From south to north went the circuit along Terrace Straight which had a steady climb along its length just sufficient to make a machine pant. Near its end a fast left kink led to North Tower Crescent, a slow right that went on for a long time and could remain slippery after a shower.

The Crescent led into the Glade, a downhill left under the trees followed by Park Curve. As the rider straightened up from the left of the Glade and lined up for Park he was faced by a very solid barrier of railway sleepers right on the left edge of the circuit and a feeling that they had been set in the ground to guard a drop on the outside of the track.

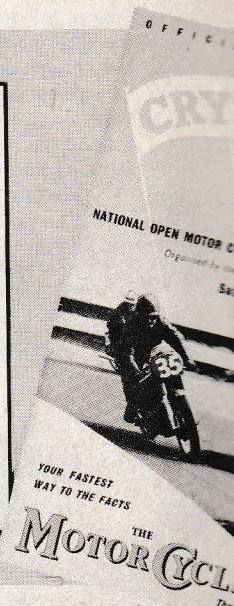
No-one stopped to check but for many years heavy black marks on the road showed that a car had had a look for the locked wheel marks, went right to the edge of the road and then up the barrier to its top.

Park Curve opened up as it was
MOTORCYCLE RACING

BELOW: Crystal Palace as it stood in 1956.

BELOW CENTRE: Paul Smart (1), Rex Butcher (7) and Steve Goodrum (136) lead the all-Yamaha 350cc action through the South London bushes at a closed to club meeting in September 1971.

BELOW RIGHT: Top man of the time Frank Perris demonstrates his immaculate style at the Palace on a 500cc Manx Norton at the May meeting in 1957.



sports centre!

rounded and the exit dropped away steeply down the New Link into a full-bore right kink which led into the finish straight.

A short lap but a busy one with nine corners to be dealt with. Pre-war the course had turned right again immediately after Park Curve and run back nearly to the Terrace Straight before turning to rejoin the circuit just before the right kink.

With a bridge over the circuit and permanent facilities, a visit to the Palace was a real pleasure for riders more used to airfields and a canvas box in a field.

For many it was also much easier to reach with only a few miles to travel



with
Roy
Bacon

retired.

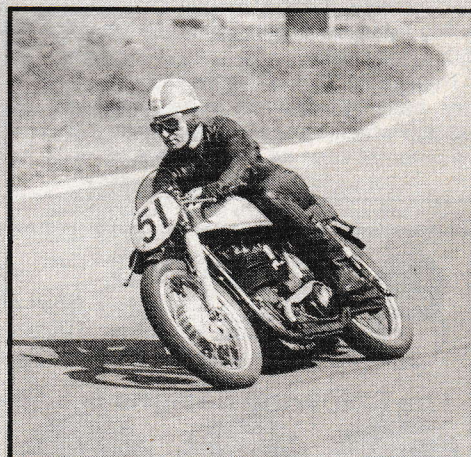
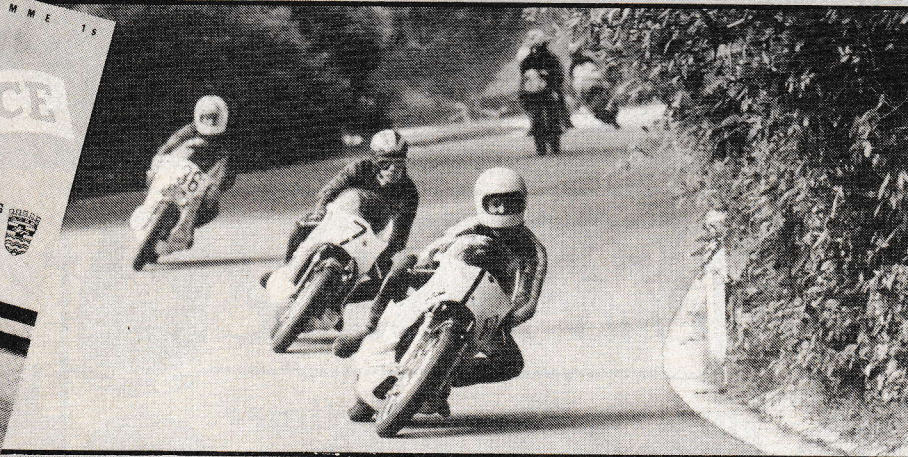
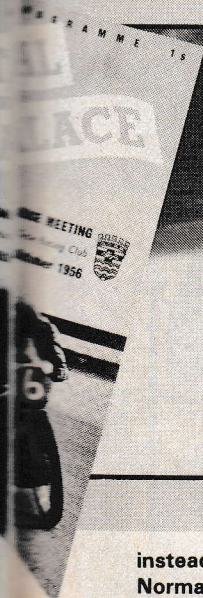
Ten thousand spectators lined the circuit and the car meetings were just as popular with everyone, except for a few local residents.

Quickly, injunctions were brought but the circuit was able to continue under strict rules as to the number of meetings per year and times of practice and racing. So it was important to start on time for at six o'clock the red flag went out – regardless.

Tricycle Association Rally and the invalids beat the organising club – in the wheelchairs.

BMCRC struck a novel note in 1960 with a race for production scooters which was won by J B Gamble on a 277 Meicoletta, with a Heinkel second.

For 1961 the bridge at Ramp Bend was removed and the corner eased a little, for it could now be seen through on the approach. The removal of the solid bridge support right at the edge of



instead of the usual 100 or more. Normally it took a fair time to reach a circuit in those days of no motorways as most vans still had side valve engines and had to be pushed to average 35mph over any distance.

Both in 1937 and 1953 the circuit opened in a Coronation year and the first post-war motorcycle event took place on June 27 a few weeks after a car one. It was a perfect day's racing with clear skies, keen racing, and no serious crashes. The first race was for 250cc machines and Maurice Cann won it in his usual style on the single cylinder Guzzi.

As normal, he made a bad start and only took the lead on the approach to the finish line on the last lap to win by a whisker.

Bob Keeler won both the 350cc and unlimited races and also set the fastest lap of the day at 71.49mph. Pip Harris beat Ted Davis to take the sidecar race after all of the other seven starters had

MOTORCYCLE RACING

Fortunately, with BMCRC organising the meetings and the LCC sponsoring them, this never became a problem.

In 1956 the circuit was resurfaced with cold-rolled asphalt and that year hosted the first UK appearance of John Surtees on the MV-4. He won but did not break his own lap record set on a Norton, and also won the 250cc event on a single cylinder MV.

Both MVs had to have ball-ended levers fitted before he could practice but push-on rubber covers saved the day. That year also saw a 50cc race run in conjunction with the 125s and seven machines were entered, one by Frank Sheene.

Many well-known riders appeared at the Palace during the 1950s. Frank Perris, Bill Boddice, Derek Minter, Mike Hailwood, Phil Read, and many others on two wheels and four made their way to south-east London and the tricky circuit with no room for errors.

In 1959 the circuit hosted the Invalid

the track helped as well. At the same time the start was moved to a point on Terrace Straight, and the paddock to an adjoining area.

Racing continued but the circuit map now carried a note – 'National Recreation Centre under construction' – and with that and the anti-noise brigade, the motorcycling days became numbered.

As the 'sixties rolled by the centre took shape with a full athletic arena and a swimming pool complex occupying much of the centre of the track.

Finally racing had to stop for the sports buildings made the circuit unsafe for modern machines and the anti-noise band finally won their war in the early 1970s.

A final meeting was held with a commemorative parade and racing on wheels stopped. Only athletics and swimming continue, but don't seem to draw the same crowds – even at international level.