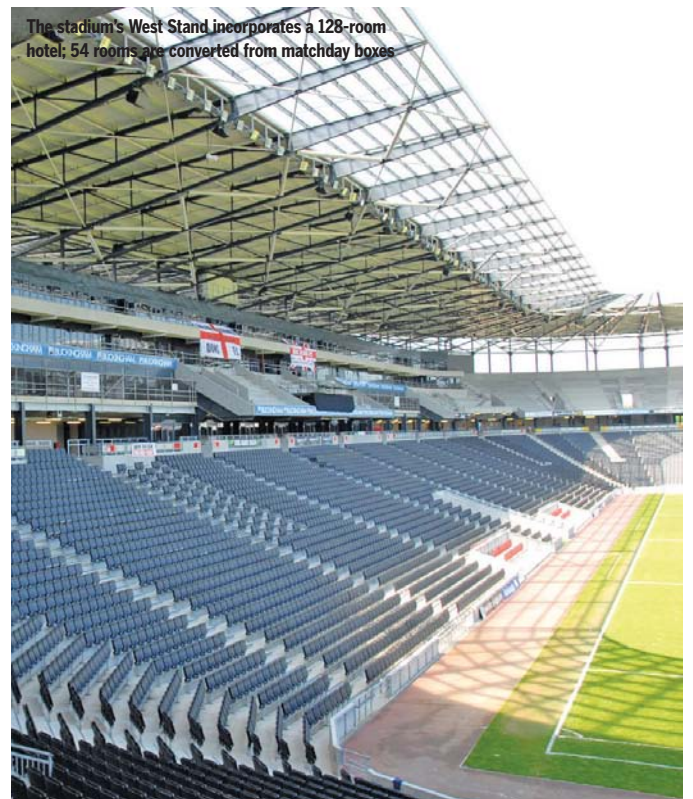




As well as domestic and international football matches, the stadium is also hoping to attract music events



The stadium's West Stand incorporates a 128-room hotel; 54 rooms are converted from matchday boxes

Better view, better sound

After a 40-year wait, a successful professional football team has come to the new city of Milton Keynes. **Dan Goldstein** finds out about the audio installation at the stadium that helped make this club relocation possible

When Pete Winkelman uprooted Wimbledon Football Club from its south London home and moved it lock, stock and barrel to Milton Keynes, over 100km north, he created a tidal wave of controversy. There was almost no precedent for a team to be moved so far from its supporter base, and the vast majority of Wimbledon fans shunned the club once it had moved, many preferring to back a new, London-based team known as AFC Wimbledon.

But the charismatic Winkelman, a former record-company executive who owns Linford Manor recording studios not far from Milton Keynes, looks as though he is going to have the last laugh. This year his team, now renamed the MK Dons, won both the League Two Championship and the Football League Trophy, with over 20,000 supporters travelling to Wembley Stadium to cheer them on for the final of the latter competition.

New home

None of this would have been possible without the construction of Stadium MK, a new arena situated in the Denbigh area of Milton Keynes, which has been the team's home for the past year. Officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in November 2007, the stadium hosted its first game the previous July, and has since given MK Dons a place they can finally call home, after three years of using the nearby National Hockey Stadium as an interim measure.

Designed by specialist architecture firm HOK Sport, Stadium MK has a current capacity of 20,500, but this will rise to 30,500 once the upper tier of seating has been completed later this year. Separating the two tiers is a top-loaded, 360° open concourse – the first of its kind in the UK – which houses food-and-drink concessions, toilets and so forth, and allows for the provision of large numbers of wheelchair-accessed seats, making the arena the first fully Disability Discrimination Act-compliant stadium in the country.

Last year the new stadium acted as a focal point for Milton Keynes' 40th-anniversary celebrations, and it's interesting to note that the new city's aspirations for its own sports arena were enshrined in its first masterplan when it was devised in 1973. For Winkelman, the very 'newness' of Milton Keynes is part of its attraction.

"The city has a very young demographic that likes to go out," he explains. "Over 1,000 companies have their headquarters here, and in 10 years' time the population will be 450,000. But there is no tradition of football here, so we have to make sure that we live up to audience expectations."

Only part of that responsibility lies with the MK Dons team itself, and Winkelman has left no stone unturned in his quest to make the stadium as inviting and satisfying a venue as possible. He says he has "thrown away the rulebook" in many aspects of the stadium's design, and has refused to compromise on many aspects of its implementation – using the same padded seating as Arsenal Football Club's new



'There is no tradition of football here, so we have to live up to audience expectations'

Pete Winkelman

Emirates Stadium in London, for example.

A similar approach has been taken to audio system design, with Stadium MK becoming the first venue of its kind in the UK to have a Meyer Sound loudspeaker system. Responsible for delivering both PA/VA and higher-level music pro-

gramming, the system covers all present and future outdoor seating areas. It was specified after Winkelman sought advice from two long-time music-industry friends: audio consultant Gary Garner and Metallica sound engineer Big Mick Hughes. Garner and Hughes then introduced Meyer Sound to the project through the auspices of rental company Thunder Audio, a long-time user of the Californian manufacturer's self-powered speaker products.

"Pete first contacted us about the sound when he was looking at the idea of using the National Bowl [a large open-air music and events venue nearby] as a home for the football team," Hughes recalls. "I don't have any interest in football, but just because you're in a different world, doesn't mean you should walk away from good sound. There was no way Gary and I were going to let him install a sub-standard system."

Sound system

The speaker system was designed by Meyer Sound European technical support specialist Thomas Mundorf around 38 UPA-1P compact wide-coverage enclosures, coupled with 38 of the UPA-2P narrow-coverage equivalents. These are augmented by 16 Meyer Sound 600-HP high-power subwoofers. All the enclosures were weatherproofed at the Meyer factory in Berkeley, California, before shipping to the UK, where they were flown from the stadium's roof on custom brackets specially made for the project by the installer, VCP Services. The UPAs are arranged in pairs, with the subs mounted on their own brackets and mounted between each UPA pair. Once

installed, the system was tweaked and tuned by Luke Jenks, Meyer Sound's director of European technical support.

"We had to use 85ft cherry-pickers to get the speakers up there, and each sub alone weighs around 65kg, so it was a big job," recalls VCP owner Vincent Clamp. Financially, too, the system represented a substantial outlay to the project, but Winkelman was fortunate to have a sympathetic main contractor at hand. "We're using a local company called Buckingham Group, which understood my desire to improve the quality of the sound system," he says. "There was a normal PA/VA system in the design-and-build contract that we had with them. They took off the cost of that, which enabled us to get the Meyer Sound system in."

Having the same boxes responsible for both PA/VA and high-SPL programming is still a rarity, however, as Clamp explains: "It's very unusual to have 240V speakers on the PA/VA side, and that calls for extensive battery back-up because the whole system needs to be able to run for 30 minutes in the event of an AC mains supply failure."

The supply and control of voice messaging are the responsibility of a Bosch Praesideo set-up, which was also installed by VCP along with the stadium's CCTV and fire alarm systems. "From an audio point of view, we've essentially got three networks sitting on top of one another: the Meyer system, the DJ system, and the Bosch system," says Clamp. "The Praesideo has a dedicated fibre network, while the Meyer boxes sit on a copper backbone which feeds back to the Bosch head end, so that



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Meyer Sound UPA-1P and 2P loudspeakers and 600-HP subs provide sound coverage



L-R: Big Mick Hughes, Pete Winkelman and Gary Garner

emergency messaging can take priority over other programming when it needs to.”

Clamp is using CobraNet for audio data transmission around the facility, and a BSS Soundweb 9088ii

for signal processing and source selection, with the system capable of being split into four separate zones if necessary. VCP has been responsible for audio at many other football clubs, including Reading, Derby and

Stoke, but says nothing compares to the MK Dons set-up. “It’s quite simply the best I’ve heard,” Clamp says.

It is also future-proof – or at least as close to it as is feasible. The system has been designed to cover the

unfinished upper tier as well as the lower one currently in use, and will help Winkelman realise an additional goal of using Stadium MK as a music venue. “Football is great, but it’s only 30 days a year,” he reflects.

“The stadium has everything it needs to meet UEFA 4-Star Elite standards, which means we can also host international matches and European club football, but that’s still a maximum of 35 days. So we need other events, and the advantage of the Meyer Sound system is that touring acts will be able to use the boxes as delays, which will substantially reduce their costs.”

Mixed-use venue

Look closely and you see myriad other revenue-generating opportunities. The stadium’s West Stand, for example, has been designed to incorporate a 128-bedroom hotel, with 54 of those rooms being converted from matchday VIP boxes with windows that look out onto the pitch. (The conversion takes only a matter of minutes.) The hotel will have its own swimming pool and gym facilities, which will be accessible by both guests and football players, while an 850-cover ballroom offers the largest facility of its kind in south-east England, outside London.

Next-door to the stadium is Arena MK, a 5,000-capacity indoor hall equally well suited to music, corporate events, and sports such as basketball. “In terms of venues, Milton Keynes doesn’t have anything between The Stables [as featured in *IE*, November 2007] and The Bowl in size, so there are lots of gaps for us to fill,” comments Winkelman.

So much has already been achieved on the Denbigh site that it would be tempting for Winkelman and his management team to rest on their laurels. Nothing could be further from the truth. “We started along this road 10 years ago and now we’re halfway through,” Winkelman says. “The team has won everything in front of it this year, and we have a higher proportion of women and children coming to our games than any team in the country. We’re saying to the people of Milton Keynes: look where we can go!” **IE**

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Stadium MK has a capacity of 20,500, set to rise to 30,500 when the second seating tier is completed

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