

## Corrigan triumphs in Kiplingcotes 500

**Chris Pitt** reports on the 2019 Kiplingcotes Derby...

The Yorkshire point-to-point venues of Askham Bryan College and Dunscombe Park would not ordinarily be regarded as places to find a Derby winner. But then, the Kiplingcotes Derby is no ordinary race. Nor was this an ordinary year, for it marked the 500th anniversary of England's (probably Britain's, maybe the world's?) oldest horse race.

A horse named Zandino contested races at both Askham Bryan College and Dunscombe Park this year. After finishing fifth at Dunscombe, he was pulled up at the twelfth in the Askham Bryan Intermediate on 24 February. Those races would have put him spot on for the Kiplingcotes Derby.

In Tracey Corrigan, Zandino, racing under the alias of Frog, could not have had a better qualified partner. Corrigan, from Sawdon, near Scarborough, had won three of the last four renewals – she failed to finish on the other occasion – aboard Willie (better known as former racehorse and point-to-pointer Willywont He) in 2014; Prince (a.k.a. Killary Bay, a Limerick bumper and Catterick hunter chase winner) in 2015; and Bob (a point-to-point winner under the name of Calapocus) in 2017.

Tragically, Corrigan had lost her intended mount just a week before the race when Calapocus broke a leg. Frog was her replacement. She reckoned her chances of a fourth victory were slim as he wouldn't stay the trip, but Frog (a.k.a. Zandino) would not let her down.

Among the ancient rules for the race is a stipulation that should it not take place one year, it would cease forever. Faced with a waterlogged course last year, the organisers arranged for local farmer Stephen Crawford to saddle up his horse and walkover for the prize to perpetuate the race's long tradition. He'd done so on a previous occasion, when the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001 threatened the event's existence. Foot and mouth may have done for Cheltenham that year but it was never going to derail Kiplingcotes.

First run in 1519 and originally called the Kiplingcotes Plate, the Kiplingcotes Derby is a 4-mile race held in the East Yorkshire Wolds, about 10 miles from Beverley. Always run on the third Thursday in March, it's a true test of horse and rider. The runners have to negotiate grass verge, ploughed field, rutted tracks, a disused railway bridge and a main road crossing.

The race's 500th anniversary had generated widespread national publicity. Local newspapers in distant regions of the country, such as South Wales and Shropshire, previewed an event that would normally have been of purely parochial interest. Not surprisingly, it resulted in a record field of 36, all keen to be a part of the race's history.

More than two-thirds of the riders were Kiplingcotes 'virgins', having their first experience of the Derby course. Tracey Corrigan was among the most experienced, along with four-time winner John Thirsk, taking part for the first time since riding Arctic Cove to victory in 2012. He'd previously won it three years running on Maisie, better known as Minster Fair, a former winner over hurdles for trainer Alistair Whillans. Thirsk's mount this time was 15-year-old Heaven's Gates, running under the *nom de plume* of Harry. He'd won a Southwell all-weather seller for Kevin Ryan back in 2007.

Another 15-year-old to take part was Start Me Up, who won three Irish bumpers when trained by Charlie Swan and ridden by Nina Carberry. He then won over hurdles and fences for Gigginstown, partnered each time by Davy Russell. His rider, Jason Carver, wearing racing silks of royal blue, yellow seam and sleeves, blue stars on sleeves, hooped cap, was in no mood for small talk. Having failed to finish on his one previous attempt in 2015, when riding Kai, he was in the zone, his eyes fixed firmly on the prize. His supporters included a toddler dressed in matching racing silks. Despite his advanced years, Start Me Up looked a serious contender.

Considerably younger than Start Me Up was five-year-old Lily Fontana, the mount of Derby first-timer Jodie Lee. She was placed once from five starts for Richard Fahey at two and three. However, the step up in trip from seven furlongs to four miles looked sure to tax her stamina.

Among the best lookers was Red Panther. Whether this was the same Red Panther who finished fifth of six on her sole previous start in a one-mile fillies' maiden at Belterra Park in Cincinnati, Ohio in 2016 was not known. What was for sure was that her rider, Emma Sanderson, had finished third and second in the two most recent editions of the Kiplingcotes Derby on Trumpstoo, so she had to be taken seriously.

Course experience is of great importance in the Kiplingcotes Derby, and they didn't come more experienced than the aforementioned local farmer Stephen Crawford. This year he rode Ferroverie, who had finished unplaced in two Pontefract maidens in 2011 when trained by Ollie Pears.

Two riders were taking part under new names. Caroline Palmer, wearing racing silks of royal blue, white diamond and striped sleeves, rode an eight-year-old chestnut mare called The Duchess, which she described as a "riding club horse". Under her previous name of Caroline Branton, she had ridden Rossini to finish eleventh in the 2007 Derby. In a nice family-related twist, Rossini duly became the dam of The Duchess. Could the daughter achieve a higher placing than her mother? Time alone would tell.

Heather Sparkes, rider of Murphy, an 11-year-old hunter cob, was among the most experienced. Under her maiden name of Heather Buck, she competed in six Derbies between 2005 (when only 13) and 2015, finishing fourth in 2009.

Those, then, were the ones with known form. The majority, the 'unknowns', presented a potential headache for lone on-course bookmaker Chris Johnson. First to be ruled out were the two ladies riding side-saddle. Sharon O'Rourke was mounted on the 18-year-old Irish gypsy cob Iceford Two Tone, while Gill Greenwood partnered the 19-year-old Cleveland Bay/Thoroughbred cross Storming Norman. Johnson felt secure in offering 100-1 the pair, though 1,000-1 would have been more appropriate.

Along with all the other riders, Hazel Burkhill, sporting an orange jersey bearing the legend 'World's Worst Racehorse', made her way to the winning post to pay her £5 entry fee and be weighed out on the traditional set of 1940s coal miner's scales. (All riders must carry a minimum of 10 stone. Any shortage is made up of weights carried on the rider's body rather than inserted in the horse's saddle.) When asked the name of her mount, Burkhill replied "He's called World's Worst Racehorse". It hardly encouraged would-be backers to dash to the bookie and take a price.

Next to be eliminated from calculations were the half-dozen assorted skewbalds, none of whom looked likely to become the first such coloured horse to win the Kiplingcotes Derby in modern times. They included Angel GG, the mount of Gaynor Nicholson, whose colours were black, pink 'Angel GG' on body, black cap, pink pom-pom; and Chrissy White on riding club pony George.

Other varieties of horse in the Derby field included an Irish-cross hunter, a 14-year-old Clydesdale/Thoroughbred cross, an Irish sports horse, an Appaloosa, a Trotter/Welsh Cob cross, and a strapping 18-hand hunter. All looked to have limited appeal for betting purposes.

Having observed the known unknowns, bookmaker Johnson and his assistants made sure to keep a wary eye out for any significant money on the unknown unknowns. When it comes to the Kiplingcotes Derby, 'known form' can often be usurped by 'unknown form'.

In accordance with ancient tradition, the runners were called up to the winning post where an abridged version of the rules was read out by clerk of the course Susan 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."

The hardy three-dozen horses and riders then made their way to the start, marked by a stone post in the parish of Etton. Over the years, many people had asked for something more recognisable to indicate the starting point. With that in mind, a local blacksmith was recently commissioned to make a special horseshoe which is now affixed to the stone.

Meanwhile, the record crowd waited eagerly for their return. Some twinkled off to place their bets, while others queued for tea, hot dogs or bacon rolls, sold from a temporary kiosk. An exposed single-track road in the East Yorkshire Wolds is rarely the best place to hang around when Boreas, the god of the north wind, chills the air with his icy breath. This year, however, he relented and the weather conditions were as good as could be remembered – the area was designated the second warmest in the country on that day.

The 500th anniversary race had attracted international interest as well as national. Indeed, some racegoers had flown from across the Atlantic to watch the spectacle, including one Canadian family whose distant ancestors were reputed to have been in the crowd to watch the first ever running. The Witty family, from Edmonton, Alberta, are descendants of Peter Witty, who, along with his brothers, may well have been present at that inaugural Kiplingcotes Derby five centuries ago. A more recent ancestor, Richard Witty, born in 1802, won the race twice in the 1830s and 1850s.

Another group had come from Australia to witness the occasion. They all reckoned it was well worth the long trip. They, along with the hundreds of other spectators, waited for the first sign that the horses were on their way. And just like everyone else, they waited some more and then waited a bit longer.

Eventually, the horses came into view, or rather, one did. Tracey Corrigan and Frog romped home some 25 lengths clear of Jason Carver on Start Me Up to claim her fourth Derby victory, all of them on different horses. There was a measure of compensation for Carver inasmuch that winner receives £50 and the runner-up receives £4 of the £5 entry fee for every horse entered to run. With 36 runners, Carver thus picked up £144, almost three times as much as the winner.

A distance back in third place came Jodie Lee on Lily Fontana, followed by John Thirsk on Harry. The remainder came in at long intervals, often very long intervals. The two side-saddle ladies came home together in 33rd and 34th positions.

Despite the testing nature of the race, all 36 runners got round safely. Trailing in last place, long after the winner's prize had been presented and the main road crossing reopened, came Hazel Burkhill on World's Worst Racehorse, who made a valiant effort to live up to his name. "He went okay for a mile and then obeyed union rules by stopping to a walk," she explained.

Race reports suggested that all had gone relatively smoothly. The lack of recent rain had rendered the course in good condition, rather than a stamina-sapping morass, which can so often be the case here. The only moment of concern occurred when a dog crossed the paths of two of the runners. Fortunately, a collision was avoided.

Winning rider Tracey Corrigan bemoaned the fact that, in her view, the course had been sanitised in recent years. "There's no skill left to it now, no skill to riding it. Before you had to pick which puddle to go through, but now it's just perfect," she told reporters. There are, no doubt, some who would beg to differ.

And so, as the crowd slowly began to wend their way homewards, the birds were singing above the trees, just as they'd done half a millennium before, when a group of sporting gentlemen first raced their horses along the four-mile trek from Etton to Londesborough Wold.

The Kiplingcotes Derby was over for another year. Roll on the next one.

The full finishing order was as follows:

1st: Frog (a.k.a. Zandino) (Tracey Corrigan) 2/1fav

2nd: Start Me Up (Jason Carver) 5/1

3rd: Lily Fontana (Jodie Lee) 5/1

4 Harry (a.k.a. Heaven's Gates) (John Thirsk), 5 Matty (Paul Heywood), 6 Ferroverie (Stephen Crawford), 7 Kinsey Krispin (Emma Kinsella), 8 Red Panther (Emma Sanderson), 9 Dougal (Kirsty Adams), 10 Billy (Louise Rusby), 11 The Duchess (Caroline Palmer), 12 Duster (David Ford), 13 Potomac (Rebecca Whiteley), 14 Whinnie (Richard Rusby), 15 Geezer (Diane Feaster), 16 Asia (Eleanor Aster-Law), 17 Alto Soltador, 18 George (Chrissy White), 19 Midsummer (Barry Hunter), 20 Murphy (Heather Sparkes), 21 Penman Point (Katie Ready), 22 Angel GG (Gaynor Nicholson), 23 Freedom Valley (Felicity Warden), 24 Gallant Hero (Mary Hallam), 25 Island Chocobox (Janet Milestone-Bargh), 26 Boston (a.k.a. Tobruk Diamond) (Brian Hyland), 27 Bruce (Charlotte Dring), 28 Hollie Rae (Rosie Inchbold), 29 Evie (Sarah Watson), 30 Maverick Joe (Joanne Thompson), 31 Storm In A Teacup (Kirsty Mills), 32 Patrick (Peter Bowser), 33 Iceford Two Tone (Sharon O'Rourke), 34 Storming Norman (Gill Greenwood), 35 Pudding (Becky Oxley), 36 World's Worst Racehorse (Hazel Burkhill).

(Unofficial) Distances: 25 lengths, a distance.