

Gigginstown cast-off in Derby triumph

Chris Pitt *reports on the 2023 Kiplingcotes Derby...*

While racing's cognoscenti gathered in Gloucestershire to see whether Shishkin could follow his impressive Ascot Chase triumph with victory in the Ryanair, and find out who would land an open-looking Stayers' Hurdle, a faithful few hundred assembled along a muddy single-track road in the East Yorkshire Wolds, five miles from Market Weighton, just as their predecessors had done for 500 years.

The third Thursday of March has always been Derby Day in these parts. Kiplingcotes Derby Day, that is, the race having celebrated its 500th anniversary in 2019.

Epsom's Derby may have taken place after Royal Ascot in 2020, but the Kiplingcotes version went ahead in its traditional March slot, likewise in 2021, both years behind closed doors. Those two BCD renewals comprised two local entrants: local farmer Stephen Crawford on Ferkin – formerly known as Ferrovierie, unplaced in two three-year-old Pontefract maidens for Ollie Pears in 2011 – and four-time Derby winner John Thirsk on Harry, a.k.a. Heaven's Gates, winner of a Southwell all-weather seller for Kevin Ryan back in 2007. They rode the entire course both times, finishing in pre-arranged dead-heats.

They had to do it. You just can't tinker with the Kiplingcotes Derby. There's supposedly a stipulation in the ancient rules, added in 1618, that should it not take place one year, it would cease forever. Something about a farmer being able to refuse permission for the race to be run over part of his land. No-one knows for certain whether that's true. They've never chanced it.

Back in the winter of 1947, 36-year-old farmer Fred Stephenson defied four-foot snowdrifts on his steed Londesborough Lad to keep the race going. Clerk of the course Harry Ruston read the rules and Fred set off for the start, returning an hour and a half later (the winner's time is usually around 15 minutes).

Nor did the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001 threaten its existence. While it may have scuppered Cheltenham, it was never going to derail Kiplingcotes. Stephen Crawford saddled up his horse Memorable and walked over for the prize, thus perpetuating the race's long tradition. Faced with a waterlogged course in 2018, the organisers arranged for Crawford to weigh out and do it again.

The Nature of the Race

A quirk of the race conditions requires that £4.00 of the £5.00 entry fee goes to the rider of the runner-up (the other £1.00 goes to the starter), hence, if there are more than a dozen runners, the second receives more than the winner, whose prize-money is capped at £50.

Nobody knows how many will take part until 11.00am on the day of the race, the cut-off point for entries. By then, all riders must have weighed out on the traditional set of 1940s coal miner's scales, weighing at least ten stone. For most riders that does not present a problem, whereas those weighing under the minimum must make up the excess on their body. This usually involves some form of body belt containing weights of a type slipped into a jockey's saddle before a race, although there have been some novel alternative methods of making up the difference.

While the number of entries is unknown until the day, one thing is certain. Since the turn of the century, the Kiplingcotes Derby has become ever more competitive. Like the Grand National where many previous winners wouldn't make the cut nowadays, so the Kiplingcotes has evolved into a race whereby you need a 'proper' racehorse to stand a chance.

"It's far more professional now," reflects racegoer Deidre Blakeston. She should know because she won the 1973 running on Lemcile, harking back to a time when it was purely a local affair and the runners were mostly farm horses or, at best, hunters.

Dierdre's victory of exactly 50 years ago interrupted the near domination of Jean Cole-Walton, who landed the prize six times during an eight-year period between 1968 and 1974. The race's organisers had a far more modern outlook to the misogynistic Jockey Club. Whereas women weren't allowed to ride under JC rules until 1972, Miss Jean Farrow had paved the way for female jockeys when winning the Kiplingcotes Derby way back in 1939.

The Course

Experience is a vital factor. It's a tough and demanding course, particularly in years such as this, with the Derby taking place in testing conditions following days of rainfall.

The race starts by a small, insignificant stone post in the parish of Etton. Over the years, people had asked for something more recognisable to indicate the starting point. With that in mind, a local blacksmith was commissioned to make a special horseshoe which is now affixed to the stone.

The three and three-quarter-mile course begins 160 feet above sea level and heads in a north-westerly direction. The horses gallop along a grass verge, climbing steadily to 368 feet over Goodmanham Wold, before dropping down to Enthorpe crossroads and over Enthorpe railway bridge. The ground then drops slightly downhill before a steady climb up to 438 feet above sea level. This part of the course often comprises thick, clinging mud, so the experienced jockeys tend to keep well to the side by the adjacent field, rather than riding along the middle of the track.

From here the course climbs further to the main A614 road crossing, where it levels out with a straight two-furlong gallop along grass verge to the winning post on Londesborough Wold.

Kiplingcotes Derby 2023 – runners and riders

The much-discussed decline in field sizes has not affected Kiplingcotes, where entries remain buoyant. A record field of 36 had gone to post for the historic 500th anniversary running in 2019. Nineteen took part in 2022, while 20 turned up for this year's renewal, the riders comprising a roughly 50-50 split of former entrants and Kiplingcotes 'virgins', having their first experience of the Derby course.

First to arrive was Kiplingcotes debutant Mel McCormick with her 11-year-old Thoroughbred named **Jolly**. Unraced under rules or in point-to-points, McCormick bought the horse as a yearling and takes part in eventing. With a landmark birthday approaching, she described herself as "a happy hacker," adding that riding in the Kiplingcotes Derby was on her bucket list of "Fifty things to do before I'm fifty."

Next was former point-to-point rider and permit holder Richard Harper and **Benny**, all the way from Kings Sutton, near Banbury. With a combined age of 91, they would be among the seniors in this year's renewal. Richard, 71, and 20-year-old Benny finished fourth last year. Better known as Chapel House in his racing days, Benny won three chases and a point-to-point.

Also among the early arrivals was last year's runner-up, 11-year-old **Jasper**, the mount of Tom Cowlam, a doctor by profession. Trained by Stella Barclay and racing under the name Prince Of Time, Jasper won three all-weather contests in April/May 2017.

Soon after came 19-year-old **Start Me Up**, second in the 500th anniversary running of 2019. A winner of three Irish bumpers when trained by Charlie Swan and ridden by Nina Carberry, he then won over hurdles and fences for Michael O'Leary's Gigginstown, operation partnered each time by Davy Russell. His owner-rider, Jason Carver, was noticeably coy but clearly there to win, having twice ridden Start Me Up to victory in the 2013 and 2015 runnings of the historic Newmarket Town Plate, a race dating back to 1665 and which some claim to be older than the Kiplingcotes Derby itself (a claim yet to be substantiated).

Asked where he came from while submitting his entry, Carver vaguely answered 'Yorkshire' but then changed his reply to 'Lincolnshire'. When asked what colours he'd be wearing, his gruff response was on the lines of 'Why do you want to know?' He was either in the zone, his eyes fixed firmly on the prize, or being evasively obtuse. Doncaster bookie Chris Johnson's 'eyes and ears' Robert Maltby, standing nearby, resolved to offer short odds about him. Despite his advanced years, Start Me Up looked a serious contender and the likely favourite.

With little more than half an hour remaining to cut-off time, only eight horses had been declared, but then came a steady stream of arrivals. They included Stephen Crawford with **Ferkin** (Ferroverie) and John Thirsk with **Harry** (Heaven's Gates), the dead-heaters in those two behind closed doors renewals.

Then came a pair of 13-year-olds, both former racehorses. The grey **Merlin** raced as Grey Destiny, winning seven times on the all-weather plus a six-furlong Catterick turf contest for York-based trainer Antony Brittain. He was partnered by Julie Campbell, having her first ride in the race.

Palermo Don, formerly trained by Donald McCain, won a Haydock bumper under AP McCoy. Palermo Don's half-brother Overturn, also trained by McCain, was a top-class dual-purpose performer, winning 14 times on the Flat and over fences and hurdles, including the Chester Cup, Northumberland Plate, Fighting Fifth Hurdle, Galway Hurdle and Scottish Champion Hurdle. Palermo Don was ridden by another Kiplingcotes first-timer, Mark Gilbert.

Boasting a more upmarket pedigree than either of those was 17-year-old **Tim**, who ran as 'Mr Tim' in 2022 and finished last of the 17 finishers, owned and ridden, as this year, by Sylvia Smith. 'Tim' was formerly known as Sand Tiger and once belonged to Sheikh Mohammed, who had bought him with visions of winning a Derby, but presumably not the Kiplingcotes one. By Indian Ridge out of an A.P. Indy mare, he won two Flat races, the last of them at Musselburgh in April 2010 when trained by Richard Fahey.

The last of the ex-racehorses was 12-year-old **Wolfie**, who, under the name of Wolfwood, finished down the field in nine races at two at three for Darlington trainer John Davies. He was partnered by yet another first-timer in Kevin Oliver.

None of the riders taking part boasted more course experience than Heather Sparkes, rider of **Murphy**, a 15-year-old hunter cob. Under her maiden name of Heather Buck, she competed in six Derbies between 2005 (when only 13) and 2015. She had ridden Murphy in 2019, finishing 20th of the 36 runners, and again when eighth in 2022. On past Kiplingcotes form, they looked up against it, but were guaranteed to complete the course.

The only other with course form was the piebald **Tink**, a 15-year-old endurance horse who combined that discipline with cross-country and hunting. He finished eleventh in last year's renewal under rider Megan Robinson who was again aboard.

Racing pundits frequently speculate on how certain types of headgear may affect a horse's performance. A useful rule of thumb performance indicator for Kiplingcotes is the 'Four Feathered Feet Factor'. Horses with feathered feet can safely be eliminated from calculations. That ruled out the seven-year-old Dales Pony **Rudy**, the mount of Rebecca Stewart; likewise, the 19-year-old grey Connemara cross hunter **Keetho**, ridden by Lisa Crossley; **Herbie**, the mount of Marie Pennock; and the tiny seven-year-old piebald Cob **Tilly**, partnered by the youngest rider in the race, 14-year-old Jessica Woolley, from nearby Shiptonthorpe.

William, a six-year-old Irish Draught-Percheron cross, partnered by owner-rider Kara McKay, hunts with both the York & Ainsty and the Middleton, but looked unlikely to make history as the first skewbald in modern times to win the Derby. Similar comments could be applied to American Quarter-Horse **Breck**, who, while almost guaranteed to be up there early, might find his stamina stretched over the final three-and-a-half miles.

With horses aged 17, 19 and 20 in the line-up, the race had the look of a veterans' contest, but even they had to bow to the oldest competitor, a 30-year-old eventer – yes, I said 30 – by the name of **Our Sexy Lady**, the mount of Collette Newbold. The mare had once been on the verge of Olympic standard but was here, we were assured, for no more than a quiet hack round.

A 10-year-old black cob called **Milly**, ridden by Lou Hudson from York, rounded out the 20-horse field.

How they bet

With riders aged between 14 and 71, horses aged between six and 30, and breeds ranging from Dales Ponies to Thoroughbreds, this year's Kiplingcotes Derby presented a wide range of ages and possibilities.

Last year's winner, Paddy (a.k.a. Mine Sweeper), by 1988 Epsom Derby hero High-Rise, did not return to defend his Kiplingcotes Derby crown. Also absent was another former Gigginstown cast-off, Wounded Warrior. In his prime, the former Noel Meade inmate had beaten Grand National winner Rule The World in a Grade 2 chase at Naas, finished second in Gowran Park's Thyestes, third to Don Poli in Cheltenham's RSA Chase, and won over 3m 6f at the 2018 Punchestown Festival. A feature in the previous week's Yorkshire Post claimed that the 14-year-old was being primed for the race and would be partnered by a certain successful lady amateur rider with a wealth of experience in Flat races.

Had he appeared, Wounded Warrior would have started a short-priced favourite to deliver the goods. As it was, Chris Johnson, who's been the Kiplingcotes on-course bookie since 2012, installed Start Me Up as the 2-1 market leader, while taking no chances with the other former racehorses. The maximum stake allowed was £50 and Johnson kept a wary eye out for a late

flurry of £50 to £150 bets on the favourite. However, they failed to materialise, with nothing larger than a £10 note being wagered.

Racehorses running under *nom de plumes* have long been a factor at Kiplingcotes. That element of subterfuge always adds spice to the occasion, necessitating a certain amount of digging around to establish their real identity and past form. Some riders are more forthcoming than others. It was noted that, while his owner-rider kept his cards seriously close to his chest, no such alias was afforded to Start Me Up.

On 'proper' racing form, he stood out. He'd performed well in good company, finishing third in the Grade 2 Ten Up Novice Chase, fourth in Limerick's Munster National, and fifth in the Fulke Walwyn Kim Muir Chase at Cheltenham. He was also considered good enough to take his chance in the 2013 Irish Grand National, in which he was pulled up two out.

The build-up

At 11.20 the 20 runners and riders assembled adjacent to the winning post, where an abridged version of the original rules was read out by clerk of the course Sue Hillaby, including the stipulation that "any rider who layeth hold of any of the other riders or striketh any of them shall win no prize."

Benny's rider was easily identifiable in black and yellow quartered racing colours, whereas most of the others wore various shades of blue, black, or, in one case, a sort of runny purple. Breck's rider stood out in a high-viz yellow jacket. Distinguishing caps were helpful: Harry's rider sported a green one with stars; Ferkin's was red with a grey pom-pom; Our Sexy Lady's wore pink and dark blue quartered.

Intriguingly, Jason Carver, wearing black, royal blue sleeves, blue and yellow hooped cap, kept Start Me Up well away from his 19 rivals during the reading of the rules, heading off to the start the moment the final words had left Hillaby's lips. The others made their way in twos and threes, while the crowd stood around and waited for their return.

The race normally gets under way around midday – the rules state it cannot be later than 1.00pm – but the walk to the start took longer than usual due to the muddy conditions, hence it must have been nearer to 12.20 when the field was dispatched.

Not that the hour-long hiatus between setting off and coming back deterred the crowd. Some placed their bets, while others queued for sustenance from the mobile food and beverage stand. The cost of living crisis has clearly been felt in this remote part of East Yorkshire, as the price of (well-filled) bacon baps had risen from last year's £3.50 to £4.00, but as all profits were donated to the race fund, nobody objected to the price hike. Nor did they seem to mind the squally showers that blew in their faces as they awaited the leaders' appearance.

Two portable toilets serve the needs of the racegoers, a sign of how things have improved in recent times, replacing secluded trees that formerly provided the only place for relief.

The last quarter mile of the course was fenced off; the A614 road crossing had temporary traffic lights; and there were plenty of medics present in their high-viz jackets. No sign of starting stalls yet, not that there's any real requirement. It would be the equine equivalent of a running dive for a cross-channel swim.

The finish

There is no photo-finish equipment here either. Even if there had been, a camera would not have been needed, with the winner, the former Gigginstown-owned Start Me Up, coming home well clear, rider Jason Carver passing the post with a celebratory raising of the whip, though not above shoulder height and while giving his mount time to respond.

Such was the margin of their victory, the winning distance was measured in seconds rather than lengths, with 23 seconds separating the winners from the runners-up, John Thirsk and Harry. Behind them, Merlin, showing the finishing speed that had enabled him to win multiple seven-furlong all-weather contests, came from the clouds to claim third place, two lengths ahead of Stephen Crawford on Ferkin in fourth.

Thoroughbreds Jolly, Jasper and Benny were next home, then a lengthy gap before Heather Sparkes finished on Murphy. The remaining runners trickled in at long intervals. The winning rider had already received the handsome Kiplingcotes Derby silver trophy and horse rug by the time the backmarkers completed the course. The police had reopened the road crossing before the last three finishers, Herbie, Tim, and 30-year-old Our Sexy Lady crossed the line.

Post-race analysis

“What’s it like to win? Fantastic,” responded Jason Carver when asked, adding that he’d had Start Me Up since 2013. Besides winning two Newmarket Town Plates on the horse, he used to ride out for Lincolnshire-based trainer Conor Dore, so was clearly no mug in the saddle.

Start Me Up had hit the front soon after halfway and from then on the result was never in doubt, forging clear to win easily.

John Thirsk, having declared beforehand that this would be his final Derby ride, was delighted with Harry’s performance.

“He’s run an absolute blinder,” he enthused. “Harry’s only a little horse and his one win on the Fibresand at Southwell was sixteen years ago, yet he took me for three miles. It was only in the final three-quarters of a mile, going up the hill, that Jason started to stretch away, and I knew he was gone, I was never going to get back to him, but Harry kept going at one pace. It was a brilliant run.”

Thirsk reported that four of the former racehorses had set off lickety-split. “Jason took a pull and let them go. I followed him for the first mile; we were fifth and sixth, with Stephen (Crawford) just behind us. The leaders got quite a bit clear up the first long straight but by the time they got to the hill they’d come back to us.”

Richard Harper, who finished seventh on Benny, reflected that it had been a higher quality field this year and confirmed that the race was run at a fast pace.

“Last year I was able to give Benny a breather, whereas this time there was no such opportunity,” he said. “They went off hell for leather at the start and we couldn’t lay up with them. But my horse ran his heart out, he never stopped galloping.”

Approaching Enthorpe crossroads the experienced Crawford had shouted for the four leaders to slow down as they were going too fast, but his warning went unheeded. Palermo Don skidded, lost his back legs and went down, unseating his rider. The horse incurred a nasty cut to a hind leg when falling. However, a vet was soon in attendance and treated him on the course,

stemming the bleeding. From there he was walked to a nearby livery yard, hosed down, and was able to make a full recovery.

Sadly, that was not the case with Wolfie, who suffered a fatal collapse during the race. It wasn't the first time it had happened here; it may not be the last. For all participants, especially those setting out to be competitive, the Kiplingcotes Derby course presents a stern challenge and is not to be taken lightly. With the race being run at an ever-faster pace in recent years, a horse needs to be race fit. Wolfie's death provided a sad postscript to an otherwise classic renewal of the historic Derby, and also a poignant reminder of the inherent risks that run parallel with all forms of horse racing.

And so, as the showers abated and the overcast sky morphed into a lighter shade of grey, the hardy racegoers began to wend their way home, just as their ancestors had done for centuries, some richer than they'd arrived, some poorer; but poorer only in financial terms, for they were all richer for the experience.

Full finishing order (*official racing name in italics*)

1st: Start Me Up (Jason Carver) 2-1 fav.

2nd: Harry (*Heaven's Gates*) (John Thirsk)

3rd: Merlin (*Grey Destiny*) (Julie Campbell)

4 Ferkin (*Ferrovierie*) (Steven Crawford), 5 Jolly (Mel McCormick), 6 Jasper (*Prince Of Time*) (Tom Cowlam), 7. Benny (*Chapel House*) (Richard Harper), 8 Murphy (Heather Sparkes), 9 Tink (Megan Robinson), 10 Breck (Debbie Peters), 11 Milly (Lou Hudson), 12 Rudy (Rebecca Stewart), 13 Tilly (Jessica Woolley), 14 Keetho (Lisa Crossley), 15 William (Kara McKay), 16 Herbie (Marie Pennock), 17 Tim (*Sand Tiger*) (Sylvia Smith), 18 Our Sexy Lady (Collette Newbold). Did not finish: Palermo Don (Mark Gilbert), Wolfie (*Wolfwood*) (Kevin Oliver).

Footnote: When informed at Cheltenham the following day that one of his Gigginstown cast-offs was now a Derby winner – albeit the Kiplingcotes version – Ryanair boss Michael O'Leary looked a tad confused. It appeared that, like the vast majority of Gold Cup day's 65,000 attendees, he'd never heard of such a race.

That's just the way it is. For most racing folk, the Kiplingcotes Derby has never registered on their radar, but for those faithful hundreds who, every third Thursday in March, brave the conditions on that windswept part of the East Yorkshire Wolds, it's a day not to be missed.