

Grounds

Villa Park, Birmingham 1914–40



Aston Villa featured this graphic delight on its programme cover for most of the 1950s and early '60s, amending it faithfully each time the ground changed – such as when the 1897 Witton Lane Stand's original barrel roof (left) was replaced in 1963 – thereby providing a handy visual guide to Villa Park's development. Both the Trinity Road Stand (right) and the far Holte End terrace, were built to Leitch's design.

In Fred Rinder, Aston Villa's all-powerful chairman, Archibald Leitch would meet the best-informed client he was ever likely to find in the football world.

Rinder had no great personal wealth. But in his role as a senior surveyor for Birmingham Corporation, with responsibility for pubs, billiard halls and music halls, he knew a great deal both about how to manage a club and how to read a set of plans. He had also, following the introduction of the 1910 Cinematograph Act, become something of an expert on the new film industry.

But in his heart, Fred Rinder was a stadium builder.

For Leitch, working with such a client might well have turned into a nightmare, as with Henry Norris at Highbury in 1913. Instead, the relationship bore exceptional fruit.

For the Trinity Road Stand the two men planned together in 1914 – though the war delayed its construction until 1922 – was by far the most accomplished of Leitch's career up to that point, and at least the equal of his other great masterwork, the South

Stand at Ibrox Park, completed in 1929. Until the redevelopment of Highbury in the 1930s the stand would also be the finest in England. But then, it was the costliest, as shall become all too painfully clear later.

Yet how could it have been otherwise? Villa Park's setting cried out for a grandiose architectural statement.

Overlooking the ground, from the heights of Aston Park, stood a handsome Jacobean mansion, Aston Hall. Close by was the 15th century church of St Peter and St Paul, some 17th century almshouses, and, immediately next to the ground, a superb late Victorian pub, the Holte Hotel, with 10 bedrooms, its own 400 capacity music hall, billiard rooms and two bowling greens.

The site of the ground itself had, until the 1880s, formed part of an extensive amusement park, the Aston Lower Grounds (not dissimilar to Manchester's Belle Vue). But as tastes changed the business collapsed and in 1897 Villa's new home was laid out on the site of the Lower Grounds'

cycle and athletics track. Rinder later claimed to have laid down every 'level and line' of the ground before construction began.

A range of other buildings that had formed part of the amusement park (see opposite) were, meanwhile, turned into Aston Villa's palatial new headquarters.

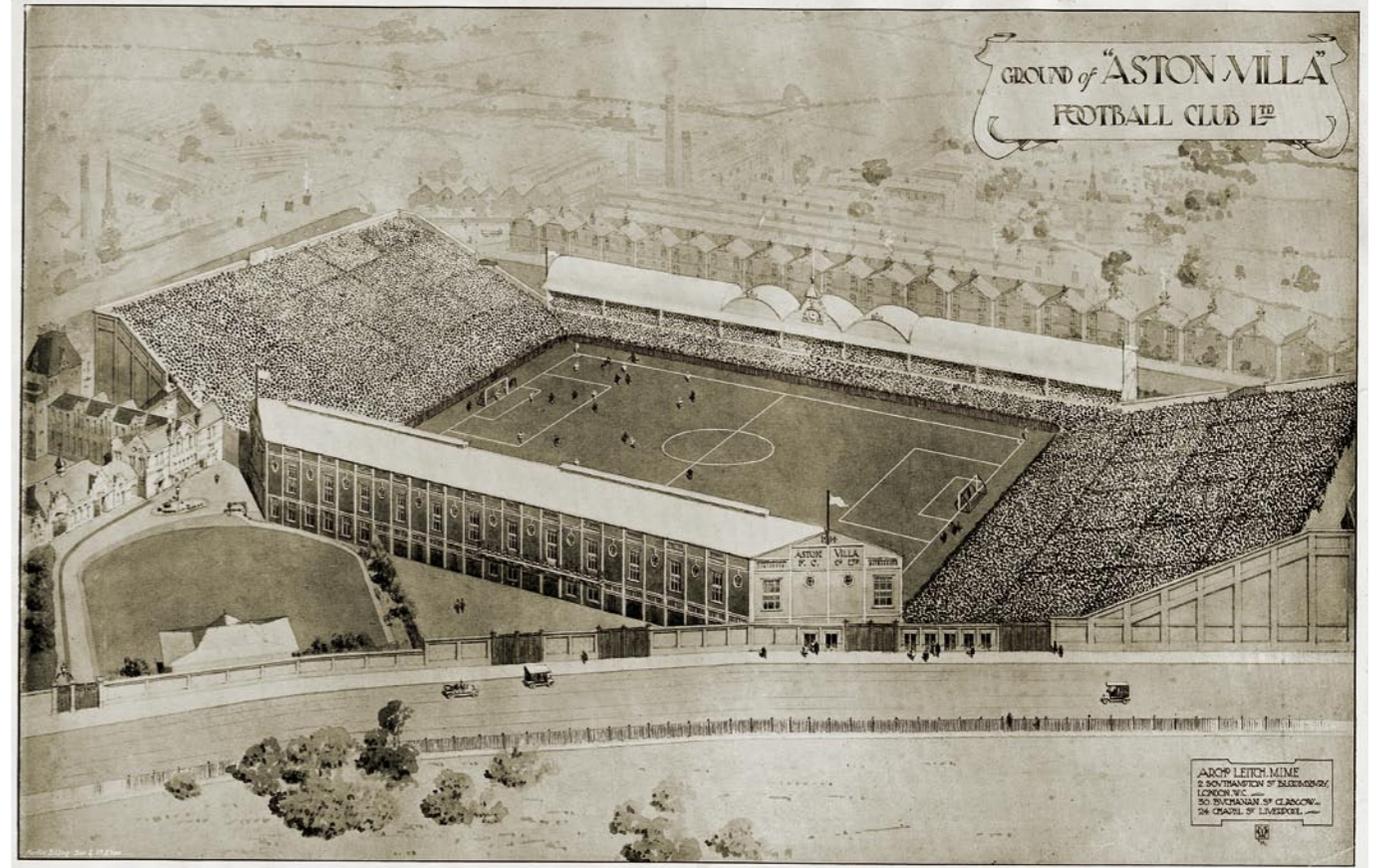
The location and its new tenants were well suited. Football was the latest craze. Villa were the team of the day; five times League champions and twice winners of the FA Cup during the 1890s alone. Even so, no football club ever had offices or grounds like these. Villa soon took on an aura of solid, institutional respectability.

Within a few years, however, Villa realised they needed more seats and terracing, and so after the club raised the £11,250 needed to buy the freehold, in 1911, Rinder started planning afresh.

Three years later he was ready.

In June 1914, shareholders at the AGM were told 'that Mr Archibald Leitch, who had considerable experience in this class of work was the man to carry out their scheme.' >>

PLANS AND PARTICULARS OF PROPOSED ALTERATIONS TO ASTON VILLA FOOTBALL GROUNDS.



▲ Before Leitch, **Villa Park** was an oval-shaped ground with a cycle track and a single stand. At one match in 1913 it managed to accommodate 59,740. But it had been an uncomfortable crush.

The Leitch perspective above, presented to shareholders in June 1914, proposed removing the track – a move bitterly opposed by the city's cycle enthusiasts – and creating a rectangular ground.

Many a Victorian ground underwent a similar remodelling to cater for the football boom.

The structures Villa chose to retain were the barrel-roofed Witton Lane Stand, designed by EB Holmes in 1897, and, on the left, the fanciful brick buildings left over from the Aston Lower Grounds Company. Designed by Thomas Naden in 1878 in a Byzantine, style, before Villa turned them into the club offices and a gymnasium they housed an aquarium, menagerie, café and mineral water manufactory. For many years their faded majesty pervaded Aston Villa's culture and identity, until

finally they were demolished in the late 1970s. The adjacent bowling green was lost too, in 1966.

Note that Leitch's original design for Trinity Road did not feature a roof gable or a central stairway, both of which appeared when the stand was finally built in 1922.

Of the two end terraces, only the Holte End (right) was built, raising Villa Park's capacity to 76,000. But neither Rinder nor Leitch lived to see it finished. Work did not begin until 1939, some 25 years after the drawing above first appeared.