

HERITAGE SHEET 11

KIPLINGCOTES DERBY

Some years ago an Irish comedian, the late Dave Allen, presented a series of television programmes which sought to turn the tables on the English by exposing some of their more eccentric practices. In his programme about the Kiplingcotes Derby the feature which particularly intrigued him was the fact that the runner up frequently receives more in prize money than the winner, the reason being that the person coming first receives a fixed amount whereas the one coming second receives the total of all the entry fees less a small percentage. Whatever the impact of the programme it did give national prominence to a race which already enjoyed more than local fame.

Only the last section of the route and the winning post are in Middleton Parish with the finish being on a minor road just north of the busy A614 between Londesborough Wold Farm on the left and Kipling House Farm on the right. The present post which was presented in 1979 by the pupils and staff of Market Weighton School bore the words “Kiplingcotes Winning Post 1519 RHR”.

Tradition states that 1519 was the year in which the “Kiplingcotes Derby” as a specific race was first run. There is no documentary evidence for such an assertion. Research has revealed that a tithe course paper found among the Diocesan records at York shows that races were held at Kiplingcotes in 1555 because a farmer, Thomas Carter, from Helperthorpe who was called in gave evidence in 1556 in tithe dispute involving Bainton Rectory stated that he was “at a horse running at Kiplingcote Eshe about Shrovetide last!”. This is the first written record of such activities. Later documents show that local gentry numbering some 49 landowners amongst whom were James Moyser, Edward Barnard, Sir Hugh Bethell of Rise and the Earl of Burlington (who was a significant landowner in Middleton) gave financial support to the endowment of the race itself in 1669. The Londesborough estate accounts in 1679 list expenses in connection with the races.

Nationally the first race course with an annual fixture was established on the Roodee at Chester in 1540. In Yorkshire courses were established at Doncaster in 1595 and York in 1709.

Kiplingcotes is not a conventional race course. The starting point is on a minor road near the old Dalton Plantation north of the old Kiplingcotes Station in Etton Parish and horses run on the grass verge alongside it passing through Londesborough Parish past the old Enthorpe station and Ashlack Wood.

The race takes place annually on the third Thursday in March. The date was chosen early in the year so that horses intended for racing in the season proper could be tested to see how they had come through the winter and in earlier times the meeting consisted of more than one race. But being so early in the year the weather can be a challenge in itself.

The Post Office Directory of 1872 states that a football match with neighbouring parishes took place after the race.

In 1947, a year noted for the long lasting severity of the winter and when the Wolds in particular were affected by deep snowdrifts a sole rider, Fred Stephenson, witnessed only by the clerk of the course rode and led his horse "Londesboro Lad" through the route. This was necessary because if the race fails to be held the terms of its endowment means that the event is lost for good. This token gesture had to be resorted to again in 2001 when the foot and mouth outbreak was rampant.

The course which is 4 miles long is in itself a gruelling one and horses have been known to collapse at the end and one even died.

The first woman to win the race was a 19 year old girl, Miss Jean Farrow of Newland Park, Hull, the daughter of a fish merchant riding a horse called "Masterful". She completed the course in March 1939 in heavy rain and in record time, her winnings being £7 13s 5d. It was her third entry in the race.

Various cups have existed for the race. One dating from 1702 appeared in Christies' Sale catalogue of April 1929 but its present whereabouts are not known. In 1970 Mrs Jean Mellonie the former Jean Farrow donated a cup which was ultimately awarded permanently to Deirdre Blackstone of Nafferton. Mrs Mellonie's daughter Mrs Victoria Revell then donated another cup in memory of her mother who although rendered partially sighted as a result of wartime service as a naval nurse had recommenced riding and encouraged her daughter to take an interest in horses.

The letters "RHR" originally appeared on the winning post and referred to Robert Henry Ruston known as Harry. He was clerk of the course for many years as was his father and grandfather Henry Ruston, the latter being a tailor in South Street, Middleton at the time of the 1891 census. Robert Henry Ruston was also the father of the present clerk of the course, Mrs Susan Hillaby, whose husband Richard is the official starter.

The Kiplingcotes Derby can appeal to anyone with a skill in riding who likes a challenge. Such a person was Colin Freeth a 33 year social worker from Cheshire who had been riding horses since he was eight years old and read about the race in a local newspaper. As a result in 1988 riding his 14 year old gelding "Ryedal Mount" he beat Rosemary Edgerton from Nafferton in a nail biting finish.

This year (2008) the riders had to contend with driving rain but despite this 12 contestants took part. The race was won by John Thirsk (44) a joiner from Holme-on-Spalding-Moor riding "Maisie" with Liz Stubbins of Thornton coming second riding "Cid".

To show the contrast between today's peaceful event and those of a more turbulent past the last word should be given to the Rev. M.C.F. Morris of Nunburnholme who writing in the 1920s stated:

"Many years ago I was told by one who had witnessed them that very rough work went on at the races, accompanied by a certain amount of bloodshed. At the present time the management of the trust has been placed on a better footing and renewed interest is being taken in this old institution".