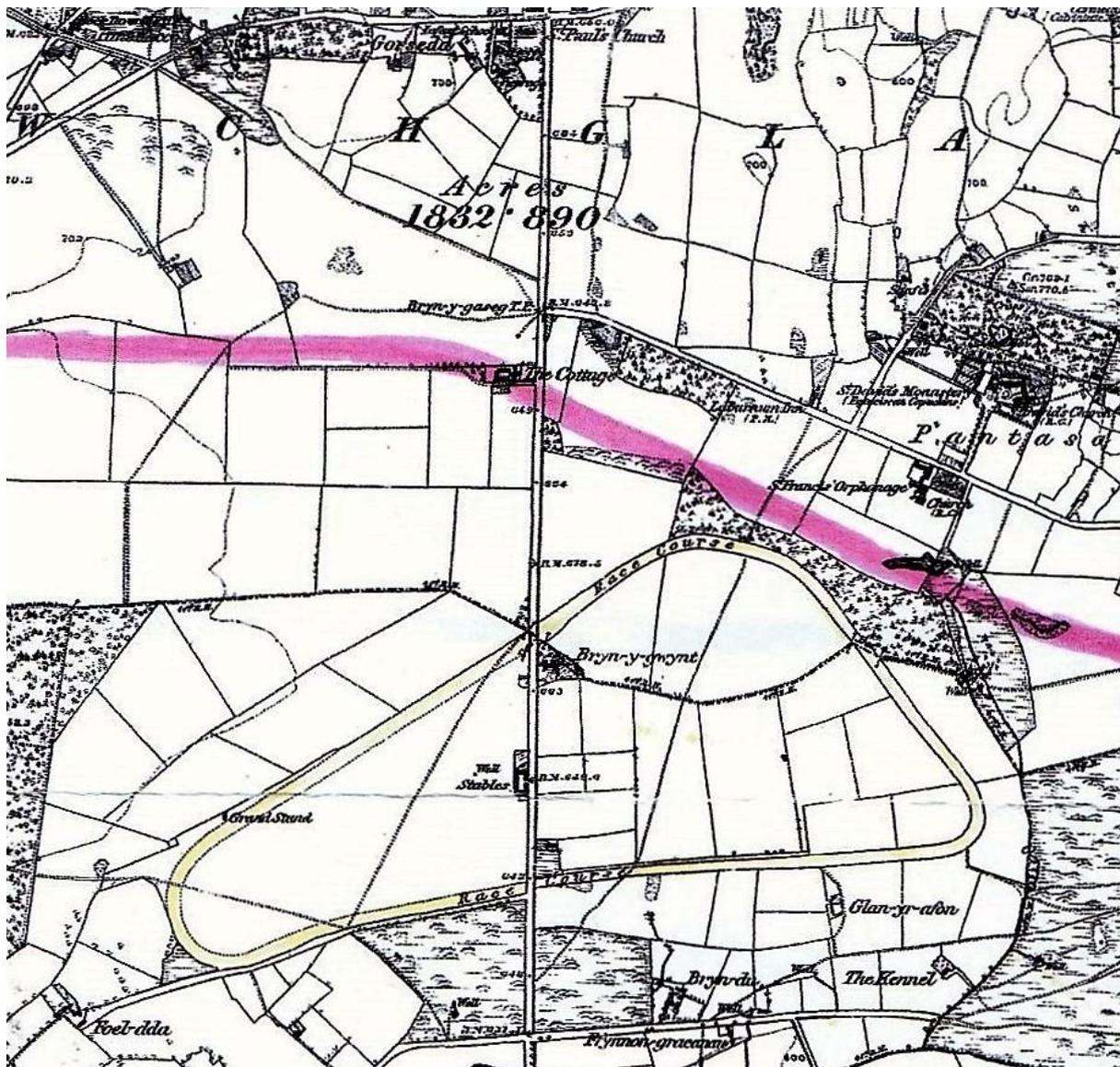


## Holywell Racecourse by Dr Ken Davies

Sir Roger Mostyn (1734-1796) 5th Baronet of Mostyn was a keen racehorse owner. His interest was shared by many of the gentry of north east Wales and neighbouring areas, including Sir Richard Grosvenor (1731-1802), who had, due to his love of racing, established studs both at Eaton Hall and Wallasey on the Wirral, Edward Stanley 11<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby 1752-1776 and Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn (1749-1789) of Wynnstay. The Holywell Hunt was established under their patronage. In 1767 Mostyn with their encouragement decided to create his own race meeting so he bought an area of land between Pantasaph and Babel for £200 and initiated the process of creating a racecourse. The final result was an oval, flat course of 2 miles one furlong circumference, with a slight hill as the horses entered the final 4 furlong straight running in an anti-clockwise direction and comprises land in Whitford and Ysceifiog parishes. The Enclosure Acts (1800) confirmed the ownership of the part in Whitford parish to Mostyn estates and the part in Ysceifiog parish to the Grosvenor estates. A training ground was also created not far from the racecourse, at Ffrith-y-garreg-wen, where the horses were run and exercised before the races.



The first recorded race took place on Thursday 9th November 1769 managed by Sir Roger Mostyn. It was, reportedly, a spectacular meeting, opening with a Match for 100 Guineas in which Mr Maurice's

Guinea-Pig beat sole rival Lord Grosvenor's Arabian. The feature race of the day, the Holywell Cup run over two miles for Members of the local Hunt, was won by racing fanatic Sir W W Wynn's Brown George ridden by Mr Maurice. On the same day the Holywell 100 guineas was won by Guinea Pig owned and ridden by Mr Maurice; the Holywell Stakes with a prize of 140 guineas for gentlemen riders went to Mr Jones's Midnight; while the meeting concluded with a race for four year old horses with a purse of £50 run over three two mile heats which was won by Sir W W Wynn's Flimnap. The size of the prize moneys involved needs to be appreciated: 100 guineas in 1769 would equate to well over £11,000 at 2025 values and 140 guineas would equate to over £15,000 at 2025 values.

The Holywell Hunt race meeting became an annual affair, run in the month of October and administered by the Mostyn family. After the death of Sir Roger Mostyn in 1796 the meetings were administered by Sir Thomas Mostyn (1776-1831) 6th Baronet of Mostyn with continued patronage by all of the prominent racing men of the day, including Sir Richard Grosvenor. Edward Smith-Stanley 12<sup>th</sup> Earl Derby (1752-1834) and Sir W W Wynn 5<sup>th</sup> Baronet (1772-1840). It was an important meeting in the national racing calendar. The Mostyn racing colours were orange with a black cap. The Grosvenor colours were initially all orange though apparently from 1799 the family adopted the same as the Mostyns. The Earl of Derby's racing colours were black with a white cap.

The race schedules were modified over the years after 1869. In 1807 the Mostyn Mile Championship was launched with the inaugural running being won by Young Chariot owned by a Mr C Cholmondeley. The Mostyn Mile was contested each year for the next 29 years, with three of the races 1821-3 won by Princess Royal owned by Sir T Mostyn. The meeting in 1817 was termed the 'Jubilee' gathering and included a race for a Jubilee Cup valued at 100 guineas. Holywell Races were clearly an important and impressive event for in 1819 Robert Grosvenor, 1st Marquess of Westminster, brought Prince Leopold (later to be named as Leopold I King of the Belgians,) who was staying with him at Eaton Hall, to the racecourse. In 1824 Princess Royal won the Hawarden Castle Stakes and another Mostyn horse, Archduchess, won the Taffy Stakes. Reputedly on another occasion Sir Thomas Mostyn was so overjoyed that his horse, Piccadilly, won a race that he gave an inn in nearby Caerwys to the jockey, who promptly renamed it after the horse he had ridden. The Piccadilly Inn still trades today.

The finest horse produced by the Eaton stud during Robert Grosvenor's 1<sup>st</sup> Marquess of Westminster (1767-1845) time was [Touchstone](#). In its debut year in 1833 it ran in the Holywell Champagne Stakes and the following year it ran in two races (Mostyn Stakes and Chieftain Stakes) It went on to win 16 of the 21 races for which it was entered, including the [St Leger](#), and on two occasions, the [Ascot Gold Cup](#) and the [Doncaster Cup](#). After retirement from racing the horse [sired](#) 323 winners of over 700 races.<sup>[5]</sup> In 1834, the noted thoroughbred Queen of Trumps, owned by Edward Lloyd-Mostyn won the Champagne Stakes at Holywell, before taking the Oaks and St Ledgers Stakes - the first horse to do so.



During the race meetings, the town of Holywell was very busy with spectators and horse owners. There is a story that Richard Grosvenor, 2nd Marquis of Westminster (1795-1869) was apt to take all the rooms of the White Horse Hotel on the High Street in Holywell (which boasted of once hosting Princess, later Queen, Victoria in 1832) for the convenience of his guests. However, on one occasion, Grosvenor found to his irritation that one of the rooms at the inn had been taken by a commercial traveller, and no amount of cajoling could persuade the fellow to leave. Enraged, Grosvenor refused to ever return to the White Horse and instead built Halkyn Castle 1824/5, where his guests could stay in some considerable luxury.

Each year 1767-1836 on the Thursday after the races the Holywell Hunt held a Ball in the upper rooms of the Bell Inn (previously known as the Blue Bell) in Holywell High Street. Local children would gather to watch the gentry including the Grosvenor, Mostyn, Stanley and Myttons arrive in their coaches and dressed in their fineries.

At some point a grandstand was built. Apparently it was warmed against the October chilling winds with a bucket containing smouldering coals in the basement beneath the seating. Surprisingly there are no reports of any disastrous fire in the timber framed stand. A hexagonal starters tower was also erected. There was a proposal in 1828 for the building of a new grandstand and stabling block financed with loans from members the Holywell Hunt. It is not clear if these proposals came to fruition.

However, despite its popularity it seems the Holywell Hunt failed to meet after 1836. Thomas Mostyn (6<sup>th</sup> Baronet from 1796), who had long been governed by his passion for the chase, which he pursued in the company of his brother-in-law Sir Edward Pryce Lloyd of Pengwern (1768-1854), died unmarried in 1831 and the baronetcy became extinct. His main estates passed to his sister Elizabeth wife of Sir Edward Pryce Lloyd, who was created Baron Mostyn later that year. Their eldest son Edward Lloyd (1795-1884) adopted by royal licence the surname Mostyn. He also seemed to have a passion for racing. His horses won 3 of the last 4 runnings of the Mostyn Mile race. Possibly Baron Mostyn and his son were the organisers of Holywell Races event 1831-1836. However, their involvement in racing seems to have waned as their involvement in Parliament grew. The 12<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby died in 1834 and his successor Edward Smith-Stanley 13<sup>th</sup> Earl was more interested in natural history than horse racing.

A revival was attempted on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> October and Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> October 1852 but despite a reputedly grand turn-out it was not repeated. It is not clear who initiated or administered that event. Though the race titles sounded familiar including the Grosvenor Stakes over 4 furlongs, Pengwern Stakes over 6 furlongs and Holywell Hunt Purse over 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> miles none of the former racing family names appear in the race lists. On the contrary Sir W W Wynn 6<sup>th</sup> Baronet (1820-1885) had organised his own, potentially competing, racing event in Ruthin on 23<sup>rd</sup> October.

In September 1867 there was a celebration of the twenty first birthday of Piers William Mostyn (heir to the Talacre estate) including a donkey race in Holywell High Street and horse racing on Talacre Park. However, Thomas Bell an auctioneer of Well Street, Holywell an ardent supporter of 'good old English sports' initiated a collection for rural sports. This resulted in a revival of the Holywell racecourse in October 1867. Thomas Bell was the clerk of the course and secretary. However, there is no record of any of the Mostyn family attending and the prize money was not of previous levels. The Mostyn Stakes for non-thorough bred had a prize of ten sovereigns, the Talacre Stakes 5 sovereigns and the Downing Sweepstakes consisted of the entry fees (Five shillings per horse) plus a sovereign. Rather than an evening ball there was a public dinner at the Swan Hotel, Holywell.

The area is now mainly in agricultural use. However, ironically most of the course is a bridleway and most of the two mile and a furlong course can still be traced on foot. However, only some scattered masonry remains as a reminder of the buildings.

