Leicester City Locations

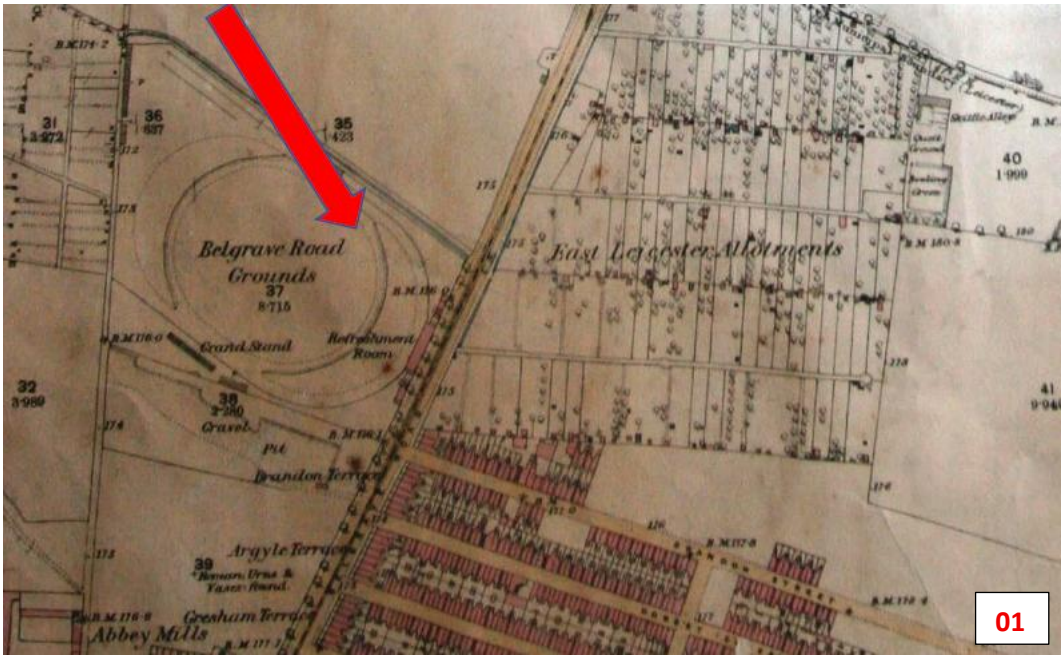
There are many locations in Leicester and Leicestershire which have been very significant in the history of Leicester Fosse and Leicester City.

Some of the buildings have long gone, some have changed and some are still with us.

Club Historian John Hutchinson's new series revisits each of these sites and tells the story behind them.

08. Belgrave Road Cycle and Cricket Grounds

In the 1887/88 season, Leicester Fosse moved their home ground from Victoria Park to the Belgrave Road Cycle and Cricket Grounds.



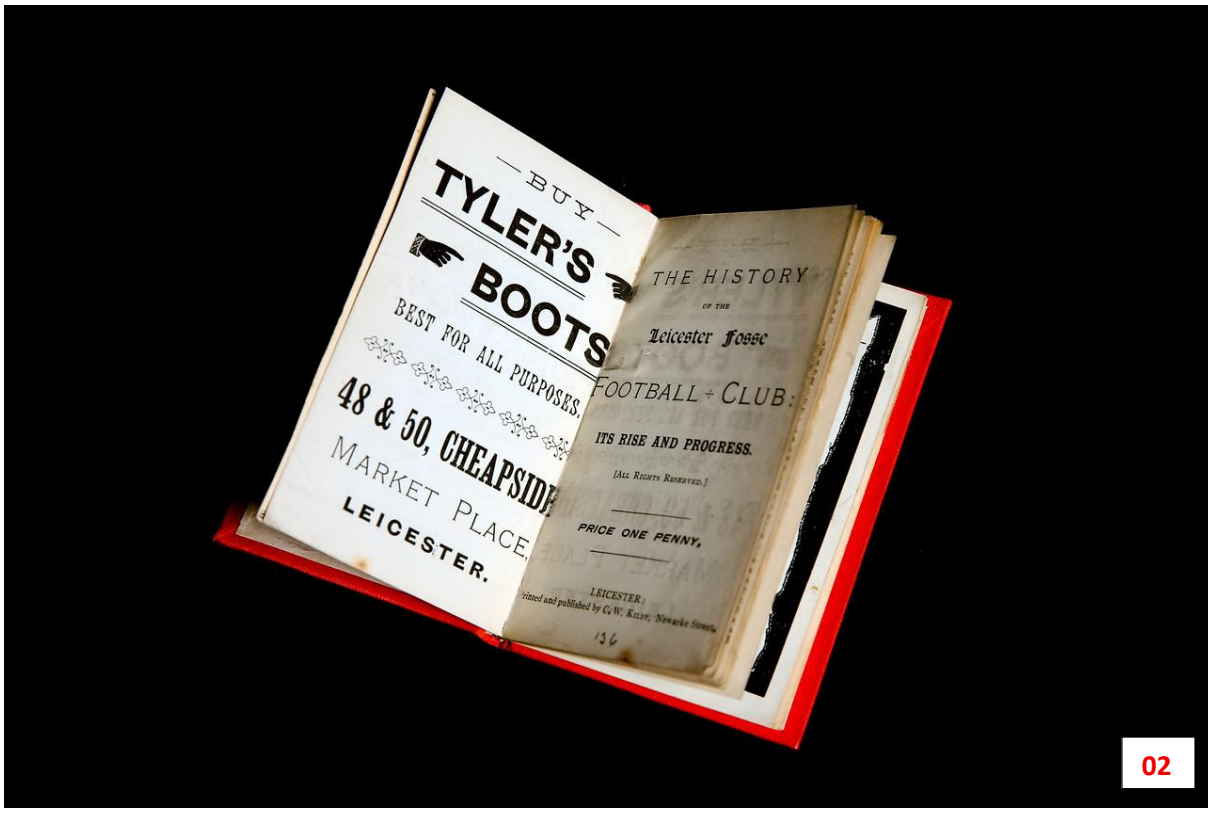
Opened in 1880, this venue had a three lap running track, a four lap cycle track (both a mile long,) pitches for cricket, football and rugby, a refreshment room and a grandstand **(Picture 01).** One drawback though was a lack of changing rooms. The Fosse players had to get changed a mile away at the White Hart Public House in the centre of Leicester.

At the start of the 1887/88 season, the Club had 65 members, 45 of whom were players. They were able to run three teams. After the first team played their opening two matches of the new season on Victoria Park, they played their first match at Belgrave Road on 22 October 1887. Their opponents, Notts County Reserves, arrived late for the game, but they beat the Fosse 5-0.

For the next game at their new home, (a 4-0 defeat against Burton Swifts) the enclosed nature of the venue enabled the Fosse, for the first time, to charge an entrance fee.

Other highlights of the season at Belgrave Road included a controversial tie in the newly established Leicestershire Senior Cup against St Saviours. Played at the end of October, the Fosse won 4-2, but their opponents' protested that the game was played with the light fading so rapidly that the players couldn't see the ball. The protest was upheld, and the game was replayed a month later with the Fosse winning 5-0.

Two matches at Belgrave Road scheduled in December1887 didn't take place when opponents Notts St Saviours and Castle Donnington failed to turn up , and due to the policy of playing teams from higher grades of football, results at the ground were sometimes disappointing.



However, the Club remained positive, as reported in a booklet published in 1893 called '*The History of the Leicester Fosse Football Club: Its Rise and Progress.'* **(Picture 02).**

It reported that by the end of their season at Belgrave Road, the Club had 72 members, and that total receipts were nearly £34 (£33/19/4 ½ in old money) of which £8.20 p (£8 and 4 shillings in old money) was gate money. After taking into account the fact that the Club paid 50% of members' railway fares, the balance was £2.66 (£2/13/4½.)

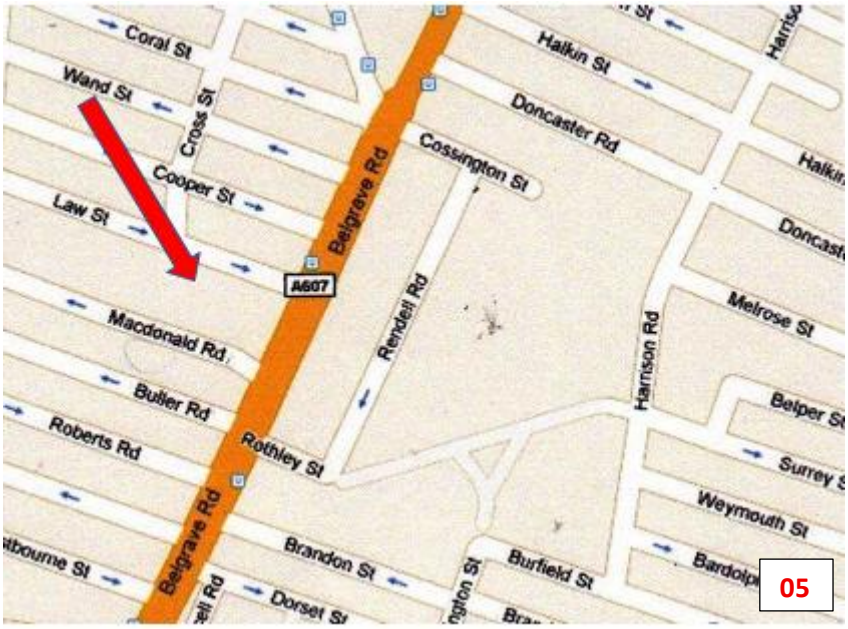
The press verdict on the season at Belgrave Road was that there was no reason to be disheartened by the results, especially as the Club's reserve team had done so well, winning 13 of their 18 games. Their view was that the Club's policy of tackling clubs that were too strong for them was a positive thing because 'their pluck and their playing against good teams will eventually bring its reward.'

However, the Club's progress then suffered a major setback. At the end of the season, Leicester Tigers Rugby Club outbid the Fosse for the privilege of playing at Belgrave Road.

This left Leicester Fosse with no alternative but to return reluctantly to Victoria Park for the 1888/89 season, removing their ability to charge gate money. Leicester Fosse's season-long sojourn at the Belgrave Road Grounds was over.

By 1901 the Grounds had gone, but not before they had staged Buffalo Bill's world famous touring Wild West Show for a week in September 1891, **(Picture 03)** at a time when Leicester Fosse were planning to move to their new Filbert Street ground. This Wild West Show presented a stereotyped and idealised version of the American West and involved 250 artists (80 of whom were Native Americans), 200 horses, mules, and 22 Buffalo. A covered canvas area was erected on the site to house 15,000 spectators. There were also 5,000 seats open to the elements.

Ten years after this show, the venue was sold to the British United Shoe Machinery Company (BU). The huge BU factory, which eventually extended over 10 acres, **(Picture 04)** became the world's largest supplier of shoe-making machinery employing 4,500 workers in its heyday.



The company collapsed in 2000. Many of the factory buildings were demolished and replaced by a housing development between 2011 and 2014. The part of the factory which covered the Belgrave Road Grounds **(Picture 05)** has since been developed into the Belgrave Commercial Centre **(Picture 06)** which includes retail outlets and a carpark **(Picture 07)**

Few people today realise that a sports ground, which was a highly significant stepping-stone in the development of Leicester Fosse, once stood on this site.