

St Patrick's Day Celebration for Paddy

Chris Pitt *reports on the 2022 Kiplingcotes Derby...*

With a combined age of 89, former point-to-point rider Richard Harper and Benny would probably rank among the oldest to have taken on the challenge of the Kiplingcotes Derby. However, with a race that harks back into the mists of time, nobody can say for sure. Ken Holmes, the Lester Piggott of Kiplingcotes, was ever coy about his age but would certainly have been in his mid-70s when gaining his last of his ten wins in 2002.

But there's no doubt that 70-year-old Richard and 19-year-old Benny were the seniors in this year's renewal. They had set off at 4.00am from their Kings Sutton, Banbury farm in order to make sure of arriving in good time for the 11.00am weighing out deadline. Having had a trouble-free run, they were among the first to arrive.

Following a three-year hiatus, the Kiplingcotes Derby was back in its traditional third Thursday of March slot – March 17th this year – in the picturesque Yorkshire Wolds, five miles east of Market Weighton. Unlike Cheltenham 2020, which was vilified and pilloried in the stocks of tabloid press, that year's Kiplingcotes avoided any adverse publicity by cancelling the event, even though the race cards had been printed ('race cards' being a figurative term, as no-one knows the names of the runners until the morning of the race).

Not that the Derby didn't take place in 2020, or in 2021. There's allegedly a stipulation in the ancient rules 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 local 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 actual race usually takes around 10 minutes, for the winner at least).

Nor did the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001 threaten its existence. It may have scuppered Cheltenham that year but it was never going to derail Kiplingcotes. Local farmer Steven 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 him to weigh out and do it again.

So it was that the 2020 and 2021 renewals took place behind closed doors, comprising two local entrants: Steven Crawford on Ferkin 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, inducing memories of the inaugural London Marathon in 1981, when American Dick Beardsley and Norwegian Inge Simonsen crossed the line holding hands.

The Racecourse

The start is marked 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 recently commissioned to make a special horseshoe which is now affixed to the stone.

The four-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, continuing on to Enthorpe Woods and over the old railway bridge. The ground then drops slightly downhill before a steady climb up to 438 feet above sea level. This part of the course invariably 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 2022 – runners and riders

Racing's ongoing anxiety regarding field sizes does not seem to have affected Kiplingcotes, where entries remain healthy. A record field of 36 had gone to post for the historic 500th anniversary running in 2019. Hence, there was much speculation about how many would take part this year. The majority view was that, having had no 'proper' race for three years, there would be a good turnout. The speculation proved correct, with 19 horses and riders taking part.

John Thirsk on Harry (a.k.a. Heaven's Gates) and Steven Crawford on Ferkin were back, one of them hoping to land a third consecutive Derby following their (unique?) dead-heats of the last two years.

Richard Harper's mount, Benny, was known as Chapel House in his racing days and won three chases and a point-to-point. Last seen in action when coming to grief in the Ladies' Open race at Andoversford in April 2015, the 19-year-old looked in spritely condition, as did his veteran rider, fitted out in black and yellow quartered racing colours and enthusing that he was looking forward to the challenge ahead.

Paddy, a 15-year-old gelding by 1988 Epsom Derby winner High-Rise, was officially named Mine Sweeper and won a Kingston Blount maiden in 2014 when partnered by today's rider Sally Hill, reunited with him for her first Kiplingcotes assault.

Boasting a more upmarket pedigree than both of those was 16-year-old Mr Tim, formerly known as Sand Tiger and once owned by Sheikh Mohammed, who had bought him with hopes of winning a Derby, but presumably not the Kiplingcotes version. 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. Owner-rider Sylvia Smith now uses him as a hack and insisted they had no chance of winning. Ah, but that's been said many times before.

Ten-year-old Jasper was another former racehorse. Trained by Stella Barclay and racing under the name Prince Of Time, he won three all-weather contests in April/May 2017 and was last seen in action as recently as November 2019. His rider, Tom Cowlam, was having his first go at the race. A doctor by profession, Tom happened to mention while completing his entry form that, should any of the riders require medical attention after the race, he was fully qualified to be of assistance. Highly reassuring, given the race's formidable nature.

Among the most experienced participants was Heather Sparkes, rider of Murphy, a 14-year-old hunter cob. Under her maiden name of Heather Buck, she competed in six Derbies between 2005 (when only 13) and 2015, finishing fourth in 2009. She returned after a ten-

year hiatus in 2019, finishing 20th of the 36 runners on Murphy. On past Kiplingcotes form, Murphy looked up against it.

Boston, a.k.a. Tobruk Diamond, had also taken part in Kiplingcotes 2019, finishing 26th under Brian Hyland. Sadly, Brian has since died and, as a tribute to his memory, Boston was now being partnered by Thirsk native Josh Dunwell. Standing a massive 18-hands, Boston had been hunted with the Hurworth and Derwent packs and looked fit enough to finish a good deal closer this time.

A 12-year-old piebald hunter named Rosie, the mount of Victoria Elbeck, wearing maroon, with an orange cap, also looked likely to outrun her odds. The same could be said for another 12-year-old, Harry, partnered by Tracy Taylor from Fishlake, near Doncaster.

The mystery horse of the race was a seven-year-old called Cobby, the mount of Kiplingcotes first-timer Helen Goodwin. Hunted with the West of Yore Foxhounds, it was hard to decipher his back history to form a view on his chances.

Among the longshots in the betting market were Berrie, a 13-year-old grey hunter ridden by Katie Weighell, and Tink, a versatile 14-year-old endurance horse who combined that discipline with cross-country and hunting. They traded at 25-1 and 40-1 respectively.

The field included three skewbalds, none of which looked likely to become the first of that colour in living memory to win the Kiplingcotes Derby. Diamond Solitaire's rider, Georgina Turgoose, reckoned she had "no chance". Bertie, the mount of Rebekah Lewis, also looked destined to be among the 'also rans', while Geoff Greenwood's mount Izzy was in the race primarily as companion to Storm, on whom Gill Greenwood was in full hunting costume and riding side-saddle. She had done that very same thing on Storming Norman in 'Kiplingcotes 500', trailing in 34th of the 36 runners.

Rounding out the 19-runner field were Bella, a grey Irish sports horse, to be ridden side-saddle by Kaitlin Beattie; and Raven, a Shire-cross with Simon Burrows on board.

Kaitlin hails from Oregon, USA, although she has lived the last decade in Britain, and was just days away from celebrating her 40th birthday. She explained that both Bella and Raven were re-enactment horses who would be taking part in an event the following weekend. It's presumably something akin to a mock version of the Charge of the Light Brigade, in which case the Kiplingcotes Derby appeared an unorthodox preparation; a bit like warming up for the roles in *Waiting For Godot* by running the London Marathon.

Doncaster bookmaker Chris Johnson, who's been the Kiplingcotes on-course bookie since 2012 – there's no Tote to rival his monopoly – was taking no chances. Going on past experience and what could be gauged from beady observation and asking around, John Thirsk was an obvious front-runner in the market, while the quartet of former racehorses all commanded respect.

He was also keeping a wary eye out for any significant money on the others – such as the unanticipated plunge on Cobby. While falling some way short of the type of coup engineered by the late Barney Curley, there was a whiff of the Charles Byrnes about it. Cobby's odds quickly tumbled from 8-1 to 5-2 as the punters piled in. On known form, or in this case unknown form, it looked curious. Perhaps it was the rider's appearance, looking every inch a jockey in racing silks of light green and light blue hoops, hooped cap. Or was someone 'in the know'?

The race

All riders having weighed out on the traditional set of 1940s coal miner's scales, they assembled on their mounts adjacent to the winning post, where an abridged version of the 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".

Horses and riders then made their way to the start, while the crowd stood around and waited for their return. Some placed their bets, while others queued for sausage or bacon baps (£3.50) from the mobile stand. The sausage rolls were a bargain at just £1 each. All profits were donated to the race fund. Racegoers could also purchase the aforementioned 2020 race cards (annotated with 2020 and 2021 results) for £3.00, a fine example of good old East Yorkshire thrift and its 'waste not, want not' philosophy.

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

The last quarter mile of course was now fenced off; the A614 road crossing had temporary traffic lights; and there was a significantly increased presence of medics in high-viz jackets. No sign of starting stalls or a photo-finish camera yet, however.

Not that a camera would have been needed to decide this year's finish, with the winner coming home in splendid isolation. Sally Hill and Paddy romped to victory all of three furlongs clear of their toiling rivals. The runner-up had not even reached the road crossing by the time Paddy crossed the line, the easiest Kiplingcotes winner in recent memory.

Second to pass the post was Tom Cowlam on Jasper, followed by Josh Dunwell on Boston and Richard Harper on Benny, closely pursued by Steven Crawford on Ferkin. Then came a loose horse, identified by number cloth 11 as Diamond Solitaire.

Rosie led the rest home in sixth, ahead of Berrie, Murphy and Cobby, the gamble on the latter having gone wildly astray.

The remainder of the runners trickled in at long intervals. The winner had already been presented with the handsome silver trophy by the time Geoff Greenwood on Izzy and Gill Greenwood on Storm limped their way to the finishing line. 'Limped' was the operative word in this case, for Gill had parted company with Storm *en route* but pluckily insisted on walking the rest of the course, accompanied all the way by Geoff and Izzy.

Even then, they weren't the last to finish. That honour went to Sylvia Smith on Mr Tim. All in all, a bit of a comedown for a horse for which Sheikh Mohammed had once entertained thoughts of Epsom Downs in June.

Georgina Turgoose, Diamond Solitaire's rider, eventually returned on the back of the starter's trailer, none the worse for having parted company with her mount. But where, much of the assembled crowd was asking, was John Thirsk? The four-time winner looked guaranteed a first-four finish but was nowhere to be seen.

The answer was revealed when Steven Crawford reported that both he and John had come down at the Enthorpe Bridge crossing. Steven remounted to complete the course, whereas John, who was unhurt, as was Heaven's Gates, decided it was more practical to ride straight

home rather than carry on when all chance had gone. (See Footnote at the end of this report for further details)

Unsaddling fourth-placed Benny, permit holder Richard Harper reflected that he'd really enjoyed the experience and, had he known the course better, could probably have finished third. Two days later, he ran Storm Rising in an ITV-televised chase at Kempton. Storm Rising got round and picked up fifth-place prize money, but it's doubtful that Richard derived as much satisfaction from that as he did for his ride in the Kiplingcotes Derby.

As for winning jockey Sally Hill, she revealed that Paddy (alias Mine Sweeper) had been bought at Ascot Sales with the aim of going for the 2020 Kiplingcotes Derby, which ended up being contested by two locals behind closed doors. Similar hopes were dashed for last year's renewal, having again been reduced to a private affair.

Third time lucky, then. It was worth the wait. And as for those who played the 'hunch bet' – a horse named Paddy on St Patrick's Day – well, they were pretty chuffed too.

Full finishing order:

1st: Paddy (a.k.a. Mine Sweeper) (Sally Hill) 5-2jtfav

2nd: Jasper (a.k.a. Prince Of Time) (Tom Cowlam) 8/1

3rd: Boston (Josh Dunwell) 5/1

4 Benny (a.k.a. Chapel House) (Richard Harper), 5 Ferkin (Steven Crawford), 6 Rosie (Victoria Elbeck), 7 Berrie (Katie Weighell), 8 Murphy (Heather Sparkes), 9 Bertie (Rebekah Lewis), 10 Cobby (Helen Goodwin), 11 Tink (Megan Robinson), 12 Harry (Tracy Taylor), 13 Raven (Simon Burrows), 14 Bella (Kaitlin Beattie), 15 Izzy (Geoff Greenwood), 16 Storm (Gill Greenwood), 17 Mr Tim (a.k.a. Sand Tiger) (Sylvia Smith). Did not finish: Diamond Solitare (Georgina Turgoose), Harry (a.k.a. Heaven's Gates) (John Thirsk).

FOOTNOTE:- A chance meeting with John Thirsk at York's Dante meeting two months later explained the mystery regarding his 'did not finish' on Harry, a.k.a. Heaven's Gates.

It transpires that Steven Crawford's report of John heading straight home after coming down at the Enthorpe Bridge crossing wasn't quite correct. What actually happened was this:

John had been upsides Sally Hill and Steven when the latter's horse came down. Then, with about a mile and a quarter left to run, John was lying around five lengths behind Sally and going comfortably enough when Harry suddenly put on the brakes. John was unseated and tried to grab hold of the reins to remount but just failed, and the horse ran off in the direction of Goodmanham Wold.

John spent the next hour and a half searching for Harry, then received a phone call that the horse had just walked back into his own yard safe and sound. A happy ending all round – and John was able to join his mates in the local pub for a post-race discussion, albeit two hours later than planned.