

# Wembley progress

The FA's vision for 2008-12 includes creating a better customer experience at Wembley. 'Mystery fan' Steve Frostdick returns to see how the facility is performing.

Having previously visited Wembley with my daughter for the second live concert held at the stadium (see S&AM August 2007), I was keen to make a return trip to the 90,000 seater venue. Millwall's qualification for a play-off final against Scunthorpe provided the opportunity. Millwall fans have a poor reputation with the authorities, so I like to spend time with them to experience safety and security close up.

Wembley is a 'public transport venue' and so many fans arrive by train from Central London. As with most Wembley matches, the South Africa public house in Baker Street is a lively meeting point. We used the toilets there and found the atmosphere carnivalesque rather than frightening.

For financial reasons to do with cross-charging, the Metropolitan Police and British Transport Police now restrict themselves to their own 'footprints'. This means lost continuity in observing risky fan groups moving on and off the railway system. Our journey supervised by the Transport Police was very noisy, with many fans illegally drinking alcohol, but we never felt uneasy. There was even a lone Scunthorpe fan in our carriage. He was barracked good humouredly but without menace.

Joining the crowds down Wembley Way, jurisdiction passed back to the Metropolitan Police until we reached the turnstiles, where the Wembley stewards took over. We were politely and efficiently searched on entry, but I was surprised when the stewards asked Andy his age – he is 15 – and then said that they were not allowed to search him. Searches of youngsters should be done with sensitivity, but no search seemed a security error. Young people are quite capable of carrying prohibited articles for themselves or their elders, which is why airports don't decline to search them. As it was, we saw and heard several air horns in the stadium. Wembley doesn't allow these, but if



Top: The South Africa public house was a lively meeting point in Central London. L to R: Joining the crowds down Wembley Way. Efficient searching on entry to the stadium.

you don't search you can't stop them.

The concourses have fantastic facilities and plenty of space. The catering delivery had much improved from my previous visit. The quality of product, service and staff was much more consistent and queuing was vastly reduced. Our seats were on level one behind the goal. The sightlines and legroom were exemplary, although the viewing distances are inevitably longer in a large venue.

One unique feature of Wembley's safety and security is the horizontal pitch perimeter fence. This preserves viewing quality for the front rows but still prevents access to the

playing area. More venues should consider using this system.

Millwall had sold 45,000 tickets, more than any other play-off team since the new Wembley opened. Scunthorpe had only about 12,000 fans in one quarter of the ground and were vastly outnumbered.

Reflecting something of their geographic and cultural heritage in a rough part of South London, the Millwall fans were very loud, some had drunk too much and some were menacing and aggressive, although not to each other or to us. We noticed a small group behind us wearing surgical masks – echoing the 1970s hooligans



**Top: The Wembley catering is much improved! Wembley's unique horizontal pitch perimeter fence.**  
**L to R: Steve Frostdick with John and Andy. The fans stood up throughout the game. Blocked gangways are a safety risk.**

known as 'The Treatment', who attacked opponents with scalpels. At the segregation lines, there was sometimes vicious abuse of Scunthorpe fans and one middle aged man (on the club level) climbed across several rows and a segregation net to confront them. His girlfriend was spitting and screaming at the stewards who intervened.

Stewards afterwards commented that Millwall were the worst behaved of the six play-off teams this year. The fact that fewer Millwall fans were arrested than fans from Burnley or Gillingham – two of the other teams – may have reflected different tactics towards a more difficult crowd. But the vast majority of this 'bad behaviour' was anti-authority –

flouting of regulations rather than hooliganism or violence. For example, we noticed large numbers of fans smoking in the toilets in contravention of the ban.

At our end, the fans stood up throughout the game. Facing such mass non-compliance with the all-seating requirements, the two stewards in our gangway understandably made no attempt to sit people down. Whether persistent standing is a genuine safety concern or not (see S&AM June 2003 and December 2007), there are compelling safety reasons for keeping the gangways clear to allow free passage and for emergency access. Yet the fans in our area stood blocking the gangways throughout the game.

A Wembley Quality Assurance person came through and pointed this out to the two stewards, who simply shrugged. One of the stewards later said to a fan opposite me: "Could you try and keep across?" The fan, who was much taller than the steward, looked down at him with sneering disdain and just ignored him. Elsewhere, another steward asked a man to sit down and was told: "You're not big enough".

These are good examples of the challenge of balancing safety with security. There were clear safety reasons to keep the gangways clear. But there were compelling security reasons not to. It would have needed a large force of stewards and police to enforce

compliance and no doubt have led to some unpleasant public disorder.

Of course the management challenge also involves balancing safety and security with commercial considerations. Given that the stadium was only two thirds full, one might have thought that it would have been easy to enforce the segregation by leaving large empty blocks between the two sets of fans. But doing this would have ruined the television spectacle. The opposing fans occupy the two ends and so the gaps would have been opposite the television cameras, giving the appearance of an empty stadium. In fact the segregation line opposite the cameras was densely populated with opposing fans either side of the netting, whilst other parts of the stadium were left empty.

Notwithstanding these hostilities towards the authorities and opposing fans, as members of the vociferous Millwall crowd we felt safe and secure throughout the match. Any anti-social behaviour was directed outwards rather than among us. We had a wonderful day out in the sunshine, tarnished only by the fact that Millwall lost a thrilling match by three goals to two.

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### Balloons and banners in the pre-match build up.

