

THE 2007 KIPLINGCOTES DERBY

Chris Pitt reports from the East Yorkshire Wolds on the
488th running of Britain's oldest horse race...

When the first four horses are named Charlie, Flossy, Boris and Barney, you suspect there's an element of subterfuge going on, especially when they all look more like racehorses than family pets.

But that's just one of the elements that make the Kiplingcotes Derby such an intriguing race. Though cards are often kept close to the chest, it's not for purposes of financial skulduggery. The race is only worth £50 and there haven't been any bookmakers present since before the last war, and there's certainly no betting in running.

Not only is there no betting; there is no grandstand and no facilities. In fact there is no racecourse as such. The horses run mainly along a wide grass verge and the occasional stretch of ploughed field, cross two country lanes, the disused Enthorpe Railway Bridge and one major road before completing their four-mile journey.

To find it, take the A614 from Market Weighton, heading for Middleton-on-the-Wolds, and you will come to a left turn for the village of Warter. The finish is 400 yards down that road.

It's a Brig o' Doon sort of place. It comes alive once a year for three hours, otherwise the only clue that anything ever happened in this middle of nowhere setting is the presence of a winning post, donated by a local school.

First run in 1519 and always held on the third Thursday in March, the Kiplingcotes Derby was at one time used as a trial for the Lincolnshire Handicap. Search through editions of the *Racing Calendar* between 1774 and 1789 and you'll find the results of the "Kipling-Coates Annual Plate" alongside the results of Newmarket's Craven Stakes.

The race is just as competitive today. Alongside the various hunters, ponies and hacks taking part for the fun of it are several thoroughbreds whose riders mean business. That's where the subterfuge comes in.

For instance, the winner in both 2003 and 2004, described by his owner-rider as "*just an old hunter called Bob*", is subsequently revealed to be a useful performer called Plumbob, a five-time winner over hurdles and fences for Lenny Lungo.

As always, the crowd is enlarged by a coach party from the Ship Inn at Dunswell, all wearing enormous Guinness hats to commemorate St Patrick's Day. Landlord Jonathan Palmer rode in the race in 1967 and has supported it for the last ten years by bringing a coach of his regulars and donating a horse blanket for the winner.

Ironically, finishing second is often more lucrative. It costs £4.25 to enter, 25 pence of which goes to the starter, the other £4 going to rider of the runner-up. The winner's prize is £50, so if there are more than a dozen runners the second actually receives more than the winner. This year there were 17 so the runner-up picked up a healthy £68.

Last year's winning combination, the grey Etton Lad and rider Katie Croft, are back to defend their crown, but there are a couple of stalwarts missing this time. Ken Holmes, the Lester Piggott of Kiplingcotes, having won the race on ten occasions, finally hung up his boots last year at the age of 74. And the evergreen Markham Lad, who had run in it for the last eight years, is absent too, along with his 60-year-old owner-rider David Pritchard, driver of the last horse-drawn ice cream cart in England.

The youngest competitor is 13-year-old Heather Buck from nearby Pocklington, riding in the race for the second time. She partners a pony called Brandy Snap.

Also returning are former apprentice jockey Laura Crawford, who rode several winners on the Flat, and her father, Stephen. Laura finished second in 2006 on Cool Affair but this time rides a horse called Barney. Stephen rides a mare named Flossy. Hmm.

Robert Howarth, rider of dual winner Plumbob and trainer of Etton Lad, rides Senza, whose owner appears confident of victory.

Eleven of the 17 riders are having their first crack at the race. They include the father and daughter combination of Ian and Vicky Hooper, who have come all the way from Wolverhampton.

Ian rides "Connor", though investigation reveals he is actually named Inchconnell, while Vicky's mount is called "Minnie" – actually she's called Welsh Doll. Both horses were poor hurdlers and will soon be running in point-to-points.

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Also taking part for the first time is John Thirsk, who had never sat on a horse twelve months ago. The BBC's local TV news programme *Look North* has been charting his progress building up to riding in the race and the cameras are there to record how he gets on. He rides last year's runner-up Cool Affair so he looks to be in with a chance.

Another first-timer is Danny Ablott, riding Castletown Lad, who was useless over hurdles for Martin Pipe and now spends his time hunting, eventing and show jumping.

Among the "just for fun" entries are Dorothy and Phil Walker, both making their Kiplingcotes debuts. Dorothy rides a seven-year-old skewbald hunter called Rock On; Phil, who is whipper-in with the Holderness Hunt, rides Wilsy, 'a general pleasure horse'.

Quinn, I find out, was bred to be a steeplechaser but never made it to the racecourse and has been hunted for the last three seasons with the York & Ainsty. His chances of winning appear compromised by the arrival of his rider, Paul Piddington, who has elected to wear full hunting gear, including top hat. I make a mental note: 'Riders wearing top hats do not win the Kiplingcotes Derby'.

Most of the riders are wearing proper racing silks. Phil Walker is in white, blue disc, striped sleeves, while Ian Hooper wears yellow, black sleeves, green cap. Heather Buck looks smart in pink, green sash, hooped sleeves and quartered cap; Danny Ablott walks by in burgundy, white diamond and sleeves; and Robert Howarth sports white, black spots, halved sleeves.

The nine-year-old mare Rossini is partnered by Caroline Branton, wearing blue, white diamond, striped sleeves. Caroline is having her first ride in the race, as is Catherine Bell on Boris, in yellow with green sleeves.

Anthony Sumpton finished fourth on his Kiplingcotes debut two years ago. His mount this time is the sprint-bred Shannon Style, who, Anthony confides, is closely related to Ouija Board. To add credence he wears Lord Derby's colours of black, white cap. Shame he forgot to include the white button though.



The field is completed by two more first timers: Liz Stubbins, who partners Charlie, has a distinctive yellow pom-pom on her red, black and blue cap. Rosemary Riby, rider of Stormy, wears red with a white V, reminiscent of the colours of Mrs Lilley, owner of 1961 St Leger winner Aurelius.

It's the build up to the race that's half the fun. It's the sense of anticipation; the gladiatorial spirit of those about to embark on a true test of horse and rider.

Horses and riders gather before the race for the reading of the rules

All jockeys have to be weighed out on a set of 1940s coal scales by eleven o'clock. The minimum weight is ten stone, all of which has to be carried on the rider's body, rather than in the saddle. This means that those who weigh less than ten stone have to be somewhat inventive, putting lead weights down their boots or in a body belt. Vicky Hooper has a unique way of solving the problem, as her colours are hastily adjusted to read 'blue, black backpack, red cap'!

After the rules are read out, including a reminder that 'any rider that striketh another shall win no prize', the runners make their four-mile trek to the start, a 30-inch moss-covered stone post, standing in the shadow of a hedge in the parish of Etton. From there the field is finally dispatched shortly after quarter past twelve.

The race was perhaps the closest in Kiplingcotes history, with four horses reaching the A614 road crossing virtually in line. But on the 400 yards run-in it was Charlie and Liz Stubbins who got the better of Stephen Crawford on Flossy, winning by four lengths, with Boris coming home third, just in front of Barney.

In addition to the £50 winner's prize, Liz received a silver trophy presented by Beverley jeweller Philip Guest and a horse blanket donated by the aforementioned Ship Inn.

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Normally the Kiplingcotes Derby boils down to just two or three serious contenders but this year there looked to be half a dozen in with a chance, so after the race it was time to make inquiries.

Those involved with third-placed Boris made a quick exit, but connections of the winner and other placed horses revealed their true identities.



The field is well bunched with a half mile to go to the finish, with eventual winner Charlie in second

Charlie, it turns out, is an eight-year-old point-to-pointer called Rare Presence, by Sadler's Wells out of a Seeking The Gold mare. In 2006 he won a maiden and the Holderness Hunt Members' race.

Flossy is better known as Fiore Di Bosco, a six-year-old mare by Charnwood Forest. Trained by David Barron, she won at Southwell on her debut as a two-year-old in 2003, won a Leicester nursery under Dean Mernagh and finished second at Catterick, Thirsk and Newcastle (partnered on the latter occasion by Jamie Spencer). She also ran in the Listed Hilary Needler Trophy at Beverley and in Doncaster's £200,000 St Leger Yearling Stakes. She was disappointing at three and four, achieving just three fourth place spots from eleven starts.

As for Barney, it transpired that he'd been with a leading northern trainer but never raced and was destined for the knacker's yard before Laura Crawford snapped him up for £300.

Bearing in mind that 'Flossy' was anchored by her rider's overweight – he weighs 13 stone stripped and estimated he was carrying between 42 and 50lbs more than 'Charlie', Fiore Di Bosco emerged as the moral winner of the 2007 Kiplingcotes Derby.

But I wish I knew who "Boris" was!

Hopefully he'll be back next year on the traditional third Thursday in March, along with the enthusiastic crowd of 400 or so, to perpetuate the history of a race that's been run continuously for almost 500 years.

2007 Kiplingcotes Derby – finishing order

1 Charlie (Liz Stubbins); 2 Flossy (Stephen Crawford); 3 Boris (Catherine Bell); 4 Barney (Laura Crawford); 5 Cool Affair (John Thirsk); 6 Etton Lad (Katie Croft); 7 Stormy (Rosemary Riby); 8 Castletown Lad (Danny Ablott); 9 Senza (Robert Howarth); 10 Minnie (Vicky Hooper); 11 Rossini (Carol Branton); 12 Quinn (Paul Piddington); 13 Shannon Style (Anthony Sumpton); 14 Rock On (Dorothy Walker); 15 Connor (Ian Hooper); 16 Wilsy (Phil Walker); 17 Brandy Snap (Heather Buck). V

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