

## **Merlin Weaves Magic at Kiplingcotes**

**Chris Pitt** *reports on the 2024 Kiplingcotes Derby...*

It was a generous gesture of Cheltenham to bring forward its Festival meeting by a week to avoid clashing with the Kiplingcotes Derby, especially with it being the centenary of their flagship race, the Gold Cup. But then the Cheltenham Festival – or the National Hunt meeting as those of us on the crematorium side of 70 still call it – is a mere whippersnapper compared with the longevity of the Kiplingcotes, which harks back to 1519, a mere ten years after Henry VIII acceded to the throne (and was still married to his first wife).

The third Thursday of March has always been Kiplingcotes Derby Day in these parts of the East Yorkshire Wolds. The 2024 renewal took place on the 21st, the latest date possible to hold it, hence no clash with Cheltenham this time.

Among the most notable of the 500 or so spectators who gathered along a muddy single-track road, five miles from Market Weighton, were the Earl of Halifax, owner and breeder of 1978 Epsom Derby winner Shirley Heights, and Lord Manton, who, before his elevation to the peerage, as plain Miles Watson, had won the 1998 Grand Military Gold Cup on Silver Stick.

Further lustre was added by the presence of the Reverend James Kenny, curate of All Saints Church in Market Weighton, conspicuous in his frock coat, while the ‘professional’ racing world was represented by Cheltenham’s Assistant General Manager Andre Klein – enjoying a far more relaxed occasion than the previous Thursday, when overseeing the third day of steeplechasing’s most prestigious meeting.

Over the last twelve months Mr Klein has travelled length and breadth of the country – and Ireland and France too – hauling the (original 1924) Gold Cup trophy up the highest peaks in England, Wales and Northern Ireland plus Scotland’s Arkle Mountain; also taking it on a grand tour of racecourses, schools, hospitals, care homes, you name it, and promoting the Gold Cup 100 Community Fund venture, raising money for local Gloucestershire charities. His focus now was solely on experiencing the Kiplingcotes Derby in all its glory, hitching a lift to the starting post in the parish of Etton in the starter’s truck, then hanging on for dear life on the back of its trailer, photographing the race as it followed the runners – even overtaking a couple.

Meanwhile, among those waiting at the finish was Grand National-winning jockey turned Daily Telegraph racing correspondent Marcus Armytage, there to capture the atmosphere of England’s oldest horse race for a ‘colour piece’, scheduled to appear three days later in the Sunday edition of that distinguished publication. Over a bacon bap at a local café he’d mulled over the prospect of taking part in it himself next year, however a subsequent sighting of the course’s layout induced an abrupt change of mind. Aintree’s fences, even in their more challenging days, appeared a safer option for this former top amateur rider.

Locals were joined by visitors from neighbouring Lancashire and not so neighbouring Devon, but none had come further than the couple from Melbourne who, as seasoned globetrotting travellers of quirky events and occasions, spotted the Kiplingcotes Derby online and reckoned it was worth the trip. Australia has some wonderfully evocative sounding racecourses, such as Bong Bong, Come By Chance and Tumbarumba, but it is doubtful that any can compare with the annual East Yorkshire spectacular. Our antipodean friends appeared to be having a good time, anyway.

## **Survival of the Race**

Results of the 'Annual Prize', as the Kiplingcotes was then known, were published in the Racing Calendar between 1764 and 1789. With the Epsom Derby's inaugural running having taken place in 1780, nobody is quite sure when the 'Derby' suffix was attached to its predecessor, which over time acquired the title 'Kiplingcotes Plate'.

One thing is for sure, though. Neither global wars, snowdrifts, waterlogged courses, animal or human epidemics have prevented the Kiplingcotes taking place. Records show that in both 1915 and 1916 Mr Joseph Foster's horse Kimberley, from nearby North Cave, won back to back renewals. Not a year was missed during World War II when the race was dominated by the dual winners Sandy and Slip In.

In the freezing winter of 1947, local farmer Fred Stephenson defied four-foot snowdrifts on his steed Londesborough Lad to keep the race going, taking an hour and a half for what is usually a winning time of around 15 minutes.

The foot and mouth epidemic of 2001 may have done for Cheltenham but it was never going to derail Kiplingcotes. Local farmer 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 Covid years races of 2020 and 2021 took place behind closed doors, with Crawford on Ferkin and four-time Derby winner John Thirsk on Harry riding the entire course both times, and finishing in pre-arranged dead-heats.

You can't mess about with the Kiplingcotes Derby. There's supposedly a stipulation in the ancient rules, added in 1619, 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.

## **Nature of the Race**

Since the turn of the century, the Kiplingcotes Derby has become ever more competitive. What was once merely a local affair with the runners being mostly farm horses or, at best, hunters, a full-blown Thoroughbred racehorse is now required to win it.

A quirk of the race conditions requires that £4.00 of the £5.00 entry fee goes to the rider of the runner-up, 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. Over the years, there have been some novel methods of making up the difference.

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. Between 1960

and 1978, female riders won all bar three runnings, with Jean Cole-Walton landing the prize six times during an eight-year period between 1967 and 1974.

But even she must tip her hat to the Lester Piggott of the Kiplingcotes Derby, equine dentist Ken Holmes, sadly no longer with us, who rode the winner ten times between 1983 and 2002.

## The Course

Experience is a vital factor. It's a tough and demanding course, particularly in years such as this one with its wet winter in seemingly incessant rainfall in the weeks leading up to the race.

The race starts by a small, insignificant stone post in the parish of Etton. Following calls for something more elaborate to mark the starting point of England's oldest horse race, 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 2024 – runners and riders

The race's increased popularity in recent years has been reflected by the number of runners. A record field of 36 for its 500th anniversary running in 2019 was followed by 19 in 2022, 20 last year, and 19 again for this year's renewal. The riders comprised a roughly 50-50 split with ten former participants and nine having their first experience of the Derby course.

First to arrive was former point-to-point rider and permit holder Richard Harper, all the way from Kings Sutton, near Banbury. He'd finished fourth and seventh on Benny, racing name Chapel House, in the previous two runnings and was all set to go again when Benny developed an abscess in a foot, ruling him out of the race. Instead, his mount was 14-year-old **Thomas**, a.k.a. Thomas Blossom, winner of four on the Flat for Patrick Chamings plus two hurdles and a chase for Aly Stronge.

"Thomas had been out in the field all winter and I hadn't long got him in," explained Richard. "With Benny unable to run I probably wasn't going to go to Kiplingcotes this year but I took Thomas out with the draghounds and he pulled my arms out."

At 74 – he was incorrectly given as a mere 71 last year – Richard would be one of the senior riders in this year's Derby – albeit not the oldest.

The next Thoroughbred to arrive was 12-year-old **Jolly**, unraced under rules or in point-to-points. He was the mount of Mel McCormack, the partnership having finished fifth on their Kiplingcotes Derby debut last year.

Last year's second, third and fourth were all back for another attempt. They included **Ferkin** – formerly known as Ferrovierie, unplaced in two three-year-old Pontefract maidens for Ollie Pears in 2011 – and **Harry**, a.k.a. Heaven's Gates, winner of a Southwell all-weather seller for Kevin Ryan back in 2007. Stephen Crawford was reunited with Ferkin, but Harry's rider, John Thirsk, had bowed out after finishing second last year and was replaced in the saddle by Crawford's daughter Laura Brown, who, under her maiden name, had lifted the prize in 1999 on Hamilton Princess and subsequently gone on to ride half a dozen winners as an apprentice on the Flat.

The grey **Merlin** split Harry and Ferkin last year, finishing third under Julie Campbell, who was having her first ride in the race. Now 14 years old, 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.

When a gleaming Thoroughbred appears and is entered under the moniker **My Lovely Big Brown Horse** you sort of know there's something afoot. For one thing, there are too many letters to run under the rules of racing (maximum 18 letters including spaces). The 11-year-old was partnered by Etton-based Heather Sparkes, having her eleventh ride in the race, the first as a mere 12-year-old in 2005. Discreet conversations with the rider's mother, Claire Buck, revealed that 'My Lovely Big Brown Horse' was actually Choungaya, winner of a Fairyhouse beginners' chase for Joseph O'Brien in February 2021 when ridden by Rachael Blackmore. Choungaya failed to build on that success and, following his acquisition by Yorkshire trainer Mike Sowersby, had failed to complete in his last seven starts over hurdles and fences, the latest as recent as New Year's Day in a Catterick handicap hurdle.

Those were the six Thoroughbreds, the race seemingly between them, although, as Marcus Armytage noted, a plausible case could be made for the 6-1 shot **Guy**, on whom the Telegraph reporter placed his tenner. Observed Armytage in his Sunday Telegraph piece: "With no form to go on, Guy looked fit from hunting," adding that the jockey, Emma Barker, was "competitive, not an adjective that looked applicable to all her rivals, or, indeed, their steeds."

Four other runners had taken part in last year's race. The first of that quartet past the post had been American Quarter-Horse **Breck**, who, despite finding his stamina stretched over the final three-and-a-half miles, managed to finish tenth under this year's pilot Debbie Peters. **William**, a seven-year-old Irish Draught-Percheron cross, partnered by owner-rider Kara McKay, finished 15th last year and looked unlikely to make history as the first skewbald in modern times to win the Derby.

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. In addition to William, that also ruled out the eight-year-old Dales Pony **Rudy**, the mount of Rebecca Stewart. They did well to finish 12th in 2023 but that looked the best they could hope for this year in what looked a stronger field.

**Herbie**, (16th last year) and newcomer **Bastiann**, a Friesian-warm blood cross-bred hunter and show-jumper, were also members of the FFFF club. Ridden by Marie Pennock and her husband Patrick Pennock, they looked likely candidates for last place.

Eighty-year-old David Calvert earned the accolade of this year's oldest rider. His mount, 13-year-old **Ellie**, included shepherding sheep as part of her activities along with conveying brides

and grooms on their wedding day. “It’s very different from doing a wedding,” confided the rider to Armytage about the task at hand.

The most poignant entry was that of Carole Johnston on **Lorna**, competing to raise money for cancer following the death of her friend Kate.

The remaining five runners, all debutant horses and riders, comprised: the grey Connemara **Connie** (Jo Wiper), nine-year-old chestnut Irish sports horse **Conker** (Calum Stainthorpe), Irish Draft hunter **Jet Flyer** (Louise Preston), grey hunter **Belle** (Shannon Walker), and dappled grey hunter **Sixmilebridge Sally** (Charlie Greenwood).

## **How they bet**

As was the case last year, with horse breeds ranging from Dales Ponies to Thoroughbreds, this year’s Kiplingcotes Derby presented a wide range of possibilities.

Doncaster bookmaker Chris Johnson, who’s been the Kiplingcotes on-course bookie since 2012, opened with 2-1 the field but quickly slashed My Lovely Big Brown Horse to 6-4 once the steed’s identity became known.

Merlin was steady at 5-2, as was Thomas at 3-1, while Harry drifted from 7-2 to 4-1. Noting the astute Armytage money was on Guy, Johnson trimmed him from sixes to fives. There was late money for Jolly, down from fives to fours, and some ‘good luck’ wagers for charity ride Carole Johnston’s mount Lorna (in from 10-1 to 8-1), but nobody seemed to fancy Ferkin, whose odds drifted from 9-1 out to an enticing looking 12-1. Jet Flyer traded at 16-1 and it was long prices the rest.

## **The build-up**

At 11.15 the 19 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.”

Thomas’s rider Richard Harper was the only one wearing racing colours (black and yellow quartered), whereas most wore various shades of blue or black, with the odd orange, purple and teal green for good measure.

As the runners made their way to the start, the assembled throng took the opportunity to place bets, join the queue for the hot food and drink stand, visit one of the two portable toilets, engage in conversation with those they hadn’t seen since this time last year, or simply stand around for three-quarters of an hour and wait for the horses and riders to return.

The last quarter mile of the course was fenced off; the A614 road crossing had temporary traffic lights; and medics were in attendance in their high-viz jackets.

## **The finish**

The race takes little describing, largely because for those gathered along the quarter-mile finishing straight precious little can be seen. Those who position themselves further down the track obtain more comprehensive views but miss the finish.

First into view was the grey Merlin, followed some ten lengths back by Guy, proving his fitness from the hunting field. There was initial confusion regarding the third-place finisher as the jockey wore all yellow, not one of the colours picked out during the preliminaries. It turned out to be Laura Brown on Harry, who had discarded the grey jersey covering her yellow silks at the start.

Three Thoroughbreds followed, Jolly finishing fourth, with Ferkin getting up in the shadows of the post to deprive My Lovely Big Brown Horse of fifth place. Next came Conker, Thomas, Jet Flyer and Belle, the rest following at lengthy intervals.

With 17 of the 19 runners safely accounted for, the starter's truck returned, with Andre Klein still on the trailer, snapping away with his camera.

"What won?" he asked.

'Merlin', I replied.

"Great," he enthused, "I backed him at 5-2!"

Long after the truck and trailer, just as the winner was being presented with the handsome Kiplingcotes Derby trophy, Marie and Patrick Pennock came trundling along on Herbie and Bestiann, completing the course at their own pace in their own time.

Everyone was back, safe and sound.

## **Post-race analysis**

The winning rider, 61-year-old Julie Campbell, from Doncaster, told Marcus Armytage after the race: "I came last year, held him back a bit too much and finished third. They shot off like the clappers but Merlin has such a long stride, there was no point in fighting him so he led for three-quarters of the race."

She reckoned had more left in the tank should a late challenger have emerged.

Speaking with BBC TV Look North's reporter, Campbell said: "It was quite full on, but you're not really thinking about that, you're thinking about the safety of your horse; you're looking at the ground because it's so bad.

"He always pulls it out of the bag and he always listens to everything I ask him to do. He's a great horse."

Emma Barker, rider of the runner-up, admitted to Armytage that until a week ago she had never heard of the Kiplingcotes Derby. There was at least some financial compensation for finishing second, as she pocketed £76 (19 x £4), £26 more than the winner.

John Thirsk was delighted with Harry's performance under Laura Brown. "He's run another blinder," he reflected. "Harry's only a little horse and his one win on the Fibresand at Southwell was seventeen years ago."

Heather Sparkes, sixth on My Lovely Big Brown Horse suggested firmer ground would have enhanced her chance. She admitted she had not quite gauged it correctly and let him run too free early, so he was tired by the end. Given the ground conditions she was pleased with how she and her horse performed. There is always another year and always something to learn.

Richard Harper, who finished eighth on Thomas, reported: “I got slightly left at the start, lost a few lengths, and they soon get away from you. But he galloped to the line and I couldn’t have been happier. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

“It’s such an incredible event and it’s wonderful to be part of it.”

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

1st: Merlin (*Grey Destiny*) (Julie Campbell) 5-2

2nd: Guy (Emma Barker) 5-1

3rd: Harry (*Heaven’s Gates*) (John Thirsk) 4-1

4 Jolly (Mel McCormick), 5 Ferkin (*Ferrovierie*) (Steven Crawford), 6 My Lovely Big Brown Horse (*Choungaya*) (Heather Sparkes), 7 Conker (Calum Stainthorpe), 8 Thomas (*Thomas Blossom*) (Richard Harper), 9 Jet Flyer (Louis Preston), 10 Belle (Shannon Walker), 11 Sixmilebridge Lady (Charlie Greenwood), 12 Breck (Debbie Peters), 13 Connie (Jo Wiper), 14 Ellie (David Calvert), 15 Lorna (Carole Johnston), 16 Rudy (Rebecca Stewart), William (Kara McKay), 17 Herbie (Marie Pennock), 18 Bastiann (Patrick Pennock).