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Epsom Races

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Clerk of the Course



"Derby Day" William Frith's Painting, Dated 1858 now in the Tate Gallery

RACING is the traditional and oldest industry of Epsom, and nowhere has it more justly earned the title of "The Sport of Kings" than on Epsom Downs.

Early records suggest that Queen Elizabeth I saw racing here four hundred years ago, while the proximity of Nonsuch Palace makes it more than likely James I also came. Certainly the Court of Charles II saw racing at Epsom for their attendance was recorded by Samuel Pepys.

After the Stuarts, and during the time of the Commonwealth, Epsom Races frequently provided a cloak for the meeting of Royalists. In this connection there is a record that in 1648 "a meeting of the Royalists was held on Banstead (Epsom) Downs under the pretence of a horse race, and six hundred horses were collected and marched to Reigate."

Such then was the early background to Epsom Races, but it was not until 1730 that we have records of regular meetings held twice a year, in spring and in the autumn. It was not, however, until some 40 years later that the full importance of the races began to be established. Then, in 1779, "The Oaks" was founded, being named after the seat of the 12th Earl of Derby at Banstead, and racing really became of prime importance to the town. Incidentally, the first Oaks Stakes was appropriately won by Lord Derby with Bridget.

The following year, 1780, saw the foundation of The Derby, the conditions for which were laid down by Lord Derby with that great patron 'of the Turf, Sir Charles Bunbury. These two tossed to decide whose name should be given to the race, and of course Lord Derby won. However, if he won the toss, he did not win the race, and Sir Charles Bunbury had the distinction of winning the first Derby with his horse Diomed.

Thus, in those two years, the whole destiny of Epsom was changed. The days of Epsom the health resort tapered off as it began to assume its new status as the venue of the greatest race in the world.

Those were the roystering days of such gay young bloods as Lord Lorne, Charles Manning and Beau Brummel, who would evidently bet on almost anything. There is, for example, a record that "Mr. Brummel bet Lord Henry Moore 25 gn. that Sir W. W. Wynn is alive this day twelvemonths." Then, too, the Prince of Wales - later to become King George IV - frequented Epsom and indeed won the Derby in 1788 with St. Thomas.

How racing at Epsom was organised and managed at that time is a matter for conjecture, but in 1830 the newly-formed Epsom Grand Stand Association announced to the "Nobility and Gentry" the opening of "an elegant new building" - the first Grand Stand.

The fifteen years that followed were bad ones for the Association for public interest in the races fell, and its income therefore, declined seriously. Then, in 1845, the Grand Stand was leased to Henry Dorling, an energetic and far-seeing man, who had been appointed Clerk of the Course a few years earlier. It was in great part he, and members of his family, who really established Epsom races. Indeed, when the Association resumed control of the Stand shortly before Henry Dorling's death in 1871, Epsom races were an established success and touched upon the history of the nation.

To illustrate this fact, in 1860 Lord Palmerston, the Prime Minister, remarked of Derby Day that "to adjourn the House for that day is part of the unwritten law of Parliament." A further historic phrase came from Disraeli who referred to The Derby as "The Blue Riband of the Turf." Yet a third Premier, Lord Rosebery, had the satisfaction of winning the 1894 Derby with Ladas.

Many Royal patrons also visited Epsom races. In 1840 Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort attended, while their son, King Edward VII was a great enthusiast and won three Derbys with Persimmon, Diamond Jubilee and Minoru. The first of these, Persimmon's Derby, was the first victory for a member of the Royal family for seventy years. Ridden by my namesake, Watts, Persimmon got up to pip the odds-on favourite St. Frusquin by a neck for one of the most spectacular and popular wins in the history of the race.

To contrast with this joyous event there was the tragic Derby of 1913 when the courageous if misguided Miss Emily Davidson threw herself in front of King George V's horse Anmer at Tattenham Corner, and died a martyr to the cause of the women's suffragette movement.

So it is, in gaiety and tragedy, with august names and the cheers of generations of racegoers that the history of Epsom and the Derby is written. Yet withal it is the names of the great horses that survive, not only in the record books, but in men's minds. It is a remarkable thing that still to-day there are men who recall the years by the names of Derby winners. You may hear them remark, "Oh, yes, that was in 1934 - Windsor Lad's Derby;" or again, "That was in 1946, Airborne's year," and so on.

The reason for the great significance placed on horses that run at Epsom, and especially Derby winners, lies essentially in the fact that Epsom, perhaps more than any other course, is the true testing ground of horses of class and, added to this, the level of prize money is well

above the average. The result is that Epsom races set a standard for the measure of British bloodstock, and provide first-class racing for the public.

Naturally, over the years the course at Epsom has been altered many times, and with the ever increasing crowds the fine old Grand Stand built in 1830 became inadequate, and a magnificent new Grand Stand, was opened in 1927 . Yet the hallowed turf, the Downs, and the gay democracy of Epsom races has remained unchanged.

This year, as in centuries past, Derby Day retained its unique atmosphere. There was the gay cosmopolitan crowd, with Pearly Kings and Queens resplendent in their glittering suits and plumed hats ; the swarthy, colourful gipsies ; raucous bookmakers ; confident tipsters ; spectators in top hats and bowlers, soft hats and cloth caps - all vying with each other in creating the unforgettable Epsom scene.

Princes and peers, premiers and punters rubbed shoulder to shoulder in the Grand Stand, while in the Paddock, with its backcloth of cool green trees, there was peace and calm as people studied the beauty of the pick of the world's thoroughbreds as they ambled round with graceful elegance

Over on the Downs, the lively music of the Fair was softened by the hum of the voices of thousands of people who watched free from the Hill. Then, as in other days, there was a hush as the field lined up for the start of the 179th Derby Stakes.

Of the race I will say nothing for I cannot usefully add to all that has already been written. Quite simply, this is the year of Hard Ridden and, once again, the significance of the Derby is emphasised by the fact that in the few fleeting minutes it took to run the race, the value of this horse which cost some few hundred pounds has now soared to hundreds of thousands of pounds.

It is a happy thing that during this, the 21st Anniversary of the Borough, H.M. The Queen and H.R.H. Prince Philip should again give Royal patronage to the Derby. More; it is a salutary and rather comforting thought in these turbulent times that when Her Majesty gazed over the course this year, in all probability the scene was basically the same that faced her predecessor Queen Elizabeth I 400 years ago. True, there were probably more people this year, in very different dress to the styles of the 17th century, but the Downs, the horses and Epsom races are a little-changed heritage of our racing history.

Finally, it is fitting that the Borough's 21st Anniversary will be commemorated on Epsom Racecourse by a special race - the Golden Key Handicap, to be run on August 4th.