

A Sunny Win on a Sunny Day

Chris Pitt *reports on the 2025 Kiplingcotes Derby...*

Ah, the spring equinox. The warmest day of the year so far, no hint of a breeze and temperatures in the mid-60s. This is not your typical Kiplingcotes weather, far removed from the usual climate when the bitter east winds blow across the Yorkshire Wolds and chill the bones to the marrow. No, this is a day more akin to Epsom in June.

But then, for many in this neck of the woods the Kiplingcotes Derby has always carried more resonance than its Epsom counterpart. It's more than 260 years older for a start. Hence the third Thursday of March is eagerly pencilled into diaries at the start of each year. The 2025 renewal took place on the 20th and, as last year, did not clash with the Cheltenham Festival.

Locals were joined by visitors from far afield, drawn there as if by some unbreakable thread to witness the uniqueness of the occasion.

There were, however, a couple of notable absentees. Perennial Clerk of the Course Susan Hillaby had been ruled out by a leg injury (it can happen to humans as well as horses), while Philip Guest, sponsor and donator of the winner's trophy, was also unavailable. In their place, Clare Waring officiated as Clerk of the Course, while longstanding Kiplingcotes treasurer Guy Stephenson stood in to present the winner with their prize, which, in addition to the magnificent silver trophy, also included £50 in cash and a horse blanket.

Sadly, the trophy had lost some of its magnificence since last year. The top part of the mounted horse and rider had been broken off and all that remained of the jockey was his left leg.

Overall, officials were a touch thin on the ground. Four-time Derby winner John Thirsk, who had announced his retirement after the 2023 running, was drafted in to act as Clerk of the Scales. The Starter was also missing, although an innovative way around this snag was duly achieved courtesy of a novel idea by Kiplingcotes veteran Stephen Crawford.

Thirsk and Crawford had ridden most of the course four days earlier and reported it in good condition with minor improvements having been made to parts of the track. The lack of recent rain had rendered the ground less testing than usual, although the runners were still making a print on the run-in from the main road. Whatever the conditions, the three and three-quarter-mile marathon remained a tough and demanding course.

Kiplingcotes Derby 2025 – runners and riders

Nobody knows how many horses will take part until 11.00am on the day of the race, the cut-off point for entries, by which time all riders must have weighed out on the traditional set of 1940s coal miners' scales. However, its increased popularity in recent times 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 in 2023, 19 again last year, and 18 for this year's renewal.

Male riders were heavily outnumbered. Fourteen of the runners were ridden by women, with just four men taking part.

The first to arrive was the one with the longest journey, former point-to-point rider and permit holder Richard Harper, all the way from Kings Sutton, near Banbury. He'd finished fourth,

seventh and eighth in the previous three runnings but came with higher hopes this time, his mount being the seven-year-old **William**, better known by his racing name of Wee Willie Nail. The son of four-time Ascot Gold Cup winner Yeats had won a Gowran Park maiden hurdle for Gordon Elliott and jockey Davy Russell in September 2022.

Richard was one of only six riders to have ridden in the race before, a dozen having their first experience of the Derby course. Of the latter group, easily the most notable participant was Alyson Deniel, who arrived with a wealth of experience in amateur riders' Flat races and as a dual winner of the Queen Mother's Cup at York, first on Step This Way in 2008, then on Show The Way in 2017.

Her mount was the Gigginstown cast-off **Wounded Warrior**, sired by Shantou. In his prime, the former Noel Meade inmate had beaten Grand National winner Rule The World in a Grade 2 chase at Naas, finished second in Gowran Park's Thyestes Chase and third to Don Poli in Cheltenham's RSA Chase. He had participated in both the Grand National and Irish Grand National in 2017 and won the valuable BoyleSports Handicap Chase at the 2018 Punchestown Festival.

Subsequently bought by the top point-to-point team of Tom Ellis and Gina Andrews, he had won at Duncombe Park in February 2022, providing rider Ellie Callwood with her first winner. (Ellie went on to finish fourth on Music Drive in this year's Cheltenham Festival's hunter chase.) Though by now 16 years old, Wounded Warrior was obviously a lively contender.

The 2024 winner **Merlin** was ridden, as last year, by Julie Campbell who was hopeful of a follow up victory. Now 15 years old, Merlin had raced as Grey Destiny, winning seven times on the all-weather plus a six-furlong Catterick turf contest for York-based trainer Antony Brittain.

The Big Brown Horse ran under the slightly different pseudonym My Lovely Big Brown Horse last year, finishing sixth under Kiplingcotes regular Heather Sparkes on ground softer than ideal. Having her twelfth ride in the race, the first when only 12 years old in 2005, Heather was among the most experienced jockeys. Her mount, now 12 years old himself, raced under the name of Choungaya and won a Fairyhouse beginners' chase for Josph O'Brien in February 2021 when ridden by Rachael Blackmore. Following his acquisition by Yorkshire trainer Mike Sowersby, he had failed to complete in seven starts over hurdles and fences prior to his sixth-place effort in last year's Kiplingcotes. Today's faster ground would surely help his cause.

Another Thoroughbred was the eight-year-old **Bill**, partnered by Kiplingcotes debutant Richard Thompson. Unraced on the Flat or over jumps, the huge 17.3 hands gelding had been hunted with Badsworth, Bramham and York South (BBYS).

Ferkin – formerly known as Ferroverie, unplaced in two three-year-old Pontefract maidens for Ollie Pears in 2011 – was again the mount of Stephen Crawford. Having run a pre-arranged dead-heat in the behind closed doors Kiplingcotes of 2020 and 2021, they had finished fifth, fourth and fifth in the last three renewals.

When I'm Ready, partnered by Kiplingcotes first-timer Rupert Smith, had run in five point-to-points, being pulled up each time. The son of Schiaperelli had finally found his niche as a hunter with the Grafton.

Cass, a 10-year-old gelding ridden by Lauren Tessayman, had also competed in point-to-points, presumably under another name, and hunted with the Brocklesby.

Two more former racehorses ran under pseudonyms: 13-year-old **Archie**, the mount of Harriet Kedie; and 16-year-old **Sunny** (entered as ‘Sunshine’ on the runners and riders’ board), ridden by Sophie Faulkner-Smith. Both riders were making their Kiplingcotes debut and offered little explanation of their mounts’ former history, except to mention that Sunny had been in training “somewhere in Wales”.

Those were the ten Thoroughbreds, the race seemingly between them, although a plausible case could be made for the 14-year-old Irish Sport Horse **Paddy**, the mount of Lucinda Coultas, who hunted him with the Sinnington. This was a different ‘Paddy’ to the Thoroughbred who won the race in 2022, that one having raced under rules as Mine Sweeper. Of the other non-Thoroughbreds, **Jet**, an Irish draught hunter, had finished ninth as ‘Jet Flyer’ in 2024 under today’s rider Louise Preston. She hunted him with the Holderness and also with the BBYS.

Eclipse is a protected name under the rules of racing, with no horse allowed to be so named. That does not apply at Kiplingcotes, hence the 15-year-old chestnut mare with four white socks could legitimately take part under the name of her illustrious 18th century predecessor. An owner-bred Irish draught horse, she was ridden by Jane Fairburn, who admitted to being 71 years old, making the combined age of horse and rider add up to 86.

All participants must weigh 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. That has led to some pretty innovative solutions over the years. In Jane Fairburn’s case, having been unable to make the required minimum, she donned a heavy tweed jacket with, strangely, a variety of tractor parts lodged in the pockets.

A rule of thumb performance indicator for Kiplingcotes is the ‘Four Feathered Feet Factor’. Horses with feathered feet can safely be eliminated from calculations. That ruled out the nine-year-old Dales Pony **Rudders**, the mount of Rebecca Stewart. They had performed heroically to finish 12th in 2023 and beat three home when finishing 16th last year, both times under the name of Rudy. However, the FFFF looked set to remain unchallenged.

The last four horses to arrive all looked to have similarly unpromising credentials. They were **Ed** (Charlotte Buckton), a 12-year-old grey Connemara; **Acapella** (Cathleen Cockin), a nine-year-old grey Andalusian warmblood mare; **Prado** (Sam Power), a 22-year-old Andalusian; and veteran of the field **Geezer** (Diana Feaster), a 23-year-old Irish hunter whose speciality was dressage.

How they bet

With breeds ranging from Thoroughbreds and Irish Draughts to Andalusians and a Dales Pony, there was inevitably a wide disparity in the odds on offer.

Doncaster bookmaker Chris Johnson, who has been the Kiplingcotes on-course bookie since 2012, opened cautiously with last year’s winner Merlin heading the market at 2-1, Bill at 5-2 and Wounded Warrior 3-1, the latter pair quickly trading places in the market. Sunny was soon proving popular, the price being cut from an opening 6-1 to half those odds.

William, despite having won over hurdles for Gordon Elliott not too long ago, was easy to back, drifting from 4-1 to 7-1. When I'm Ready, Cass and Archie were all available around the same 7-1 to 8-1 mark, while The Big Brown Horse traded at 10s.

Ferkin opened 8-1 but when jockey Stephen Crawford announced that, due to the shortage of officials, he was going to make Kiplingcotes history as the first rider to actually start the race as well as ride in it, his mount's odds quickly went out 20-1. The plan, he explained, was to walk to the start with the rest of the field, get off his mount, wave the flag to send them off, then jump back on and canter round behind them.

"That's a blow," sighed one rueful punter on being appraised of Crawford's tactics. "I've backed him each-way at 20-1. I wondered why he was such a big price. Talk about 'not off'."

Of the non-Thoroughbred contingent, there was some money for Jet at 10s and Paddy at 12s, probably more in hope than expectation, although it is possible the latter was mistaken for the Thoroughbred of that name who won three years ago.

Eclipse first, the rest nowhere, goes the age-old saying. At least one overly-optimistic punter clearly believed that any horse bearing such a celebrated moniker must run well and duly parted with his money, causing her odds to tumble from 16-1 to 12-1. Even at those reduced odds she attracted another £10 bet. Presumably those punters were unaware of the rider having tractor components in her pockets.

The Connemara, Ed, could be backed at 16-1 while you could pretty much name your price on the Andalusian pair, the 23-year-old dressage horse and the Dales Pony.

The build-up

At 11.15 the 18 runners and riders assembled adjacent to the winning post, where clerk of the course Clare Waring read out an abridged version of the original rules, including the stipulation that "any rider who layeth hold of any of the other riders or striketh any of them shall win no prize."

Several of the jockeys were bedecked in racing colours. Among them, Alyson Deniel sported yellow with maroon hoops; Richard Harper yellow and black quarters, orange cap; When I'm Ready's rider Rupert Smith had silks of green, red sleeves, hooped cap; Cathleen Cockin wore a combination of blue, green, red, yellow and orange hoops with a red cap; Diana Feaster was similarly multicoloured with hoops of red, green, white and black, while Sam Power's were of black and purple quarters.

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, use 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.

As usual, 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

Those spectators who position themselves further down the track obtain more comprehensive views but miss the finish. However, for those gathered along the quarter-mile finishing straight precious little can be seen until the closing stages, hence the reliance on post-race feedback from the participants.

In fact, it took little describing. The race was dominated by a pair of 16-year-old veterans. Sunny, wearing saddle cloth number 13, made all under Sophie Faulkner-Smith, who emitted a 'woo-hoo' when coming home the best part of a furlong clear of Alyson Deniel on Wounded Warrior.

It was a much closer affair for the places, with Wounded Warrior some five lengths ahead of Cass, ridden by Lauren Tessayman, with When I'm Ready a further three lengths back in fourth under Rupert Smith, meaning the result had been a 1-2-3 for lady riders.

A gap ensued before Bill came home fifth ahead of Merlin in sixth. Archie, Paddy and The Big Brown Horse were the next three to complete, followed by Jet and the first of the Andalusians, Acapella, a fine performance belying her long odds. Willie finished twelfth, his rider admitting that he'd got tired before his horse who was running on at the end.

Ferkin, despite his rider having officiated as starter before setting off, managed to pass five rivals on the way, coming home in thirteenth place. He was followed by Eclipse, failing on this occasion to live up to his predecessor's name – more a case of 'Eclipse nowhere, the rest ahead'.

Twenty-three-year-old Geezer finished fifteenth – "Not bad for a dressage horse," mused his rider after the race – then came Ed and Rudders. Seventeen home, just one left.

A few minutes later the last of the runners appeared, Prado and Sam Power crossing the line to enthusiastic cheers from those still waiting at the finish. All 18 had come back safe and sound.

By then, Sunny's rider Sophie Faulkner-Smith, from Slingsby, in Lincolnshire, had exchanged her number 13 saddle cloth for the winner's prizes. Holding aloft the trophy, she admitted: "I really didn't want to be that number." It didn't matter.

Post-race analysis

Given the glorious weather, Sunny may have been the hunch bet for those wanting their annual flutter, but those who didn't back mere hunches were also in clover. Bookmaker Chris Johnson and his 'eyes and ears' Robert Maltby revealed they had taken a couple of hefty bets at 6-1 on the winner.

Alyson Deniel said that she had tracked Sophie and Sunny all the way, hoping to pick them off in the closing stages, but when they quickened Wounded Warrior didn't have the legs to go with them. There was some consolation in finishing second, however, for with 18 runners, she pocketed £72 (£4 per runner), £22 more than the winner. This was due to a quirk of the race conditions which stipulate 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.

Lauren Tessayman was delighted with Cass's third place, while a disappointed Julie Campbell reported that Merlin had lost a shoe during the race, causing her to look after him and coast home rather than being competitive.

Ever the amateurs' professional, Alyson Deniel was quick to thank Lord and Lady Halifax and Garrowby Stud for the support they had given her. Founded in 1962 and located 10 miles from Malton, the stud has produced no end of top-class racehorses, its most famous graduate being the 1978 Derby winner Shirley Heights.

Having received her runners-up cash prize, she thanked everyone for attending and urged them to buy a souvenir race card and support the Kiplingcotes' race fund in order to ensure that this long-established and unique contest can continue for years to come. Well said, Alyson.

The only question that remained was who exactly was 'Sunny'? Usually, keen detective work will reveal the identity of racehorses running under assumed names. But not on this occasion. The connections appeared to be on the coy side, which perhaps explained the weight of money for this unknown commodity. Maybe by the time of next year's Kiplingcotes Derby we'll know the answer.

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

1st: Sunny (Sophie Faulkner-Smith) 3-1

2nd: Wounded Warrior (Alyson Deniel) 5-2

3rd: Cass (Lauren Tessayman) 7-1

4 When I'm Ready (Rupert Smith), 5 Bill (Richard Thompson), 6 Merlin (Julie Campbell), 7 Archie (Harriet Kedie), 8 Paddy (Lucinda Coultas), 9 The Big Brown Horse (*Choungaya*) (Heather Sparkes), 10 Jet (Jet Flyer) (Louis Preston), 11 Acapella (Cathleen Cockin), 12 William (*Wee Willie Nail*) (Richard Harper), 13 Ferkin (*Ferrovierie*) (Steven Crawford), 14 Eclipse (Jane Fairburn), 15 Geezer (Diana Feaster), 16 Ed (Charlotte Buckton), 17 Rudders (Rudy) (Rebecca Stewart), 18 Prado (Sam Power).

A Brief History 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 not having taken place until 1780, nobody is quite sure when the 'Derby' suffix was attached to its predecessor, which over time had acquired the title 'Kiplingcotes Plate' before becoming the Kiplingcotes Derby.

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 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 who rode the winner ten times between 1983 and 2002.

Since the turn of the 21st 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 Thoroughbred racehorse is now required to win it.

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 Stephen Crawford on Ferkin and John Thirsk on Harry riding the entire course both times and finishing in pre-arranged dead-heats.

You see, you can't mess about with the Kiplingcotes Derby. There's supposedly 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.

The Course

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.