

COUNTY SKETCHES,
Town and Garrison Races
(Drawn from the Files of the *Hampshire Telegraph*)

The officers of Portsmouth garrison were always among the most ardent supporters of horse racing in Hampshire.

Long before they had any meeting of their own they used to arrange for matches to be run on Soberton Downs on the day of the Hambledon Hunt races, or at other race meetings in the south of the county.

During the years of the war with France they were too busily engaged to get up a meeting of their own; but they did all they could to make the meeting of the South-East Hants Yeomanry Cavalry successful, and not unfrequently carried off some of the open events. This meeting was first of all held on Soberton Downs a couple of months after the Hambledon Hunt races, and the subscriptions for the Yeomanry Corps alone used to run to two fifty guinea cups, in addition to numerous sweepstakes. The races were commonly well contested, and the proceedings always wound up with a dinner and ball at the Crown.

In 1812 the scene of racing was changed to Portsdown Hill, where they remained fixed for some years, on a course which is described as being just above the village. When peace was declared in 1815, the officers of the garrison had time to look about them, and they very soon secured the privilege of racing on Portsdown Hill, and arranged for a meeting in the following spring under the title of the *Town and Garrison Races*. One of the most active promoters of the meeting was Sir Lucius Curtis, whose name brings us down to recent times, for he lived until 1869.¹ Sir Lucius Curtis was at this time a young naval officer, fairly well off, for his father Sir Roger had left him money, including £24,000 which he had received two years before his death from the Government for Gatcombe House.²

1 Admiral Sir Lucius Curtis prominent Freemason. Born 3 Jun 1786 Died Thu 14 Jan. Deaths Mar 1869 Curtis Lucius Age 83 Fareham 2b p330. Obit: *The Hampshire Advertiser* Sat 16 Jan 1869.

2 Gatcombe House was built about 1780 by Sir Roger following his marriage to Sarah Brady [12 Dec 1778 at St Marys, Portsmouth]. They appear do not to have had a long stay at the House as it was acquired by the Government for military purposes. The house was described thus in the *London Gazette* of 1832:

The house consisting of numerous rooms of good proportions, well fitted up and replete with fixtures, good underground wine and beer cellars, large kitchen, servants' hall, and all other necessary attached and detached offices; a double coach-house, excellent five stall stable with harness-room and lofts over. A large green-house on a lawn of upwards of an acre, and two good kitchen gardens, and also the walk meadow leading up to the house, consisting of

The first meeting took place in July, 1816, and provided two days' excellent sport. The entrance fees were two guineas. There were two subscription purses of £50 each and many private matches for small stakes. This seems but meagre sport to us now; but it must be remembered that the races for the purses were never won right out. Even if only two horses started, the victor had to win two heats out of three. At any rate the sport was good enough to induce the officers to arrange for a second meeting in the following September.³ By this time the card had swelled to three subscription purses of £50 each, one of them a ladies' purse for horses belonging to officers of the garrison only. There was also a 10 guinea sweepstakes on the first day, and numerous matches. The number of fashionable equipages on the hill at this meeting exceeded the number at Goodwood, and the magnificent prospect formed an added charm to the pleasures of the course. After each day's racing the subscribers dined at the Crown, while on the second night there was a ball, to which all the youth and beauty of the neighbourhood flocked. I fear the garrison was going the pace at this time. It is difficult to account otherwise for the fact that a third meeting was immediately announced for October, with two £50 plates, two five guinea sweepstakes with 20 guineas added, and one 20 guinea sweepstakes. This third outing seems to have exhausted the interest of the town, however it might have been with the garrison; but the sport continued good, Captain Moore's Romp winning in the three meetings £140 in stakes, a good record for that time.

The following year the stewards had some difficulty with Mr Thistlethwayte, who had not expected that such a generous construction would be put on his permission to race on Portsdown Hill. A spring meeting was held, at which Marksman, a horse that became celebrated, won his first £50 plate, or rather his first two £50 plates, as he carried off the principal trophy each day. The ball at Mr. Neyler's Assembly Room at the Crown was this year attended by 230 guests. Beyond this, however, Mr. Thistlethwayte would not go, and after a time the relations became so strained that the lord of the manor turned the meeting off the hill altogether, and they had to seek other quarters. This practically cooked their goose. In 1818 they migrated to Horndean Down,⁴ where gentlemen

about six acres.

³ At this meeting Capt Moors bay mare Romp won both heats in a £50 purse, See *The Morning Post* Tue 3 Sep 1816

⁴ The meeting was 7 and 8 July, Tue and Wed.

riders were tempted with two £50 Plates, a ladies' purse, and three sweepstakes of five guineas each.⁵ Marksman again carried off chief honours,⁶ but the long drive told upon the agility of the dancing men at the Assembly Rooms in Green-row. There were bitter complaints about the course to the stewards, who next year secured a better course on Horndean Down, where one meeting again sufficed to meet the wants of the military jockeys in the garrison. Sir Lucius Curtis won the great event at this meeting, a 10 guinea sweepstakes with £50 added.⁷

With this the Town and Garrison meeting bade adieu to country courses. There were two days' racing on Southsea Common in August, 1820,⁸ three sweepstakes with substantial prizes added, and a Ladies' Plate of £50, for which twelve horses ran altogether twelve heats, but thenceforth, so far as I have been able to go, the files of the Hampshire Telegraph know the Town and Garrison Races of Portsmouth no more.⁹

The diversions on Critch Plain in the Forest of Bere were going out of repute at the beginning of the century. For a generation before this the countrymen had regarded the Critch diversions as due of the merriest times. The horse racing was not much. There had long been a prize of five guineas for horses not exceeding 13½ hands, to carry 8st., and a purse of ten guineas for horses any height, to carry 10st. The great sport, however, was the race for cart horses, for which a prize of three guineas was given, the donkeys' race for two guineas, and the race for women for a like figure, which was a more substantial inducement to fleetness of foot than the ornamental chemise which was the common re-ward for such feminine exertions. The oak on Critch Plain was the starting point, and thither the carters had to come without saddles, riding their horses in feet-halters. At the time of which I write the attractions of the cart-horses, donkeys, and female sprinters had been exhausted, and such old-fashioned

5 Prior to the meeting a notice stating that booths and tents were not to be erected on the course without permission from Daniel Wise – presumably the land owner. See: *Hampshire Telegraph* Mon 18 May 1818. A full programme of races was also published in the same journal.

6 On the first day Mr Brown's brown gelding Marksman ran second to Brush in a £50 a two mile two heat race. Marksman was favourite but along with Sideophee ran the wrong side of a post in the first heat which did not help his chances. On the second day in a two mile three heat race Marksman won both races after an initial dead heat with Col Graves Sir Christopher. See: *The Morning Post* Tue 14 Jul 1818.

7 Partial returns for this meeting on 14 and 15 Sep, Tue and Wed, appear in *The Racing Calendar* but do not appear to include Sir Lucius' race. However, Effie Deans [b f 4y 7-10] did win a £10 Sweep with £50 added on the second day owned by 'Mr Dilly'.

8 The Common was noted as a cricketing field but there is not a trace of these races.

9 It would appear they were revived in 1830. See: *Hampshire Advertiser* Sat 4 Sep 1830.

sports as graining through a horse collar and climbing a greasy pole were not sufficient to keep the diversions going. There was a great effort in 1803, when the subscribers turned up in great force; but after this the meeting languished, and all attempt to keep it alive as a racing fixture was abandoned.

Another Hampshire race meeting that showed great promise at the outset, but soon exhausted itself, was the Newport meeting in the Isle of Wight. The races were set agoing in 1807 by Major Blahchard of the Volunteers, who offered a £50 cup for horses that had been bred in the Island. A meeting was called at the Newport Arms Inn, at which a second £50 plate was subscribed for, and a 10 guinea sweepstakes for Isle of Wight horses. The entrance fee was fixed at three guineas for non-subscribers, and a fair field rewarded the exertions of the promoters in the August of that year. The event of the meeting was the running of Mr. Baker's Major, which left the other Islanders standing still, and romped off with the best prizes. Major was purchased on the second day of the meeting by a well known sportsman, Mr. Webb; and a good investment it proved to be, for within eight weeks he had won two matches on the same course of 200 and 100 guineas.

The sensational running of Major gave a fillip to the races next year. All the great families became subscribers, the stewards added a purse of 20 guineas to the two plates, and a ball was held at the Sun, attended by 200 belles and beaux of the island. This was on the first night of the races, and on the second Sir Henry Holmes kept open house in honour of the coming of age of his son, Mr. Leonard Holmes, one of the stewards. There was a fine old English breadth about Sir Henry's hospitality. The record says that the inns were free, that the streets ran with beer, and that the populace and the fashionables danced together on the lawn in front of Sir Henry's house until human nature was exhausted. A further prize of tea guineas was offered for troop horses in 1809, and so the races prospered up to 1813, when the great event was a Hunter's Cup of £50 that had been sixteen times out during the season with either of the packs on the island. Then all at once the record of the meeting drops. Probably the attractions of the Ryde and Cowes regattas, which were now for the first time blossoming out into national importance under the patronage of the Prince Regent, gave the sportsmen of the island something else to talk about.

In future articles I will carry down to a further date the records of Goodwood; of Winchester race meeting; of the races of the Maddington Club; and of the meetings at Southampton and Soberton Down.

This article is confined to the ephemeral race meetings of the first twenty years of the century in this county. Bognor races started on the sands in 1822, are out of my district, but I might mention the Emsworth and Havant subscription races, occasionally held at Funtington, and described in my recent pictures of old days in Emsworth and Havant. There were also intermittent cups offered for hunters on Fleming Flat, which in 1818, at any rate, produced some of the severest racing on record, the eight horses having to run six heats before Mr. Gore's Maida won the prize.
