

‘A FIRST-RATE AFFAIR’

A Famous Steeplechase is born in Market Harborough.

Thousands of people converged on Market Harborough in April 1860 for a great event in the world of steeple-chasing. Although the ‘Harborough Advertiser’ for that year seems not to have survived, a full account appeared in ‘The Field’. This report conveys very well the excitement caused by what was perhaps the greatest sporting event ever held in the area. The idea of fifteen thousand people going up onto Mill Hill at East Farndon to gain the best view of the races in the valley below seems hard to believe today.

Here is The Field’s account, in all its breathless excitement.

‘The day of this magnificent steeple-chasing festival opened under a brilliant sunshine on Wednesday morning. Throughout the counties of Northampton, Leicester, Rutland, Warwick and Lincoln, sportsmen of every grade were up betimes, and in readiness for the treat in store for them. No need was there to sing “Rouse, boys, rouse, ‘tis a fine hunting morning”, for all were “prepared for the chase” at cock-crow. The little town of Market Harborough was in a bustle at day-break, making ready for the reception of visitors, and its houses were decorated for the occasion with an unusual degree of gaiety. A host of noble and gentle lovers of sport were expected. The industrious proprietors of itinerant rifle-galleries had painted their tunnels afresh, the vendors of gingerbread had decorated their stalls with ribbons, and the dealers in small-beer had hung the carts – from the tailboards of which they dispensed the frothing beverage – with branches of evergreen. All around was joy; the day had arrived; railway trains from both north and south brought enormous cargoes of sightseers; most grotesque vehicles, apparently extricated from the lumber of ancient carriage repositories at Berlin, rolled cumbrously along the road, and more modern carriages whirled in quick succession towards the scene of action during the entire forenoon. It is rather remarkable that in hunting countries where one sees the best horses in the world, the very worst carriages and worst drivers are to be found. Whether a fine horseman despises wheels we know not, but we do know from experience that many a man who can go well over a country is out of his element when sitting behind, instead of upon, his horse.

By twelve o’clock the street, for there is only one, was literally crammed, and by one the stream of human beings extended from the quaint old market-town of Harborough to the sloping pasture lands about Farndon Windmill. The wind blew a bit and was felt somewhat keenly on the high ground whither flocked on this grand occasion from fifteen to twenty thousand people. For the information of those who never had the good fortune to see Farndon Windmill, we state that it stands on an eminence which commands an extended view over as fine a tract of country as can be found in Europe. In front of the hill was the long-looked-for steeple-chase. The crack affair was first set on foot during the hunting season by Mr. Fothergill Rowlands, a gentleman well-known in the hunting and steeplechase world; “the running was immediately taken up” by a number of masters of foxhounds and their friends, whose united exertions sent in subscriptions, and lent their patronage to this first-rate affair, which the gentlemen of England determined should be “Grand”. So great an assembly of “quality” was never before seen at a meet to witness a steeple-chase. Among those who bear the honoured title of M.F.H. we noticed the Earl of Stamford (Quorndon),

Lord Curzon (Atherstone), Hon. F.W. Villiers (Pychley). Others were doubtless present – and it is no easy matter to say who was not – for the hill was covered with carriages and horsemen, like that of Epsom on an Oaks day. The aristocratic character of the great steeple-chase must have indeed been attractive, or two of these masters would not have turned their horses' heads towards Market Harborough. It is, we are confident, their first appearance at a meeting of this kind, and, stranger still, a running horse came from the stable of one of them. The line of country was admirably adapted to its purpose, and to the situation of those who first set the prime affair on foot, nothing but a hunter could get over it; a few of the fences had been slightly lowered, because they were scarcely practicable for horses after going a slapping pace after three miles. Sir Richard Sutton (and he was a hard one) used to say of the Harborough country that it did very well in the early part of the day, but it was sometimes “a little too severe with a second fox”. The country on Wednesday was stiff, there were twenty fences, and the artificial brook – half a mile from home – was fifteen foot wide, with a row of thorns about three feet high on the taking-off side. A crowd collected at it to see the “ducks”, and were pretty well satisfied, for it caused a few spills in the big race, and in that of the farmers exactly half got in, although not a single mistake had occurred the first three miles and a half. It is worthy of notice that in the Open Steeplechase every horse cleared without even a splash; they evidently knew their business.

.....The land run over is in the occupation of Mr. Bennett of Marston, who rendered all the assistance he could to make the day's pastime perfect; and so nearly did it approach to perfection that we are fair to conclude by saying of it, as the old Romans did, *Esto perpetua.*'

The windmill at East Farndon, referred to in the report, no longer exists, of course. It was struck by lightning in 1895 and destroyed in the resulting fire. No photographs or drawings of the 1860 Steeplechase have come to light, as far as I know, though surely some visual record must have been made of such a momentous occasion. The result of the races appeared in national newspapers, including *The Times*. One race of out those run was the main event, the race which attracted the best entries.

After this impressive beginning, the race was held again the following year, again at Market Harborough. In 1862 it moved to Rugby and then back to Harborough in 1863. On this occasion, the crowds did not have to go up to Farndon. According to the *Leicester Journal*, “Removing the stand from its former site on Farndon Hill to a spot near the wide water jump in the flat, not only brought the chief centre of attention almost within hail of the town, but dispensed with a tedious backbreaking pilgrimage, an omission alike acceptable to biped and beast.” The *Harborough News* reported this change somewhat differently. “The stand...instead of being on Windmill-hill... was placed in front of [the water-jump]...As a consequence, a large part of the line beyond the hill was concealed from the view of spectators”. The course was changed a little so that “some of the worst part of the ridge and furrow was avoided.” The meeting was once more a great attraction and a very large event by any standards, drawing “at least 20,000 people”.

In 1864 the race moved to Melton Mowbray, but after that it became detached from its original location in this area and went all round the country. It was held, for example, in Abergavenny in 1872, Sandown in 1875 and Liverpool in 1880. Apart

from blank years in 1869 and 2001, it has been held every year since, except in war-time. From 1902, it was held seven times in nine years at Warwick. It was first run at Cheltenham in 1904 and then moved there permanently in 1911.

There is a local story that the first-ever Grand National was held in the fields between Harborough and Farndon. But the Grand National was first staged in 1839 and has always been run at Liverpool. The Harborough race of 1860 was called 'The Grand National Hunt Steeplechase' – not the same as The Grand National. It was not uncommon for important races to be called 'Grand National', but the Harborough event was what became known as 'The National Hunt Steeplechase'. Its full title is now 'The National Hunt Steeplechase Challenge Cup' and it is run as part of the Gold Cup meeting, but nowadays it is perhaps the least attractive of the races at that prestigious occasion. Its main quality is its long history. It was eclipsed when the Gold Cup was started in 1924.

However, there is no doubting the race's glamour in its early days, especially the very first occasion at Harborough in 1860. Perhaps some visual impression of that exciting day may yet come to light.

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April 2021