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BRAMLEY MOORE DOCK

From Slavery to Football at the New Home of Everton FC

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pitch

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EVERTON'S SEARCH FOR A NEW HOME

AT THE start of the 2025/26 season, Everton Football Club will move out of their home of 133 years, Goodison Park, and make the short trip of a mile or so up to the docks and move into their purpose-built stadium of Bramley-Moore Dock. The new stadium will seat 52,888, potentially rising to 62,000. It will occupy the site of the old Bramley-Moore Dock, which was drained and infilled with sand from the Irish Sea to form the base supporting the new stadium structure. As well as being a home to Everton FC it will host international football; in October 2023 it was announced that the stadium would be one of the grounds hosting Euro 2028. It is also intended that the stadium, out of season, will host arts and cultural events like pop concerts.

The American architect Dan Meis, who has designed the stadium, wanted to it to be built in sympathy with its surroundings:

'Bramley-Moore is a site steeped in Liverpool history. It gives the opportunity to draw on that context … we were striving for a building that was both familiar and yet awe-inspiring, historic yet futuristic.'[1]

The conservation issues surrounding the new stadium will be a major feature of this book.

The club had been searching for a new home for over 20 years. Goodison Park was dated, with the Bullens Road stand being built in 1926 and the Gwladys Street stand being completed in 1938.[2] Also, there was no room for expansion, as the ground is hemmed in by numerous terraced streets.

In the mid-1990s, controversial chairman Peter Johnson – he had previously been chairman of Tranmere Rovers and was a selfconfessed Liverpool fan – first began the search for a new stadium. In 2001, plans were announced for a 55,000-seater stadium in the Kings Dock area beside the newly renovated Albert Dock.[3]

The stadium would have a retractable roof and be used for concerts all-year round. However, the club had insufficient funds to proceed with the project and, in 2003, it was shelved. According to Paul Gregg, a former Everton stakeholder and business partner of the late Everton chairman Bill Kenwright, the latter pulled out of the stadium as he wasn't prepared to borrow another £30m to fund a stadium that the club wouldn't own. It would be owned by the council, who were prepared to put in significant funds to secure the stadium.[4]

The site eventually became the home of the M&S Bank Arena, venue for the 2023 Eurovision Song Contest. It was a prestigious site in a prime riverside location and the failure to relocate there was seen by most Everton fans as a lost opportunity.

Peter Johnson eventually sold his stake in the club to the Bill Kenwright consortium in 2009. That year, under fire from the fan pressure group Keep Everton In Our City, the club board dropped their proposal to move the ground out of the city to nearby Kirkby.

In December 2006, Everton joined the rush to move stadia to generate more income. The board announced the possibility of a move in conjunction with Knowsley Council and Tesco. The 50,000-seat stadium would be part of a £400m development. The club argued the move would develop the Everton FC brand, would take advantage of multi-use facilities and would create a media-friendly stadium. It must also be said that the stadium would have enormously expanded the club's income. For Tesco, it would help construct a socially responsible corporate identity and build a brand community.

Showing a desire to consult the fans and being aware of a growing opposition to the out-of-city stadium concept, Everton chairman Kenwright announced a ballot and the fans conducted a fierce debate. A grassroots organisation, Keep Everton In Our City, was formed and lobbied private and public institutions in the local area and wider region.

In August 2008, the secretary of state for communities and local government, Hazel Blears, ruled that the proposals breached local and regional planning policy and ordered a public inquiry.

In November 2009, as a result of the inquiry, Blears's successor, John Denham, agreed that the project breached local and regional area planning policy and would encourage business away from the city centre. The proposal was dropped and the club committed itself to finding a new site in the city.[5]

At the same time, the club were also examining a possible ground share with Liverpool FC on

Stanley Park. The project received the enthusiastic support of the then-City Council leader Warren Bradley, as the stadium would be part of England's bid to host the 2018 World Cup.[6] The project was never popular with a majority of both sets of supporters. The project was finally quashed in 2016 when Liverpool announced plans for its new main stand, showing that its owners, the Fenway Group, were committed to redeveloping Anfield rather than building a completely new stadium.[7]

Mindful of the failure of all previous proposals to gain the support of the fans, Everton FC was careful to adopt a much more consultative approach to the proposal to relocate the club's ground to the Bramley-Moore dockside site. Revealingly, the new stadium project was called 'The People's Project' by the club, which intended to undergo extensive fan consultation to prevent the previous mistakes in the search for a new stadium.

In October 2018, the club announced a two-stage public consultation process about moving to the new ground. The first three-week consultation started on 15 November that year. This took the form of a series of exhibitions across Liverpool. The second stage came in the summer of 2019 when the club submitted detailed plans including homes, health and business facilities.[8] Everton's then-chief executive Denise Barrett-Baxendale said: 'This consultation marks a very significant moment as we progress with this project. We would like as many people as possible – and not just football fans – to take part and let us know their views.'[9]

The club received 43,000 responses to the second-stage consultation, which was believed to be the largest commercial undertaking in the city's history. It also had 20,000 responses to its first-stage consultation. The second-stage tour events were attended by 15,000 people including 2,726 non-Everton fans, 24 per cent of whom had no interest in football. Overall, 98 per cent of respondents supported the club's plans.[10]

The consultation process was praised by independent outsiders such as Chris Daly, the head of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, who said: 'Strong brands put their customer at the heart of everything they do, and Everton's stadium consultation is a shining example of this. The club has not assumed, but asked fans what it is they want, inviting Evertonians and the wider public alike to play a meaningful part in the process.'[11]

The consultation process also won awards. In November 2019, 'The People's Project' was named as the 'best property and construction campaign' at the Northern Marketing Awards.[12] In 2020, it won the 'stakeholders in planning' category at the National Planning Awards.[13]

'The People's Project' was unanimously supported by Liverpool City Council's planning committee and was later approved at government level when, in March 2021, secretary of state for housing, communities and local government, Robert Jenrick, gave it the green light.

On 31 May 2017, Liverpool City Council announced that it had voted in favour of a special purpose vehicle company acquiring the land and leasing the stadium, which in turn would be sub-leased back to the club for 200 years.[14]

In March 2022, the club announced that it would no longer receive funding from the council and that it had alternative funding. Two months later, it paid back £502,000 of the £841,000 costs the council had incurred in exploring the loan.[15]

In the meantime, the club got on with the stadium's construction, which began in September 2021 with the draining of the dock through the depositing of silt from the Irish Sea.

One possible snag occurred in July 2021 when UNESCO announced that the building of the stadium, along with other dockside developments, would end Liverpool's status as a World Heritage site. However, despite this, the stadium continued to be built with the support of local political authorities.[16]

At the time of writing, despite numerous questions about future funding, the stadium continues its rise above the River Mersey, apparently on schedule to be finished in December 2024 for opening at the start of the 2025/26 season. By mid-February 2024, the stadium was structurally complete, with the final concrete terracing panel being installed.[17]

The financing of the stadium has been a complicated story, despite the original utterances of club owner Farhad Moshiri in 2019 that: 'I'll throw as much money as needed. It is no luxury; we have to get it done. If we want to have a big club, we need a modern stadium and we will get it.'[18] By April 2022, he had contributed £100m for the enabling works (the dock infill and preparatory work).[19]

Initially, the club had a £30m naming rights option with Moshiri's business partner, Alisher Usmanov. However, this was cancelled due to his sanctioning in March 2022 following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[20]

In 2017, the city council agreed to partly fund the stadium through acting as guarantors for £280m – expected to rise to £500m. In January 2018, city mayor Joe Anderson proposed to borrow £280m from the city's public loans work board and lend it to Everton. Ultimately this plan was dropped by both council and club as it was found to be unworkable and undesirable to both parties.[21]

By June 2023, it was announced that the cost of building the new stadium had risen by 50 per cent and the search was on for new investors to secure the completion of the building contract. It seemed to come down to one of two American finance companies – MSP Sports Capital or 777 partners. The former was in negotiations for a 25 per cent stake in the club and had already provided a loan which would secure £100m in funding, which could later be converted into shares.[22]

By August 2023, MSP Sports Group withdrew its offer for a 25 per cent stake in the club after its bid was opposed by one of the club's existing lenders, Rights and Media Funding Ltd from Cheshire. However, MSP's £100m loan to the club would remain, but not as convertible debt.[23] The money was expected to give the club breathing space to ensure an allocated budget for the new stadium, as well as freeing resources for general funding. It was also expected that some of the money would be used to repay a loan of £40m from AJ Bell.[24]

The withdrawal of MSP paved the way the following month for the club to be taken over by 777 Partners, subject to approval by the Premier League, the FA and the Financial Conduct Authority. This time, there was no opposition from Rights and Media Funding. It was understood that it gave the club interim financial funding, and the deal would see Moshiri cut his ties with the club after seven tumultuous years.[25]

It seems that 777 calculated that the media rights for the Premier League were likely to double in ten years. This was in stark contrast to the other European clubs where 777 had an interest. In Italy, Genoa's share of a recent media rights offer shrank while in France, Red Star FC had to be part of a re-tendering process when no firms came forward with the desired $1bn rate.[26]

The takeover was controversial given that 777 already had stakes in other European clubs, some of whom had seen fan protests opposing 777 investment. At Hertha Berlin and Standard Liege, the protestors alleged that 777 had had a negative effect on both the running and competitiveness of the teams. The former *Daily Star* journalist Paul Brown even claimed that he had yet to speak to anyone in football who believed the group had the capability of running a Premier League club and that it may be more interested in adding value to its portfolio rather than in owning Everton.[27]

In response to growing fan concerns at Everton, the group sent them a message of reassurance in October 2023. According to a post on the fansite Royal Blue Mersey, it seemed to have a degree of success. The nine-paragraph statement hit all the right notes as far as Evertonians would be concerned, talking about *Z Cars*, the fans' incredible support and using words like 'effort' and 'accountability', terms that many fans claimed could not be associated with the previous regime.[28] The group initially gave the club £81m towards the cost of the stadium building. This was expected to reach £100m by the time the takeover was completed.[29] Should the deal not go through, there were, according to former chief executive Keith Wyness, 'investment groups out there, that I know of, who are interested in the club and in the stadium asset'. He put particular emphasis on the stadium as being of interest to future investors.[30]

By February 2024, the club takeover still had not been approved after 22 weeks of consideration, even though the much smaller 25 per cent stake Sir Jim Ratcliffe acquired in Manchester United had been approved after only a month and a half. In the meantime, the club were becoming more dependent on life support loans from 777. One of the possible causes of this delay was the sustained negative publicity surrounding 777. Throughout all this, 777 honoured its commitment to keep the club afloat.[31]

On Friday, 17 November 2023, Everton learned they had been hit with a ten-point deduction by the Premier league (this was subsequently reduced to six points). According to Dave Powell of the *Liverpool Echo*, this was unlikely to deter 777 partners from its purchase of the club as the group had already 'priced in' all potential penalties and points deductions. He did recognise that the price 777 would have to pay for the club may now be subject to change, presumably a lowering.[32] However, an article two days later by Simon Mullock in the *Sunday Express* claimed that the penalty could prompt 777 to walk away from the takeover.[33]

The penalty was caused by the club breaching the maximum debt levels clubs were allowed by the Premier League for the 2021/22 season. The debt of £124.5m was higher than the £105m allowed. The cost of borrowing to finance the new stadium was a key factor in breaking these limits. The club believed that there were some key mitigating factors behind the debt level, such as having to pull out of a lucrative naming rights deal for the stadium with Alisher Usmanov's USM company after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They also believed that the loans taken out to finance the stadium build should not count in the penalty, as infrastructure projects sat outside the Premier league's profit and sustainability rules. Consequently, the club appealed against the penalty.[34]

The appeal was successful in clawing back four of the lost points. By May 2024, after Everton were hit with a further two-point deduction relating to financial breaches for the 2022/23 season, 777 partners remained in play but had still not received Premier League approval. The 'miracle week' in late April 2024 of three successive victories, including a 2-0 derby victory over Liverpool, saved Everton's Premier League status and things appeared to be looking up for the club and their future stadium. However, concerns about 777 were magnifying and there was even talk of the club going into administration. An article by Matt Slater of *The Athletic* which summarised a report on 777 by the London investment firm Leadenhall even concluded that: 'This must surely be the end of 777's almost eight-month attempt to complete its purchase of Everton, and very possibly the end of 777, too.'[35]

The report documented that 777 and its associated companies were the subject of 16 different lawsuits over unpaid debts totalling $130m. Leadenhall itself claimed it was owed $600m by the group. It also alleged that the group owed a further $2bn to strategic insurance investor A-CAP.[36]

This report led to the Everton FC Shareholders' Association insisting that majority shareholder Farhad Moshiri recognise that '777 Partners are not fit and proper prospective owners of the club'.[37] According to *Liverpool Echo* journalist Joe Thomas, the Leadenhall report added further pressure on the Premier League whose decision on this case 'will be viewed as a landmark decision and come under heavy scrutiny by lawmakers debating whether it can operate in the best interests of the sport'.[38] Concerns over this report led to Moshiri having a face-to-face meeting with 777. The club subsequently announced that, should the deal with 777 partners collapse by the end of May – an increasingly likely occurrence – plans were in place to progress alternative scenarios.[39]

Later in the month, much of 777's international stable appeared to be in serious financial circumstances, with late payments from 777 causing extreme disquiet among fans at clubs under its ownership. Belgian club Standard Liege were hit with a transfer ban, Vasco da Gama of Brazil had their 777 ownership overturned by a judge and Germany's Hertha Berlin were struggling to recover after being relegated from the Bundesliga. Even among 777's more successful acquisitions, there were significant issues, with Italian club Genoa being docked a point due to tax irregularities and 777 facing mounting anger from fans of Red Star Paris.[40] The group's football assets in Belgium were seized by a Belgian court due to non-payment of a second payment owed to Standard Liege, which had led to non-payment of players' wages in April. In Brazil, the two 777 members on the board of Vasco da Gama were removed from the board due to a court order. In April, the 777-backed Australian budget airline Bonza entered voluntary administration and ceased operating.[41]

A more positive development, in late May 2024, was the apparent interest in Everton from the US digital media entrepreneur John Textor. His successful companies were worth $9bn and he seemed to have had equal success with his football investments in three global clubs. Botafogo of Rio de Janeiro were having their third successive season in the Brazilian top flight, Lyon had just finished sixth in France's Ligue 1 to qualify for the Europa League and, crucially, Textor's 45 per cent stake in Crystal Palace had paid off, with the London club achieving their joint highest Premier League finish of tenth place. Textor had expressed dissatisfaction with being unable to be the controlling influence at Palace and voiced a desire to have such influence at another Premier

League club. He expressed a vocal preference for Everton:

'Everton represents the best of English football: the struggles, the glory, the *want*. I love that it's out of London. Everybody should want to buy Everton right now. That kind of club is what I'm referring to. How great would it be to take one of these great English clubs back to sort of glory?'[42]

Firstly, he would have needed to sell his Palace stake, which might not have been possible in the timescale, with the 777 Partners bid expiring by the end of the month. He was also still keen on gaining a controlling influence over Palace.[43]

By the start of June 2024, after the 777 partners deal deadline had expired, *The Athletic* journalist Matt Slater believed that the two most likely scenarios for Everton were entering administration or the club's main creditors taking control. If the club went into administration, it would incur an automatic nine-point deduction, effective from the start of the 2024/25 season – potentially precipitating the nightmare scenario of inaugurating the new stadium in the Championship. Another key argument against going down this route was that Laing O'Rourke, the contractor building the stadium, would almost certainly have insisted on a clause requiring the club to renegotiate its contract in the event of the club going into administration. This would have substantially pushed up the remaining building costs. For these reasons, Slater believed that the most likely scenario was for the club's main creditors to take control. MSP Sports Capital had the right to seize 51 per cent of Everton's shares from Moshiri for 777's failure to repay the £158m loan it made to Everton the previous summer.

However, they could have done this already and had so far not done so. There was also a possibility that the Cheshire-based company Rights and Media Funding could bid for the shares – or that there could be a joint bid from the two companies.[44]

By early June 2024, according to *Liverpool Echo* journalists Joe Thomas and Dave Powell, the battle to take control of the club was between MSP Sports Capital and the Everton-supporting millionaire duo of Andy Bell and George Downing. However, the proposed bid from major Crystal Palace shareholder John Textor was also a possibility. The latter bid was jeopardised by his need to divest himself of his shareholding in the Selhurst Park club.[45] Bell's Blythe Capital played a role in the securing of funding for the stadium in 2023 and both he and Downing were prominent in MSP Sports Capital's bid for a 25 per cent stake in the club. Bell's commitment to the club could be judged by his setting up of a new vehicle called Toffee Venture, which was a private company listed with Companies House as a business within the bracket of sports and recreation education. Downing's commitment to the city could be seen by his company taking over the historic Port of Liverpool building, one of the city's waterfront Three Graces buildings, at which he was implementing a multi-million-pound restoration.[46] The joint bid was also apparently being backed by Michael Dell, the tenth richest man in the world worth about £120bn, according to *Times* journalist Paul Joyce, who claimed talks between the pair and the club were at an advanced stage.[47]

By now, John Textor was apparently out of contention due to the difficulties he faced in selling his Crystal Palace shares. However, *Bloomberg* reported that the situation remained fluid and that Textor should not be completely ruled out of the race.[48] The situation also became more complicated with the apparent interest in the club from Roma owner Dan Friedkin, who had a fortune of £4.8bn.[49] Yet another bid was received from London-based businessman Vatche Manoukian, who was fronting a rumoured

£400m offer to buy the club. The bid reportedly involved several international investors, including a member of the Saudi royal family. This offer was an all-equity one which would not take on additional debt, thereby aiming to create a sustainable long-term strategy.[50] By mid-June, the bid by 59-year-old US billionaire Friedkin appeared to be the clear frontrunner. He was said to be on the brink of signing an exclusivity deal with the club. News of this bid appeared to prompt the Manoukian group to pull out of the race. It posted the following statement:

'Everton fans deserve to be competing for trophies once again and we hope this deal delivers success for the club on and off the pitch. I want to thank our world-class investors for their support and we are excited to turn our focus to new opportunities to take great clubs to the next level.'[51]

According to the *Goodison News* website, Friedkin, unlike 777 Partners, wouldn't encounter any problems in passing the Premier League's owners' and directors' test due to his successful four years of running AS Roma, the Italian club having won the Europa Conference League in 2022 before then reaching the last four of the Europa League in successive seasons, finishing as runners-up in 2023.[52]

On 21 June, the club announced that the Friedkin Group had been granted a period of exclusivity to progress discussions with a view to acquiring a majority shareholding in the club. This was expected to take between 30 and 60 days but could be extended if required. There was no guarantee that the deal would go through, particularly in view of the three previous deals with Maciek Kaminski, MSP Sports Capital and 777 Partners failing to complete.[53] However, the Friedkin Group, unlike 777 Partners, had a proven track record in football. It also had a reputable financial background that was easy to access. This, according to the Everton correspondent for the *Liverpool Echo*, Joe Thomas, would all help the Friedkin Group pass the Premier League's owners' and directors' test.[54] If this bid went through, which most informed commentators believed would happen, the future of the stadium seemed to have been secured, with the first home Premier League game to be staged in August 2025. Clear demonstrable proof of the veracity of this statement happened four days later when one of Friedkin's companies, TDF Capital, took a charge against the new stadium. This signified that the old MSP loan for the stadium build had been repaid, with TDF acting as security agent for the transaction, with the new stadium as collateral for the loan. This deal was significant, as failure by 777 Partners to repay the MSP loan had been a key factor in the Premier League refusing to agree to its proposed takeover of the club.[55]

According to *Liverpool Echo* journalist Chris Beesley, Friedkin was likely to feel that Everton was actually in a stronger position than Roma, due to the respective progress of the two clubs' new stadia. Bramley-Moore was six months from completion when Friedkin was given exclusivity over Everton. However, the proposed new Roma stadium, despite being planned two and a half years before Bramley-Moore, had not got off the ground due to opposition from the local political authorities. Ironically, the new Roma stadium plans were the work of US architect Dan Meis, the designer of the new Everton stadium.[56]

On 19 July 2024, there was a fresh twist in the takeover saga when the Friedkin Group pulled out due to concerns over the financial exposure the club had to 777 Partners, who Dave Powell, writing in the *Liverpool Echo*, described as a 'stricken investment firm'. The Friedkin Group was particularly concerned about several legal cases 777 was involved in, some including allegations of fraudulent activity, and that A-CAP was wanting to reduce its exposure to 777. However, the Friedkin Group was insistent it was not in a rush to seek repayment by the club of the money spent on repaying the MSP loan.[57]

In mid-August, it was reported that the club appeared to have turned full circle, returning to John Textor and giving him a period of exclusivity with a view to a future purchase of the club.[58] One would assume that he was thoroughly prepared to resolve the issues left by the 777 group.

Finally, though, in late September, the situation appeared to be resolved. The Friedkin Group issued a joint statement with Farhad Moshiri's Blue Heaven Group. With the two parties apparently prepared to put aside their previous concerns about the outstanding 777 Partners' debt, it was announced that the Friedkin Group had acquired the 94.1 per cent of the club owned by Moshiri. The deal was subject to approval from the Premier League, the FA and the Financial Conduct Authority. *Business of Football* writer Dave Powell predicted the Friedkin Group would have no problems in passing these tests and would have the funds to complete the deal.[59] Throughout the preceding months, it had been clear that the Friedkin Group was the best placed financially to take on the club and there was no stumbling block like the one Textor faced regarding his shareholding in Crystal Palace. Friedkin, who made his fortune in the car industry, was financially secure, having recently been listed by Forbes as the 383rd richest person in the world. Encouragingly for Everton fans, since taking ownership of AS Roma in 2020, the Friedkin Group had invested £830m in the Italian club, helping them to compete at the top end of Serie A and to enjoy success in Europe.[60] Now, with the announcement of the Friedkin deal, both the future of Everton Football Club and the development of the new stadium appeared to have been secured.