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TOWN AND TURF: THE DEVELOPMENT OF RACING IN ENGLAND

c. 1680–1760

Peter Borsay

I

HORSE-RACING AS WE UNDERSTAND IT TODAY (with regular meetings, established prizes, open to a wide range of competitors) probably dates back to the early sixteenth century.¹ But if the Tudors and early Stuarts presided over the birth of sport, it was their later Stuart and early Hanoverian successors who saw it grow and mature into an expensive and sophisticated recreational industry. Between about 1680 and the late 1730s the number of meetings expanded considerably. When the *Racing Calendar* was first published in 1727 it already listed 112 courses. By 1739 this number had risen to 138 (a figure probably only ever exceeded again in the late 1860s) which accommodated over four hundred recorded prizes and matches valued at about £13,500.² One observer commented in 1736, that 'it is surprising to think what a height this spirit of horse-racing is now arrived in this kingdom, when there is scarce a village so mean that has not a bit of plate raised once a year for this purpose'.³

The development of the industry in these years was too rapid for its own well-being. There was little time for the new growth to become firmly established, leaving it highly vulnerable if circumstances worsened. Moreover, the speed of change provoked an adverse reaction amongst the nation's rulers. They were concerned that what was essentially a gentleman's sport, had expanded to such an extent that it was now attracting many plebeian elements. It was felt that this not only 'contributed very much to the encouragement of idleness' and 'to the impoverishment of many of the meaner sort of the subjects of this kingdom', but also promoted an unacceptable degree of social mixing.⁴ Therefore, in 1740 legislation was introduced which sought to destroy the smaller and financially weaker meetings, which were generally those patronized by popular society, primarily by raising the minimum value of prizes to a draconian £50. Judging from the *Racing Calendars* the effects were dramatic. By 1749 the level of recorded winnings stood at only two-thirds of their 1739 level, and the number of courses, and of prizes and matches, had plummeted to a paltry one-third. During the 1750s a highly selective recovery took place. Whereas the number of meetings scarcely expanded at all from the nadir of 1749, the value of recorded winnings had by 1760 spiralled to £33,500 (almost two and a half times the level of 1739). What was emerging was a more rationalized, business-oriented sport. Thus, in the longer term the crisis of the 1740s had a pruning effect, cutting out the luxuriant but weaker growth of the early phase, and encouraging a more compact and fundamentally healthier racing industry to develop. Ironically, it is unlikely in the long run this reduced popular participation in the sport, since 'the meaner sort' simply redirected their attentions to the larger courses that survived, though at least these were under gentry and civic control.

II

Though racing is often seen as a rural sport the majority of courses were located in, or on the edge of towns, and often played an important role in their economic and social life. Of over

three hundred courses that I have traced between 1500 and 1770, seventy per cent were based on market towns. The *Racing Calendars*, though they omit a number of rural meetings, suggest that by the mid eighteenth century the proportion was even higher; in the 1730s between seventy-four and eighty per cent, by the 1760s possibly as high as ninety per cent.⁵ There were solid practical reasons for this close association between town and turf. Already when racing began to develop in the sixteenth century there was a rich heritage of market towns. These were the natural gathering points of country society, where agricultural products and manufactured goods were regularly exchanged, and where people congregated to transact personal, administrative and political business. A racecourse based on a market town was therefore able to exploit the advantages of an established meeting place, with its own defined catchment area, to provide a basic core of support. It could also call upon a range of services, such as stabling, smith work, saddlery, food, drink, accommodation and entertainment, which were concentrated in urban centres and were essential to the operation of the sport.

The urban courses came in a variety of shapes and sizes. However, by the mid eighteenth century a number of distinct types had emerged and these can be ordered into a rough sort of hierarchy. At the very top of the league, in a division all of its own, reigned Newmarket. By most standards it was head and shoulders above its nearest rivals. On the Heath was won (and lost) a huge proportion of all recorded prize and match money; between one fifth and a half during the years 1730 to 1760.⁶ Though the *Calendars* may exaggerate this, with Newmarket races being perhaps better recorded, it represents a remarkable geographical concentration of the monetary rewards of the sport. To service the large number of races required to produce such returns, the town developed a far more extended calendar of events than was to be found elsewhere. This was reflected not only in the relatively large number of days racing that occurred, but also in the practice of holding more than one meeting a year. Though other courses experimented along these lines, Newmarket was the only one to boast consistently a multi-meeting calendar. This may have emerged as early as the 1620s, and a programme in spring and autumn events became a regular feature of racing in the town. Even in the dark year of 1740, when the number of recorded days racing dropped to eight, two gatherings still took place. By 1770, with the town's dominance if anything growing, there were five annual meetings, though these were still largely focused around the spring/autumn axis. The year began with the 'First Spring Meeting' in April, followed by the 'Second Spring Meeting' in May, the 'July Meeting', the 'First October Meeting', the 'Second October Meeting', and finished with the 'Houghton Meeting' in November.⁷ The pre-eminence of the town was reflected in its relations with the wider world of racing. In 1734 the prestigious and valuable Wallasey stakes were transferred from their seaside venue in Cheshire to the Heath, and from the early 1730s there is evidence of courses referring disputed races 'to the judgement of Newmarket'.⁸

The dominant position of the course flowed from the royal and aristocratic patronage that it attracted. In the early seventeenth century James I established Newmarket as a recreational retreat for the Court. From then on it received the constant and often lavish patronage of Stuart monarchs.⁹ At some point in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries royal favour was replaced by that of an élite aristocratic group, which from the 1750s coalesced into the Jockey Club. By the end of the century large stables were maintained in the town by noblemen such as the Dukes of Bolton, Cumberland, Devonshire, Grafton, Northumberland and Queensbury, and Lords Abingdon, Clermont, Egremont and Grosvenor.¹⁰

Newmarket's unique position was not inevitable. Royal patronage, the initial stimulus behind the course's success, had on occasions wavered dangerously in other directions. The royal residence at Windsor in Berkshire provided an alternative focus for racing. Charles II

attended events at Datchett Ferry close to the castle, while in 1711 Queen Anne established the nearby meeting at Ascot.¹¹ Charles II's allegiance to Newmarket was apparently wearing thin during the latter part of his reign. In 1681, under the influence of the Oxford Parliament, he moved his horses from the Heath to Burford and encouraged his friends to do the same. During his very last years he envisaged turning Winchester into an English Versailles, building a grand new palace in the town, and developing its racing facilities.¹² Though none of these twists and turns in royal patronage were ever to create a serious challenger to Newmarket, they gave to the favoured courses a certain social élan, that in the case of Ascot came to bear fruit at a much later date.

Below Newmarket came the first substantial category of courses, the country meetings. Though invariably located in the shire town this was not always the case. In Lancashire and Staffordshire the centres of county social life were Preston and Lichfield, rather than Lancaster and Stafford. Certainly the meetings at the latter two places were eclipsed by their rivals. Lichfield occurs in all seventeen of a sample of years drawn from the *Calendars* between 1730 and 1770, Stafford in only one; Preston in ten of the years, Lancaster in five.¹³ The same may have been the case in Sussex, where Lewes emerges as a far more active centre of racing than Chichester.¹⁴ In a large county like Yorkshire, with a great racing tradition, there were a number of what may be called quasi-county meetings, in places like Beverley and Doncaster. The latter was so well patronized by the gentry and supported such a rich variety of entertainments, that it would be difficult to differentiate it from a typical county event. Separated by a good thirty miles from York, it acted as an additional social centre for the gentry of South Yorkshire.¹⁵

With such problems of definition it is difficult to be precise about the size of the county category. What however is clear, even using the shire town as a crude marker of the county meeting, is that after 1740 this sector grows considerably in importance, and at the expense of the smaller racing centres. Whereas in 1739 less than one in five courses were located in shire towns, by 1760 this proportion had risen to one in three.¹⁶ This reflected the county meeting's capacity both to survive and capitalize on the years of crisis. Such resilience derived from its special character, which was based on three principal features; the size and nature of the region serviced by the meeting, the high status of those who attended it, and the sophisticated facilities that evolved around it.

A wide catchment area, largely based on the county, or a substantial portion of it, was an essential feature. It was crucial that the meeting drew its patronage not simply from the immediate locality, in the way a smaller course may do, but from a wide region. This need not necessarily be *precisely* the county. A gentleman who lived close to the border of two shires might well use both their county meetings. Such was the case with Sir Roger Newdigate of Arbury in north Warwickshire, who regularly visited the Warwick and Lichfield races in the mid eighteenth century. Similarly, Nicholas Blundell and his cousin attended not only their native Lancashire meetings earlier in the century, but also occasionally crossed the Pennines to York.¹⁷ None the less, a county meeting must have a specific shire, or part of one, whose patronage it could depend on. This was the core onto which may then be built a wider clientele. Evidence of this core can be seen in the subscriptions collected to finance race prizes. The Warwick list for 1754 contains a rich sprinkling of the county élite drawn from throughout the shire; for example, Earl Brooke and Samuel Greatheed from Warwick, Lord Craven from Stoneleigh, Sir Richard Newdigate from Arbury and Sir Charles Mordaunt of Walton.¹⁸ In drawing upon this core of support the county meeting was able to exploit a particularly lucrative and loyal source of demand. During the early modern period the county emerged as an immensely important administrative and political unit, which provided a natural focus around which the ruling élite could organize themselves in the localities and develop a sense of social cohesion.¹⁹ The county meeting, among other things, was part of the

apparatus through which this cohesion was achieved and maintained. Subscription to a plate or prize, attendance at the races and the entertainments they spawned, were a sign of one's allegiance to shire society, and an opportunity to reaffirm the bonds that held it together.

The second feature of the county meeting's character, its wealth and prestige, naturally flowed from the first. Frequently contemporaries commented on the numbers and quality of 'the company' who attended the county races. In 1733 we hear that 'my sister Delves, Dolly and myself went to the Lichfield races . . . where we met all the world, indeed I never saw so much good company in any place before'; and Defoe could write of the Nottingham races, 'it is a glorious show they have here when the running season begins, for here is such an assembly of gentlemen of quality, that not Banstead Down, or Newmarket Heath, produces better company'.²⁰ This impression of the high status of those who visited county meetings is confirmed by the evidence from subscription lists for gentlemen's race prizes. Three such lists survive for mid eighteenth-century Warwick (1744, 1745, 1754) and one for Stafford (1755).²¹ Those for Warwick show that perhaps a third of the subscribers held the title of knight or above, and that about fifteen per cent could be included among the aristocracy. The single list for Stratford provides useful comparative evidence. There is a relatively large proportion of aristocrats, thirteen per cent of all subscribers, but the low representation of the middling élite leaves only one fifth in the knight or above category. This suggests there was a real difference between the status of a shire meeting like that at Warwick, and an important market-town course such as that at nearby Stratford.

Along with the nature of its catchment area and the wealth and prestige it attracted, the county meeting's third characteristic was the sophisticated social infrastructure that it supported. Much of this focused around the provision of accommodation and food for the considerable number of gentry who attended. The need for sustenance gave rise to some bumper feasts known by contemporaries as 'ordinaries'. At Lichfield in 1733 'there was a hundred and fifty gentlemen dined at one ordinary, beside what dined at another inn in town and private houses', while in 1751 '174 dined in garden, and in house all 200'. It was reported from Worcester in 1759 that 'upwards of five hundred persons were at the public breakfast at Digley bowling green, on the Thursday morning, and about three hundred on Friday morning'. Such culinary bonanzas required extensive catering facilities, and it seems these were normally provided by local inns. In 1755 four of Worcester's hostelries took it in turn to provide an ordinary each day of the meeting; 'The Fleece' and 'The Bull' in Broad Street on the first and second days, 'The Hop Pole' and 'The Green Dragon' in Foregate Street on the third and fourth days.²²

Inns, along with booths on the course,²³ also purveyed drink, which for a number of race-goers appears to have been the *raison d'être* of the whole occasion. In 1766 Dorothy Long reported from the Salisbury races that, 'Mr Fox and Lady Mary were there and Lord Starorsdale, who got most exceedingly drunk the last day'. This was an experience shared by others. Thomas Smales recorded in his diary in 1731; 'June 12, to Newcastle races. Very drunk. June 13, at do., drinking day and night . . . June 14, won the plate, drinking day and night . . . June 17, at home very ill!' For Thomas Turner, a grocer of East Hoathly in Sussex, the Lewes races were often the occasion of physically pleasurable, if spiritually painful, overindulgence. He records in his diary:

5 August 1758: I came home [from the races] in company with Francis Ellis, about ten; but, to my shame do I say it, very much in liquor.

23 August 1764: Came home about 9.30, but happy should I be could I stay sober. Oh my unhappy — nay, I may say, unfortunate — disposition, that am so irresolute and cannot refrain from what my soul detests . . . Saw several London riders upon the Downs, with whom I drank a glass or two of punch.²⁴

Food and drink were more than simply a form of sustenance. They were part of a wider nexus of facilities, typical of county meetings, that were designed to offer entertainment and promote social contact. Cock-fighting frequently accompanied the racing and the *Calendars* had a specific section advertising matches, often between rival counties.²⁵ Hunts were sometimes arranged to coincide with meetings. In 1753 it was reported that at Doncaster 'a number of stables are taken up for hunters by gentlemen who intend to take the diversion of stag and fox hunting during the race week and week after'. Two years earlier it was claimed that over four thousand mounted noblemen, squires and yeomen, met the Marquis of Granby's staghounds on the town moor.²⁶ For the less robust there was usually a visit from a travelling theatre company or a group of musicians. In 1729 the Guildhall at Shrewsbury was used for a concert during race week, and at Lichfield in 1769 'the company was entertained at the public breakfast by a fine band of musicians from London', whose expenses were such as to plunge the race accounts into deficit.²⁷

The most prestigious of the entertainments associated with the meeting were the evening assemblies. It was at race balls, perhaps more than on any other single occasion, that county society could be seen operating as a coherent and vibrant social group. Dances were normally housed in an inn, or some large public building belonging to the town. For example, at Warwick in the 1720s in the room over the Market House, and at Doncaster in the splendid ballroom of the new Mansion House completed in 1748.²⁸ Some of the greater balls would accommodate several hundred people, and when compounded with all the personal finery on show presented an impressive spectacle. In 1757 Thomas Turner, not himself a member of the charmed county circle, arrived at the Lewes meeting 'just as the people came from the hill. We went in to see the ball, which, in my opinion, was an extreme pretty sight'. In the same year Mrs Lybbe Powys was visiting Chesterfield during race week. She wrote, 'on the Wednesday . . . about ten we went to the assembly room, where the Duke of Devonshire always presided as master of ceremonies . . . on the third day again went to the course . . . that evening's ball was equally brilliant as the first night, and both gave us strangers a high idea of the annual assemblies at Chesterfield'. Not that these could compare with the glittering race balls at York, which from 1732 were staged in the magnificent 'Egyptian Hall' of the new assembly rooms designed by Lord Burlington. In 1736 the city's historian wrote of these, 'here it is that York shines indeed, when, by the light of several elegant lustres, a concourse of four or five hundred of both sexes, out of the best families in the kingdom, are met together. In short, the politeness of the gentlemen, the richness of the dress, and remarkable beauty of the ladies, and, of late, the magnificence of the rooms they meet in, cannot be equalled, throughout, in any part of Europe'.²⁹

Below the grand county meetings came a rather amorphous group of market-town courses. They drew their clientele from a much narrower geographical area, a difference suggested by an incident in 1751, when the races at Yarm in Yorkshire had to be postponed from late September to early October because they clashed with the great Doncaster meeting over seventy miles away.³⁰ Due to their smaller catchment zone the status of those who attended the market-town meetings was generally lower (as suggested in the case of Stratford), and their service infrastructure proportionately less developed. Not that they were devoid of social facilities. Stratford, Barnsley and Rugby, all laid on ordinaries, though it is unlikely that the number catered for rivalled the gargantuan feasts of the county meetings. At the Rugby races in 1752 Sir Roger Newdigate records only fifteen couples at the ordinary on the first day, and 54 gentlemen on the second.³¹

Somewhat different in character from the market-town courses were those located in leisure and health resorts. Able to draw on the patronage of a pool of wealthy visitors, these meetings enjoyed a cosmopolitan and prestigious image. The latter quality was alluded to in 1720 when it was reported of Bath, that 'the neighbouring hills afford the most pleasant down

imaginable, where it is incredible what a number of coaches and horses appear there at a race'.³² That symbol of status, the coach, was also found to be on the Banstead Downs near Epsom. As Defoe wrote, 'on the public race days they are covered with coaches and ladies, and an innumerable company of horsemen, as well as gentlemen as citizens attending the sports'.³³ Epsom was in fact one of the great courses of the land. Though the principal event was in May, it flirted at various times with biennial and even triennial meetings, and by 1770 seems to have firmly settled on the former.³⁴ Its importance rested squarely upon its role as a resort, and critically, as one only a short distance from the bulging metropolis. As early as 1663 Pepys noticed that on race days the road from London was 'full of citizens going and coming towards Epsom'. By the early eighteenth century it had also developed into a salubrious commuter town for the capital's business men.³⁵ The presence of the citizenry widened the social types to be found at Epsom, as for example compared with Bath or Tunbridge, though it did not undermine the overall standing of the meeting. The display of status was still a predominant concern, albeit for some at a rather parvenu level. Perhaps it is the presence of an aspiring bourgeoisie that accounts for the rather cynical tones of a poem of 1732: 'On Epsom Downs when racing does begin, | large companies from every part come in, | Tag-rag and Bob-tail, Lords and Ladies meet, | And Squires without Estates, each other greet | . . .'.³⁶

One further way in which a number of the resort courses differed from the market-town meetings, was in their setting. Neither Epsom nor Tunbridge Wells were normally listed as market-towns, and both seem to have deliberately cultivated a semi-rural image, no doubt to enhance their attractions to the over-urbanized inhabitants of London. In this sense they belong to a whole category of rural meetings. This had its own internal hierarchy. At the top were the prestigious events like those held at Wallasey in Cheshire and Hambleton in Yorkshire, the former built around a coterie of wealthy aristocrats from the north-west, the latter attracting large numbers of the Yorkshire gentry.³⁷ Socially on a par with this type of course, but of less wider significance, were the park meetings located in the grounds of some aristocratic or gentleman's residence, such as Lynsted Park (Kent), Bramham (Yorkshire), Knowsley (Lancashire) and Whittlebury (Northants). Very much at the bottom of the ladder came the village meeting which catered largely for popular society. A particular form of this was to be found in the plethora of small courses that sprang up on the rural fringe of London to meet the recreational demands of its huge working population.

The rural meetings never appear to have played more than a minority role in the world of racing and seem to have been a dying breed. They comprise only about thirty per cent of the pre-1770 courses that I have traced, and a significantly lower proportion of those for any individual year in the *Calendars*. Many were severely hit by the legislation of 1740, which was deliberately cast to destroy the popular village meetings, and by the rationalization that followed it. Even prestigious courses like Wallasey and Hambleton were in the long term to be critically weakened by their lack of the sort of social infrastructure a town could offer. Significantly, both were swallowed up by two of the urban racing giants. In 1734 the valuable Wallasey Stakes were moved to Newmarket, and in the late eighteenth century the Hambleton Royal Guineas and its Gold Cup were transferred to nearby York.³⁸

III

The years between about 1680 and 1760 were a formative period in the development of the modern Turf. Though steeplechasing was yet to be introduced, a present day devotee of the flat would already find much to recognize in the world of racing at George III's accession. One immediately intelligible feature would be the close, almost symbiotic relationship, between town and turf. From the origins of the sport the vast majority of courses had developed in

urban centres. The crisis of the 1740s, with its attendant rationalization, simply accentuated this trend. But the links between towns and racing were much deeper than ones of mere geography. Both shared a close common economic and social interest. On the one hand, many towns during this period were developing a novel and lucrative role as centres of fashionable pastimes and services, and were constantly seeking to improve the quality and range of those they possessed. Urban authorities often financially promoted the sport, and in several towns race week emerged as the high point of their annual social calendar.³⁹ On the other hand, racing itself was becoming more and more a *social* occasion, and not just a sporting one, that required the extensive lodging, leisure and consumer facilities, which only a town, and preferably a large one, could offer. Thus town and turf became increasingly bound together in a marriage of mutual convenience.

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