

THE RACECOURSE ON EPSOM COMMON

By
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©June 2014



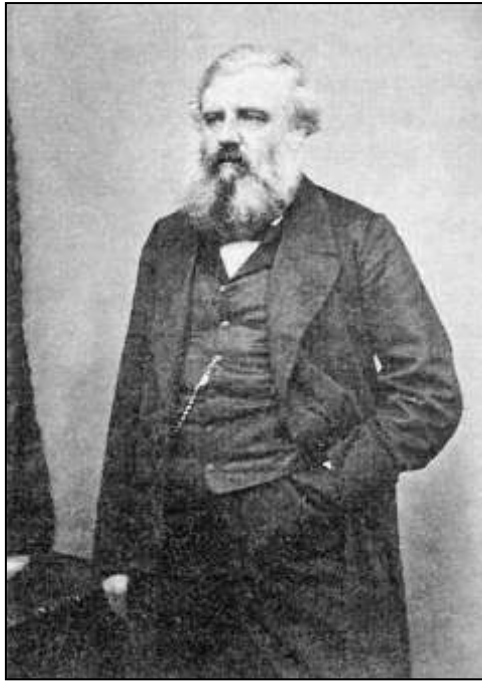
Scenes from a steeplechase: Taking a Hedge
By Henry Thomas Alken c1845

NATIONAL HUNT RACING AT EPSOM

[Henry Dorling](#), the Clerk of the Course, for Epsom Downs instigated Epsom's first Steeplechase meeting in 1850.

Always ready to embrace new ideas, Henry Dorling must have been impressed by the success of the Grand National, first run at Aintree in 1839. Introducing the rural sport of "Steeplechasing" to a location close to an urban area had caught the public's imagination. Furthermore the first two Grand National winners had been trained at Mickleham near Epsom. Therefore Dorling must have concluded that Steeplechasing near London looked to have great potential.

Presumably Dorling first considered Epsom Downs as the venue, however the cambers of the undulating course made it unsuitable, and Dorling was fearful that too much racing would damage the turf.



Henry Dorling
Image Source Wikipedia

Mr Dorling therefore concluded that the Downs could not provide an orbital course with jumping obstacles, and sought an alternative course near Epsom. In 1850, he instigated a two day Spring Meeting. The first day was to consist of Flat racing on Epsom Downs, and the second day of a four race Steeplechase meeting on Epsom Common. Whereas Epsom Downs are chalk based, Epsom Common stands on clay, and its propensity to become waterlogged makes it less suitable, so good weather was particularly important for the second day.

The course and its location were described in *The Morning Chronicle: Wednesday April 10, 1850*

“The subjoined list of the flat races (To be run tomorrow on the Downs) and of the steeplechases (to be decided on the following day within ten minutes’ walk of the town),...show an amount and variety of sport to which it would be difficult to take exception.

The Steeplechase ground selected is on Epsom Common, about a mile from the town on the right of the road to Leatherhead. The winning post will be within a quarter of a mile of the Windmill, and the start will take place at the distance post, the line proceeding past the winning chair, through the enclosed lands adjoining the Windmill, over some quickset hedges: it then take a Westerly direction towards Newton Road: then turning right up the valley, leaving the pond on the right up the hill, and finish with nearly half a mile of straight running. The fences will be about thirty in number, and will comprehend posts and rails, hedges and ditches, and two or three water jumps: and the distance twice round will be about four miles. The stands for the accommodation of the public will be placed on the hill, very near the winning chair, and will afford a good view of the whole line of the course.”

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MEETING ONE. Friday 12th April 1850

Despite the tightness of the bends, and doubts about the going, there was an encouraging amount of competitors. Fourteen runners took place in the third race, over four miles. The fourth race, the Scramble Stakes featuring thirteen runners, was “once round and a distance.”

Results:

Surrey Hunt Stakes About two miles. 8 runners.

1st Mr H Bird's *The Hero*, 11st. 7lbs, ridden by W Archer. Won by hd.

The Aristocratic Stakes. Three miles. 3 runners.

1st Mr Anson's *Johnny Oaks*, 11st 7lb (carried 12st), ridden by Captain Barlow at 6/4. Won in a canter.

Great Metropolitan Handicap Sweepstakes, Four miles. 14 runners.

1st Lord Lurgan's *Fugitive*, 10st 8lb, ridden by H Bradley at 12/1. Won by half a length.

The Scramble Stakes. Once round and a distance. 13 runners.

1st Mr O Key's *Maurice Daly*, 11st, ridden by Boyce at 5/2. Won cleverly by 3 lengths.

Post-meeting reports were mixed. The attendance was good, but the weather bad. The innovative nature of the experiment was acknowledged, but the suitability of the course was questioned from the outset. Events were also overshadowed by a collapse of the stand on the Downs during the previous day's Flat racing.

Sporting Magazine May 1850

“April 11th/12th Epsom Spring Meeting

On the morrow there was steeplechasing on the opposite side of town, the trysting ground being Epsom Common. The line was all within sight of the Stands; and though the mise en scene was but a rough one, matters ended as well as could be expected. There were no fatal accidents to men or horses. The sport was declared excellent; and the experiment of a Metropolitan mixed meeting was pronounced successful....”

Daily News, Saturday April 13th, 1850

“Notwithstanding the discouraging state of the weather during the whole day, there was an immense assemblage yesterday on Epsom common to witness the first essay at a steeplechase meeting, in that part of the country, an essay which to a certain extent, must be allowed to have been eminently successful-that it failed to realise our notions of steeplechasing must be attributed as much to the country as to the want of experience in the parties concerned in “getting up.” For the accommodation of those to whom five shillings was “no object,” Barnard's Stand were erected in a position commanding a good view of the running. If we repeat that the issue of the experiment as a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence, was favourable, and that the sport of its kind was excellent, we shall say no more than is literally true: but it is not less true that the line run over was not at all adapted for steeple chasing; it might, in fact, from the character of the fences-most artificial ones- have been properly called a hurdle race course. We trust that the encouragement that the managers have received in this, their maiden attempt, will stimulate them to greater exertions next year; and while

selecting a line more in accordance with the real nature of the sport from which the present meeting received its title, they will bear in mind that an hour and a quarter between races is one hour too much, and that moderation is the grand element of success in all things."

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MEETING TWO. Wednesday 6th November 1850

Once again Epsom staged a two day meeting; Flat racing on the Downs on Tuesday, and Steeplechase racing on the Common on Wednesday. Mr Dorling had noted comments about the Course, and also tried to improve the card by staging five races, unfortunately one race failed to attract sufficient runners. The Steeplechase Calendar and Hurdle Race Epitome noted:

‘The steeplechase course has been thoroughly drained and much improved, and considerably increased in size, an additional mile of good ground having been added.’

Results:

Surrey Hunt Stakes About two miles. 3 runners.

1st Mr Mason’s *Trust-me-not*, 11st, ridden by Mason at 2/1 on. Won by a length

Epsom Autumn Grand Handicap (Hurdle) About four miles. 5 runners.

1st Mr Anson’s *Spring Buck*, 10st 6lbs, ridden by Oliver at 5/1. Won hard- held by a length.

A Free Handicap Hurdle Sweepstakes About two miles. 12 runners.

1st Mr Hughes’s *Miss Collingwood*, 10st 11lb, ridden by the owner at 3/1.

(Miss Collingwood won “*first time round in a canter*” the horses pulled up, and were returning to the stables, when it was pointed out that they had another circuit to race. Miss Collingwood finished second, but after a Steward’s Enquiry, the “first” result stood. Hence no winning distance was returned for this race.)

The Scramble Stakes. 11st 9lbs each. About two miles.

1st Mr Land’s *The Painter*, 10st 4lbs, ridden by the owner at 5/1. Won by 2 lengths.

The **Aristocratic Steeple Chase**, owing to there being only two horses entered, fell to the ground

Despite the improvement to the course, and fine weather, the *Daily News* was already expressing doubts that Steeplechase racing had a future at Epsom.

Daily News Thursday 7th November 1850

‘The nominations for the races “across the country” were in every respect inferior to those of the flat events on Tuesday, the fields were certain to be small, and no public interest was excited. Luckily for the parties who got them up, the weather turned out exceedingly fine, and the company was numerous, less so, however, than last year, when the weather was bad, and embracing but a very small number of the sporting aristocracy. Of the sport we have nothing to say in praise, and the line run over, although extended, was not improved: the country in short, is not adapted for this description of racing, and we see no reason to alter the opinion expressed by us last year, that steeplechasing never will become popular at Epsom: we are disposed to think that the money would be better bestowed on a second day’s racing on the downs.’

The Era, Sunday 10th November 1850 reviewed the sport on the Common:

“The first attempt to establish a Metropolitan Steeple Chase Meeting at Epsom was made last April, when unfortunately the weather was so dreadfully inauspicious, that the Meeting was a failure. The spot selected, the common, had undergone little or no preparation, and from the nature of the soil, stiff clay, the want of drainage, and the unceasing rains, the running ground was reduced to a quagmire, and discomfort both to bipeds and quadrupeds reigned supreme. Undaunted, however, by the partial failure, Messrs Dorling, Barnard, and Langlands determined to try again. The necessary funds provided, they set to work to improve the Course by draining it thoroughly, and removing the hillocks and scrub; and, certainly, it is now as pretty a piece of ground as can be well desired.”

However, despite the improvement to the course, the stigma surrounding early Steeplechase races still remained:

“That Steeple Chasing, as an offshoot of the regular sport is obtaining vast popularity, is an undeniable fact, and when conducted on fair and honourable principles, and divested of cruelty, we have no fault to find with it, as it gives employment to a heavy weighted race of jockeys, who would have none on the regular turf, and enables owners and breeders of horses to turn animals to account, possessing breeding and bottom, yet who are too slow and heavy for the racecourse, and have sufficient pluck and speed for the Steeple Chase ground. But unfortunately the “squaring” and “arranging” of these affairs has been carried to such an extent, that...Steeple Chasing has been viewed with distrust. No man likes to be “done” and know that he is done: yet so barefaced and frequent have been the robberies under the guise of Steeplechasing that the bare idea of a “square race” for a great event is laughed at.”

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MEETING THREE, Thursday 3rd April 1851

For the 1851 Spring Meeting, the Steeplechase meeting was staged on the first day, with the sport reverting to the Downs for Flat racing on the second day. Local Steward, Sir Gilbert Heathcote, owner of the Derby winner Amato died the previous week. His son Arthur Heathcote succeeded him as steward. It also marked the first running of the City and Suburban Handicap on the Downs; Mr Dorling had persuaded the licensees of London and the suburbs, (the beneficiaries of off course betting at that time), to provide the prize money.

The Daily News, 31st March 1851 previewed the meeting;

“The programme for Thursday and Friday next is by far the strongest that has been issued since the establishment of the Spring meeting, thanks to the liberality of the licensed victuallers and their friends, and the zeal of the Clerk of the Course.”

The Morning Chronicle, 31st March 1851, summed up the inferiority of steeplechase racing at that time;

“The first day of the venue will be laid in the same locality as last year, the sport to consist of three Steeplechases and a hurdle-race, public money amounting to £220. The “legitimate” racing the following day will be in every respect first-rate.”

Results:

Beddington Free Handicap Sweepstakes About three miles. 10 runners.

1st Mr Land's *The General*, 11st 2lbs, ridden by the owner at 5/1. Won 'very cleverly' by 3 lengths.

A Free Handicap Hurdle Sweepstakes About two miles, over 6 flights of hurdles. 8 runners.

1st Lord Waterford's *Lord George*, 11st 4lb, ridden by Ryan at 4/1. Won by 3 lengths.

The Scramble Stakes About two miles. 9 runners.

1st Mr Gooch's *Victress*, 9st. 11lbs, ridden by Boyce at 2/1. Won easily by 3 lengths.

Grand Metropolitan Handicap About four miles. 7 runners.

1st Lord Waterford's ch *Lord George*, 11st 11lb, ridden by Ryan at 4/1. Won easily by 2 lengths.

Press comment was favourable:

The Era, Sunday 6th April 1851

“Whilst awarding sweeping condemnation to the practices of the past (steeplechase) season, we are bound to admit that there have been a few brilliant exceptions, foremost among which we must place the Spring Gathering at Epsom. The experiment of establishing a Metropolitan Steeplechase Meeting was considered a bold one. People said it would never answer so near the great metropolis, that neither ground nor horses could be found worthy of the occasion. A most favourable locality was, however, discovered, and with the provision of liberal bonuses came ample entries of first class animal. The attendance was large and brilliant, embracing men of the right sort (more of the aristocracy of the turf and less of the mobocracy), and the sport was

excellent-racing of a good honest description Thus, in both respectability of attendances, quality of sport, and excellence of management, the Epsom Spring Steeplechase meeting may boldly challenge comparison with any "meet" of the season and worthily claim the honour of setting a praiseworthy example to the majority of such assemblages."

Lloyds Weekly Newspaper Sunday 6th April 1851

"The Steeplechases attracted on this occasion an assemblage of a better class than we have seen at any former meeting. The ground, as may be imagined, was very trying for the horses, but made "easy falling" for their riders, two or three of whom would scarcely have escaped broken limbs had it been in good condition. The fields were large, and the sport excellent."

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Dorling's List of Epsom Autumn Steeple Chases, 1850.

STEWARD:—CHARLES HALLOWELL CAREW, ESQUIRE.

Mr. HENRY DORLING, Clerk of the Course.

The Rules and Regulations of Epsom Races will be strictly enforced. All disputes to be settled by the Steward, or whom he may appoint, and that decision to be final. Three Horses to start for each Race, or the public money will not be given.

On WEDNESDAY, 6th of NOVEMBER, to Start at One o'Clock.

The SURREY HUNT STEEPLE CHASE of 5 mcs. each, with 25 sov. added; 12st. each; the winner to be sold for 300 sov.; if entered to be sold for 120 sov. allowed 20s., for 100 sov. 70s., for 80 sov. 125s., for 60 sov. 140s., for 40 sov. 240s. and for 20 sov. 280s., once round and a distance, about two miles; the winner to pay 5 sov. towards expenses.

			<i>st. lb. sold for</i>	
1	Mr T. Mason's .. ch. g.	Trust me not ..	11 0	£60 purple, orange sleeves, black cap Mason.
2	Mr Allen's	hr. h. Whitley	11 0	£60
3	Mr Carew's	b. g. Lansquenet	10 8	£40 chocolate and orange stripes, black cap
4	Mr Cart's	Young Lottery ..	10 8	£40 chocolate and orange stripes, black cap

The ARISTOCRATIC STEEPLE CHASE of 10 mcs. each, with 25 sov. added; Gentlemen Riders as qualified for the Leominster Head Cup; 11st. 7lb. each. Winners once in 1848 or 1849 to carry 11b., twice or more, 14lb. extra & three miles.

1	Mr Carew's	b. g. Lansquenet, aged	chocolate and orange stripes, black cap
2	Mr Carew's	Buscot, (h.b.) 4 yrs	chocolate and orange stripes, black cap
3	Mr John Bullen's ..	Valdepenas, (h.b.) 6 yrs ..	

The SCRAMBLE STEEPLE CHASE of 3 mcs. each, with 25 sov. added; 11st. 7lb. each; the winner to be sold for 300 sov.; if entered to be sold for 80 sov. allowed 15s., for 60 sov. 11s., for 40 1 w. 135s., for 20 sov. 175s., for 10 sov. 240s. Once round and a distance. The winner to be sold by auction immediately after the race, and any advance on the stated selling price to go to the fund.

1	Mr G. Richardson's br. m.	Dromedary ..	11 4	£80 dark blue, white sleeves and cap Charles.
2	Mr T. Mason's .. ch. g.	Trust me not ..	11 0	£60 purple, orange sleeves, black cap
3	Mr Anson's	Spring Buck ..		£60 blue and white stripes, black cap
4	Mr Carew's	Young Lottery ..	10 9	£40 chocolate and orange stripes, black cap
5	Mr K. Drenitt's . ch. m.	Miss Nipper ..	10 4	£30 scarlet, yellow sleeves, black cap Mr Barker.
6	Mr Land's	b. g. The Painter ..		£30 blue, yellow sleeves, black cap
7	Mr Smith's	b. m. Miss Fanny, aged ..	8 11	£20 blue, black cap
8	Mr Smith's	ch. g. Tamworth, aged ..		£20 blue, yellow sleeves, black cap
9	Mr Miller's	b. g. The Parson ..		£20 blue, black cap
10	Mr Carew's	b. g. Lansquenet ..	10 4	£30 chocolate and orange stripes, black cap

EPSOM AUTUMN STEEPLE CHASE of 15 mcs. each, 10 st., and 5 (if declared to Mr. H. Dorling, Clerk of the Course, Epsom, on the 25th of October, by Five o'Clock p.m., with 100 sov. added by the Lessee. A winner of 100 sov. clear after the weights are published, to carry for once 11b., twice 12lb. extra; the second to save his stake; the winner to pay 20 sov. towards expenses; twice round and a distance, about four miles.

1	Captain Barnett's ..	br. h. Sir Peter Laurie, aged ..	11 12	purple, black cap
2	Mr Carew's	b. g. British Yeoman, aged ..	11 7	chocolate and orange stripes, black cap
3	Mr Perse na.	ch. h. Lord George, 5 yrs ..	10 11	
4	Mr Treadgold's ..	b. m. Maria Day, aged ..	10 8	
5	Mr Anson's	Spring Buck	10 6	blue and white stripes, blue cap
6	Mr Hughes's	b. m. Miss Collingwood, aged ..	10 5	white with purple cap
7	Mr Hopkins's	b. m. Gulsare	9 12	purple, orange sleeves, black cap
8	Mr Carew's	b. g. Lansquenet, aged ..	9 10	chocolate and orange stripes, black cap

A FREE HANDICAP HURDLE RACE of 5 mcs. each, with 40 sov. added; over five flights of hurdles; one sov. to be paid at the time of entry, and 5 sov. in case of an acceptance. Five to start or the public money will not be added; the winner to pay 5 sov. towards expenses; New Hurdle Race Course, about two miles.

1	Mr Perse na.	ch. h. Lord George, 5 yrs ..	11 2	
2	Mr Hughes's	b. m. Miss Collingwood ..	10 11	white with purple cap
3	Mr Jarratt's	br. m. Lady Fordwich, aged ..	10 7	black, with red cap
4	Mr J. Payne's	br. g. by Coronation, 5 yrs ..	10 7	white, crimson pouter, crimson cap ..
5	Mr P. Harling's ..	b. c. Bedford, (h. h.) 4 yrs ..	10 5	red, with black cap
6	Mr R. Caffall's ..	br. m. Fanny Hill, 5 yrs ..	10 0	
7	Mr Carew's	b. h. Buscot, (h. h.) 4 yrs ..	10 0	chocolate, orange stripes, black cap ..
8	Mr John Barnard's	br. g. Coronet, 4 yrs	10 0	
9	Mr Benton's	br. f. The Little Queen, 4 yrs ..	10 0	
10	Mr H. Boyer's	br. h. The Premier, 4 yrs ..	9 12	
11	Mr Barnard's	ch. h. Sobersides, (h. h.) aged ..	9 7	

HENRY DORLING, PRINTER, EPSOM.

A 1850 Race Card

MEETING FOUR, Wednesday 5th November 1851

Results:

The Walton Free Handicap Steeplechase About 3 Miles. 3 runners

1st Mr B. Land's *The General*, 10st 4lbs, ridden by the owner. Won by a head

Free Handicap Hurdle race About 2 Miles, 3 runners

1st Mr C. Higgins *Maria Monk*, 10st 7 lbs, ridden by Planner. Won by a neck

The Scramble Steeplechase, Once round and a distance

1st Mr Mason's *Guinare*, 9st 11lbs, ridden by Oliver . Finished alone

The Epsom Autumn Steeplechase, About 4 miles, 4 runners

1st Mr Carew's *The British Yeoman*, 11st 7lb, ridden by Oliver. Won by 10 lengths

Press comment included:

The York Herald, Saturday 8th November 1851

"These events came off yesterday, but, like the Flat racing of the previous day, drew but a thin company. The affair excited no interest except among those directly involved. Like all others of the same kind that have taken place in this neighbourhood, proved a failure. The sport was not of a character to require more than a brief return."

The Era, 9th November 1851

"Although the weather on Tuesday had been bright and propitious enough for the Flat Racing on the Downs, it was surpassed by that of Wednesday, devoted to the Steeple Chasing on the old spot, Epsom Common. The lovely morning, we thought, would have tempted thousands abroad with such a prospect of sport, but, such was not the case; the muster was below average. Perhaps the novelty of a Steeple Chase near the metropolis has worn off."

The Era, continuing, praised the well-drained ground,

"Sound as a roach in every part", and noted that "Mr Barnard's Derby stand was erected immediately opposite the winning post with a railed off lawn in front"

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MEETING FIVE, Friday, 2nd. April 1852

Lack of advance publicity affected the number of runners.

Results:

A Free Handicap Hurdle, about 2 miles, 5 runners

1st Mr Collins' *The Old Wells*, ridden by Archer 9st 4lbs, won easily by a length

The Great Metropolitan Steeplechase, About 4 miles, 10 runners

1st Mr Braithwaite's *The Drag*, Ridden by White, 9st 13lbs.. Won by a length

The Scramble Steeplechase, About 2 miles. 10runners

1st Lord Lurgan's *Victress*, Ridden by Boyce, 10st 4lbs. Won "in a common canter"

The Era, Sunday April 4th 1852 recorded:

"Steward: Arthur Heathcote, Esq. Clerk of the Course: Mr Henry Dorling

These events came off on Friday over the usual line of country. Owing to the short time that elapsed between the acceptance for the great race and the day of running, numbers were left in ignorance of what might be the attractions of the card, and consequently the attendance was not so great as might have been anticipated. Still there was a goodly muster of the Ring, and the sides of the Course presented a respectable number of carriages. Of the sport itself we regret that we cannot say much, and the grand race was evidently a made up affair, and tended but little to increase the popularity of Steeple Chasing. The weather was fair, and the arrangements satisfactory."

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MEETING SIX, Friday 5th November 1852

A Flat race with a £70 purse was added as first race in an effort to stimulate extra interest. It was probably the first time that a Flat race and Steeplechase race featured on the same race card.

Results:

The Durdans Plate, For 2 year olds and upwards, 14 runners

1st Mr H. Smith's *Mayday*, Ridden by Hiatt, 6 stone 11 lbs. Won by 20 lengths

A Free Handicap Hurdle Race, About 2 miles, 5 runners

1st Mr Lister's *Tomboy*, Ridden by Tasker 10 stone 2 lbs. Won by 6 lengths

The Scramble Steeplechase, About 2 miles, 3 runners

1st Mr Maxwell's *Nutley*, Ridden by Boyce 9st 11lbs. Won by a head

The Epsom Annual Steeplechase, About 4 miles, 6 runners

1st Mr Smith's *Victress*, Ridden by T. Oliver 11st.2 lbs. Won by "several lengths in a canter"

The Morning Chronicle, Saturday 6th November 1852

"The addition of a 70l. plate for racehorses, to the hurdle and steeplechase events, to which the sport on the second day has hitherto been confined, materially strengthened the bill of fare yesterday: and the weather, although gloomy in the early part of the morning, having turned out fine, there was a fair numerical attendance, confined, however, as on the occasion of the "legitimate" racing on the Downs, to the professional and middle classes; of the "influential", the proportion was smaller than at any previous meeting. The course in all parts was awfully deep and "holding", making easy falling for the riders, but proving distressing in the extreme to the horse, many of whom could scarcely raise a walk at the finish. The sport was indifferent, the only events that produced anything like a contest being the Scramble steeple-chase, which the spectators evidently imagined ought to have been won by the by the animal whose head was second past the winning post. The general feeling on the subject was very significantly expressed.

The racing, which, from bad management; was not got through until nearly dusk."

The Era, 7th November 1852, again commented on the geological suitability of the location:

"Steeple chases are decidedly unpopular at Epsom, and notwithstanding the liberal management and untiring exertions to render them attractive, they have proved unsuccessful and unsatisfactory. The course is ill adapted to the proper display of this peculiar description of the sport. On this occasion the ground was more than usually sticky and holding, and in some places it was fetlock deep in mud and water."

"A Steeplechase with its contingent exciting, possesses powerful attractions to pleasure folk; spectators therefore mustered more numerously than they did on the Downs on the previous day to witness the celebration of the legitimate sport."

But the cheating that was rife in Steeplechasing at this time persisted;

"The most flagrant and glaring "doings" were connected with the Scramble Steeplechase. For this event three started, two of them, Sam Hood and La Chouette

belonging to Mr Sait. Nutley was the favourite and from the spirit in which it was backed, the "good thing" was evident. On charging the first, Sam Hood refused and was "considerately" stopped. Nutley fell and before he could be again got upon his legs, La Chouette was nearly a quarter of a mile clear. La Chouette, with difficulty, succeeded in losing the race. More palpable Steeplechase trickery was seldom witnessed. Both jockeys were greeted with groans and hisses and shouts of "Pull then from their horses", "Duck them" and other expressions of rage and indignation."

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MEETING SEVEN, Wednesday 19th January 1853

Results:

A Free Handicap Steeplechase, About four miles. 13 runners

1st Mr C. Higgins's *Forest Lad*, Ridden by Weever*. Won by 6 lengths

The Selling Steeplechase, Three miles. 8 runners

1st Mr Barnard's *Young Lottery*, Ridden by Boyce. Won by a distance

A Free Handicap Hurdle Race About two miles. 7 runners

1st Mr Price's *Tom Gurney*, Ridden by Price jnr. Won by 3 lengths

*Shown as ridden by Weever in *The London Daily News*, but Tasker in *Lloyds Weekly* newspaper.

However the Obituary to former jockey Edwin Weever in the *Glasgow Herald* 8th November 1895, refers to him winning an important Steeplechase at Epsom on Forest Lad.

The Daily News, Thursday January 20th 1853 noted

"The little interest the events had excited was neutralised by the weather, which was gloomy and uninviting in the extreme: and it is almost needless to add that the course was in anything but a fit state for racing, or that the attendance was thin, speculation dull, and the meeting, as a pecuniary speculation, a failure."

The Era, Sunday 23rd January 1853, gave a fuller account:

*"Steward: A, Heathcote Clerk of the Course: Mr. Dorling
The Steeplechases which were got up at the Dolphin Club, Mil-street, with the laudable view of endeavouring in some measure to enliven the dullness that pervades the Sporting World in the metropolis, came off on Wednesday last over the usual Course, and we regret that we cannot add that we discovered any improvement upon the style of former Meetings, which have incurred so strongly our censure. The weather, which on the previous day had promised some amendment, broke heavily and the rain came down in a manner that tested severely the pluck of those who were resolved not to be away from "the day's play" they had promised themselves. Owing to the atmospheric influence the Epsom Railway was the means of conveyance chiefly patronised, and the directors, with commendable foresight, having consented to send on the 12.15 train that usually stops at Croydon, upwards of five hundred persons were forwarded to the scene of action with punctuality and dispatch. On our arrival we found the Stand but thinly attended, and the company anything but aristocratic. Of farmers and country folks there was a small sprinkling, but the muster, upon the whole was far below average. The course was heavy in the extreme, and the approach to the Stand almost inaccessible to pedestrians, and none but the pugilistic division, who are used weekly to traverse the Dartford Marshes, appeared at home in the attempt to get up to it."*

The article continued to describe that owing to the confined space in the weighing room, the first race was an hour late starting, and "shades of evening" were approaching when the third and final race started. The race was followed by "great confusion created by Ben Land

charging Tom Price with dropping a pound weight, and having it given to him afterwards. A war of words ensued, which was likely but for the interference of the police, to end in a pugilistic encounter.”

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MEETING EIGHT, Friday 8th April 1853

Results:

The Great Metropolitan Steeplechase, About 4 miles, 6 runners

1st Mr Mason's *British Yeoman*, Ridden by S. Darling jun. 11st. 7 lbs. Won by a head

The Selling Steeplechase, about 2 miles, 7 runners

1st Mr Land's *The Slashing Painter*, 10st. 9lbs. Won easily by 6 lengths

A Free Handicap hurdle, about 2 miles, 5 runners

1st Mr Saxon's *Caurire*, 10s.t. Won by half a distance

The Stand Plate Steeplechase, about 3 miles, 5 runners

1st Mr Sait's *Simon the Cellarer*, 10st. Won by two lengths

A Match, About 3 miles

1st Mr Jordans's *Fourteen-two* ridden by C. Boyce, 10st. 6 lbs won in a canter

There was very little press coverage for the National Hunt day of the two-day Epsom Spring Meeting.

The first day's racing, the Flat fixture on the Downs; that included the valuable City and Suburban, and Great Metropolitan Handicaps attracted most attention, and overshadowed the second day.

The race analyses in *The Morning Chronicle*, 9th April 1853 partly set the scene.

In the first race:

"For the last mile, an extremely fine race with Ringleader and British Yeoman. Up the straight they measured stride with stride, and ran as if locked together. The perseverance of both horses and jockeys were greeted with shouts of applause. In the last effort British Yeoman achieved the victory by a head."

Conversely the Stand Plate Steeplechase produced a poor spectacle:

"Shinree led to the top fence at which he refused, and caused the others to refuse also. At last they found their way over, and Shinree entered the hollow with a strong lead. Peg top refused the flight there, and his spin was over. Louis the First fell and threw his rider, and got away. The race was then left to the three placed."

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MEETING NINE, 4th November 1853

The Era, 30th October 1853 reported:

“Mr. Dorling not at all discouraged by the pecuniary loss which has hitherto attended his getting up of an Autumn Meeting at Epsom, has again appeared in print with a programme for Thursday and Friday next. The sport at these meetings hitherto, has hardly come up to that of the Spring and Summer Meetings.”

In an effort to generate extra interest, Mr Dorling repeated the experiment of the previous November by starting proceedings with a Flat race for two year olds worth 70 sovereigns.

Results;

The Durdans Plate, for two year olds and upwards, 6 furlongs, 10 run

1st Mr Merry's *Mysterious Lady*, ridden by Fordham, 5st 4lbs. won by a couple of lengths

The Free Handicap Hurdle, about 2 miles, 4 runners

1st Mr Searle's *Edward of York*. Ridden by Poole, 10st 4lbs won by half a length

The Scramble Steeplechase, About 2 miles, 6 runners

1st Mr Baird's *Chestnut Gelding*, Ridden by Boyce, 10st 4lbs, finished alone

The Epsom Autumn Steeplechase, About 4 miles. 10 runners

1st Mr Sait's *Sam Hood*, Ridden by owner, 9st 4 lbs, won by 6 lengths

The Daily News, Saturday November 5th 1853 noted:

“The weather was fine and the attendance of company pretty good. As usual some of the proceedings with the “jumpers” were of a very discreditable character, and we were glad to find a determination on the part of the steward Mr Arthur Heathcote, to prevent a recurrence of the doings and arrangements which were too palpable to escape indignation.”

The Era, Sunday November 6th 1853, was more explicit;

“The second day's proceedings at the Epsom meeting were with one exception confined to cross-country “sport”, if the term can be properly applied to cross running and barefaced robbery. The day was beautiful in the extreme, and the fine weather continued the whole of the afternoon. The first race (over the flat) was run at half past one o'clock with it commenced the wrangle of the day. It was won from end to end by Mysterious Lady; Sweetheart and Corfu not getting to the post in time to start. Some interested parties tried to get the race run again, upon the paltry subterfuge that all had not gone to post at the appointed time. We believe the cause of this attempt was the fact there had not been time to execute a commission to back the winner. The Handicap Hurdle race was a well-planned but miserably executed, robbery, for which all the parties concerned, or their plating employers, ought to be warned off any racecourse in the kingdom. Sir Philip and Songster were purposely stopped, and The Screw was pulled back in order to allow Edward of York to win. There can be no doubt that all the others were made safe. So palpable was the fraud, that a fellow named Green, who rode The Screw, was groaned and hissed at by every

nine out of ten members of the Ring, and a dozen policemen of the A Division were obliged to conduct him into the weighing room, or the threats of ducking or thrashing him would have certainly been carried into execution. The scamp attempted to weigh in again in the Steeplechase, but the Steward with a straightforwardly determination only to be mentioned to be commended, directed that he should not be allowed to ride again under his stewardship. We hope that the Stewards, at Liverpool next week, and elsewhere, will adopt the same means of punishing the scoundrel. A great outcry then ensued about the bets, many expressing a hope that the worthy young Steward would declare them off. That gentleman after consulting Mr. George Payne, (who had money, and was a loser, on the race, and consequently refused to give any opinion) doubted his power to adopt such a course of proceeding, but directed that all bets on the race should remain in abeyance until he had consulted a higher authority, when he would give his decision accordingly. We do not remember having witnessed such a discreditable scene before. Mr. Bird's chestnut gelding made the running from end to end, and won in a trot, nothing else being up. All the others fell, and stopped with the exception of Arlette, who went on, and passed the post, although above a quarter of a mile off when the winner went by. The Judge only placed one, and refused to place Arlette for the cause given above. A protest was then handed in by the owner of Arlette, that the owner of the Chesnut (sic) gelding was not entitled to the stakes, on the ground that the horse had run twice before with a name, whereas he was now entered without one. The Steward overruled the objection immediately."

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MEETING TEN, Friday 7th April 1854

In 1854, the venue for the Steeplechase was changed. *The Era* recorded:

“EPSOM GREAT METROPOLITAN STEEPLECHASES.-These home events will be decided on Friday, the 7th April next, over Epsom Court farm, the residence of Mr. William Price, the proprietor, who has kindly consented to that arrangement. The farm comprises nearly 500 acres of fair hunting country, including grass, seeds, wheat etc., has two natural brooks. And the usual hedges and ditches, and is supposed to be quite equal to the majority of ground used for similar sporting purpose. There will be four races under the stewardship of Captain Douglas Lane and Captain G.B. Price, and the public money to be given away exceeds £200. The Great Metropolitan Chase to which £100 clear is added, and the Free Handicap Hurdle Race, both close on the 20th March. The other two races the Selling Hurdle Race, and the Selling Steeplechase- do not close until the 4th April,(entries) to that well -known sporting caterer, Mr Henry Dorling, of Epsom.”

Results:

Selling Flat Race, About 4 furlongs, 6 runners

1st Mr Reeves' *Lioness* Ridden by Ashmall, 7st 2lbs. Won “easily” by two lengths

The Great Metropolitan Steeplechase, About 3 and a half miles, 7 runners

1st Mr B. Land's *Needwood*. Ridden by T. Ablett, 11st Won “in a canter” by eight lengths

Selling Steeplechase, About 2 miles, 3 runners

1st Mr Simmonds' *Rob Roy*. Ridden by Ablett, 10st 11lbs. Won by 6 lengths

Free Handicap Hurdle Race, About 2 miles, 3 runners

1st Mr B. Land's *Theodine*. Ridden by Ablett. 9st, 12lbs, (carried 10 st.) won by a neck

The Selling Hurdle Race, About 2 miles, 4 runners

1st *The Monk*, Ridden by W. Archer 10 st, won by 20 lengths.

The Daily News added the ominous footnote:

“Some of the proceedings connected with this meeting furnished an additional argument for the abolition of Selling Steeplechases etc.”

The Era, Sunday 9th April 1854, continued its now familiar theme that Steeplechase racing had no future at Epsom:

“On the principle laid down by Shakespeare, that when “A well dressed actor leaves the stage, the eyes are idly bent on him who enters next”, so, indeed was the relative difference noticeable between the aristocratic and immense attendance of the previous day to the general aspect of affairs witnessed on the occasion of the steeple chase gathering on Friday.

The line of country was different to that ever selected before, being chosen on the Epsom Court Farm, by the permission of Mr. William Price.

The various events which were decided, never excited the slightest speculation. Messrs. Langlands and Barnard erected their booth on the Upper Long Meadow, near the Common, and this was termed the grandstand.

None of the events deserve further allusion than has already been made. The sport, which was quite mediocre, and such as to induce a pretty general belief that steeple chasing had better not be added here as an amusement any longer, commenced at two o'clock, and did not terminate till nearly seven o'clock."

Sporting Magazine, May 1854, reflected on the Steeplechase meeting:

"April 6th Epsom Spring Meeting. 7th April Epsom Steeple Chases.

"The venue of this popular pageant has been changed; but that it is a fitting site, or at all likely to become a favourite one with the owners of horses, or the public, we entertain considerable doubt, and, but for the exertions of the popular Clerk of the Course, we are convinced the meeting would, ere this, have met with a premature death. The land was chiefly plough and wheat, and from the recent dry weather was very hard."

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THE DEMISE OF STEEPLECHASE RACING AT EPSOM

The Era, Sunday 29th October 1854, reported the demise of the Steeplechase Meeting: Praising Mr Dorling for his “*deference to public opinion*” the sport was dismissed as affording “*opportunities for the most barefaced plunder of the public*” and “*were looked upon with aversion and contempt by every right minded sportsman.*”

The Autumn Meeting became a one-day fixture of Flat racing on the Downs.

The Era, Sunday 5th November 1854, praised Mr Dorling for standing up to the cheating:

“The meeting it might be here mentioned, was solely confined to one day’s proceedings across the flat, the disgraceful “screw-robbery” of last year, and the warning off of the Downs of Green, the offending rider, having been the cause of Mr. Dorling and the Epsomites eschewing everything in the shape of steeplechasing. It is a great pity such vile proceedings have not had a similar effect elsewhere.”

As predicted despite the exertions of Clerk of the Course Henry Dorling the venue did not become a permanent fixture, and appears to have ceased from 1854. The move from Epsom Common to Epsom Court Farm failed to save the event.

Press comment at the time sums up the primary reasons; the unsuitability of Epsom Common, plus the decidedly low-grade racing and level of cheating that pervaded Steeplechase racing at that time.

In some respects Mr Dorling was “ahead of his time”. Mixing Flat and Jumps racing became popular, and still exists today. Similarly the doubts about staging Steeplechase racing so close to London were eventually dispelled, albeit some twenty years later.

Sandown Park opened in 1875, and Kempton Park in 1878, both continue to stage Jumps racing to this day.

Steeplechase racing at Croydon started in 1858, and staged several important races. It was second in importance only to Aintree, until its closure in 1890 when the fixture was moved to Gatwick.

There was also Steeplechase racing at Streatham between 1868 and 1878, Bromley (1864-1876), and Eltham,

Epsom’s growth as a training centre from 1860 saw the trainers concentrating, in the main, on Steeplechase racing; but was sadly too late for the Epsom Steeplechase course; but Croydon in particular was a regular successful venue for local trainers and jockeys. Such was the success of Epsom trained horses in Steeplechase races that the Prince of Wales had his horses trained at Priam Lodge in Burgh Heath Road.

Memories of the waterlogged Common, and the “bare faced plunder” faded with time.

The Penny Illustrated Paper, 16th November 1895, referring to the death of trainer and jockey Teddy Weever recalls a rosier picture:

“I will not recollect his riding in a steeplechase at Epsom on the Common, because I am not certain I was about then, but I am quite sure I recollect being told about the business, not long after the then slim Teddy, who in his later days was four feet wide,

rode and won on the common over against Horton Manor, where but for political influence we might now have a good steeplechase course."

The area of "political influence" remains unclear; however, Mr Dorling and the racecourse management gave Steeplechase racing at Epsom every chance; perhaps a dozen or so years before the sport was ready for a wider audience.

Dorling's role in aiding the transition of Steeplechasing from field to racecourse was thankless, and unsuccessful at the time; however it was an important part of the evolution of the sport that we know today.

SURREY ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS 1921

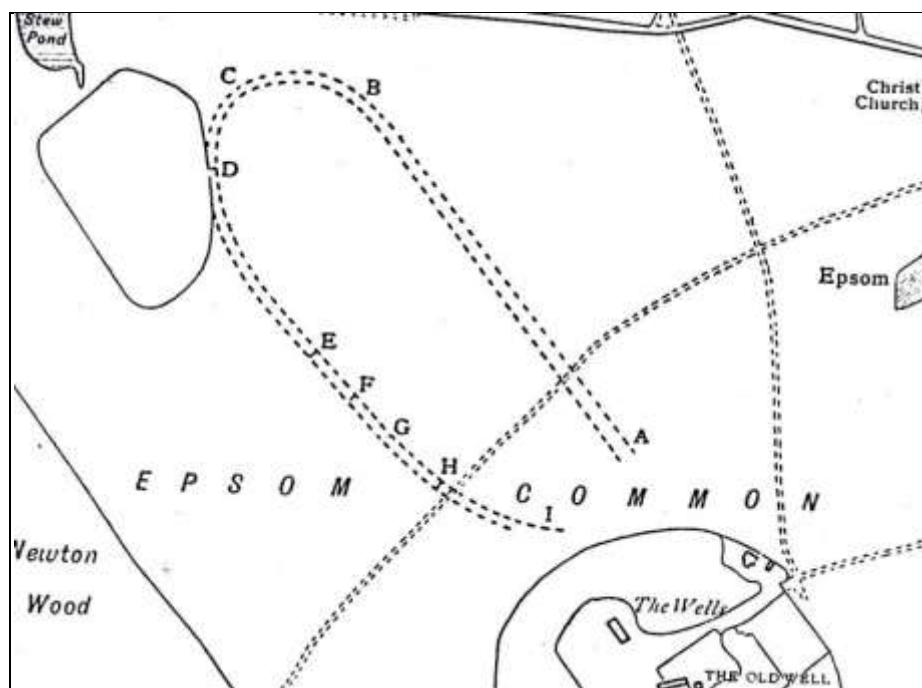
Pages 101-104, written by A.A. Hopper, describe "EPSOM; AN OLD TRACK NEAR THE WELLS"

The course is described as "oval." *"The track is marked on each side by a ditch and bank, the ditch being generally visible as a shallow depression about a yard across where it is faintest; where it is clearly marked I am satisfied that most of the earth has been thrown up on the outside forming a low bank about six inches above normal ground level."*

The identification of ditches on each side concurs with The Steeplechase Calendar that recorded prior to the November 1850 meeting:

"The steeplechase course has been thoroughly drained and much improved."

The paper notes that the system of built up banks outside the ditches is only visible on the higher ground (i.e. the ground nearest The Wells) where the gorse has protected it.



Reproduced from the Surrey Archaeological Society paper 1921, the illustration shows the approximate site of the racecourse.

“The track is about 30 yards to begin with (at A), gradually tapering to about 18 at B; near C it is barely 11, and the remainder maintains a fairly normal width of 13 yards. The track is for the most part much more clear of bushes etc., than the rest of the common; in fact, a cart track runs right along the section A-B, and goes straight on to the road at the northern edge of the common. A path follows from B to C, and turns aside at the Stew Pond.

Between D and H the track runs on fairly level ground, which must be 30 to 40 feet lower than the ground A-B. Soon after crossing the footpath near H the track begins to curve again and climbs steeply up the hill towards I, where both the ditches appear to be lost. It is possible that the oval was completed, as the ground between A and I has been cut up by shallow excavations two or three feet deep.

At five points on the track, D,E,F,G, and H a trench appears to have been dug across the track, ending in the boundary ditches. In each case, the ditch appears to have been three feet wide, and two feet deep.

There is a vague tradition of a racecourse on the common, but the track is too narrow to compare with a full size racecourse, and the cross trenches too irregular in distribution for jumps.”

The trenches at D, E, F, G and H were probably dug after the course became redundant to stop people galloping around it.

The location concurs with the description that appeared in *The Morning Chronicle*, Wednesday April 10, 1850.

“The subjoined list of the flat races (To be run tomorrow on the Downs) and of the steeplechases (to be decided on the following day within ten minutes’ walk of the town The Steeplechase ground selected is on Epsom common, about a mile from the town on the right of the road to Leatherhead. The winning post will be within a quarter of a mile of the Windmill, and the start will take place at the distance post.”

The site of the stand was also identified in the 1921 paper,

“This is a circular mound, ditch and bank about 15 yards in diameter which stands just beside the track on the highest point of the common.”

This was probably the site recorded in the *Daily News*, Saturday April 13th, 1850,

“For the accommodation of those to whom five shillings was “no object,” Barnard’s stand were erected in a position commanding a good view of the running.”

Sporting Magazine May 1850, noted,

‘On the morrow there was steeplechasing on the opposite side of town, the trysting ground being Epsom Common. The line was all within sight of the Stands’

The stands were clearly located on the highest point.

By 2014, the part marked A to B, remained as a designated horse track. The ditches dug either side of the track have become eroded but are evident in places near A. There is some brickwork, (now largely buried) near the site of the old “grandstand”.