

The Derby goes to Thirsk – again

Chris Pitt reports on the 2010 Kiplingcotes Derby...

Despite waking up with what he called “bad vibes” and feeling “very nervous”, John Thirsk, a joiner from nearby Holme-on-Spalding-Moor, won the historic Kiplingcotes Derby for the third year running on his 12-year-old mare Maisie.

Known as Minster Fair when winning over hurdles for trainer Alistair Whillans, Maisie came home ten lengths clear of 11-year-old Meena, the mount of Laura Brown, in a dramatic renewal of England’s oldest horse race.

The runner-up was called Patricia Philomena when successful on the Flat for David Barron. Her rider had undergone a name change too, she being the former Laura-Jayne Crawford, who had been Barron’s successful apprentice jockey before relinquishing her licence.

In fact, Patricia Philomena had provided Crawford with her first winner, at Ayr in July 2002. She rode her second at Catterick two days later in the Willie Carson - Pinker’s Pond Apprentice Handicap, 40 years after Carson had ridden the first of his 3,821 winners there.

Maisie and **Meena**, along with 2007 Kiplingcotes winners, Liz Stubbins and 14-year-old **Charlie**, a.k.a. winning point-to-pointer Rare Presence, stood out as the main contenders in this year’s 13-horse field.

Mush, the mount of Sally Ireland, who finished third last year aboard John Rich, turns out to be 13-year-old point-to-pointer Almashrouk, last seen in the spring of 2007 when being pulled up in two maiden races at Charm Park and in the Holderness Members at Dalton.

Shannon Style, by Desert Style out of a Cyrano de Bergerac mare that was placed over hurdles, ran four times in Ireland at distances from six to ten furlongs before being purchased by Tony Sumpton at Doncaster sales. He’d ridden her when she finished a distant thirteenth in 2007 but this time he was hoping for better and gave the leg up to Georgette Greaves, having her first ride in Kiplingcotes’ four-mile marathon.

Greaves is one of seven Kiplingcotes newcomers, the others including Karen Hall riding 8-year-old **Mariner’s Jig**, who she’d bought a mere three weeks earlier.

Among the “just for fun” entries are husband and wife team Peter and Gaynor Nicholson. He rides **Master Roberts** and she is aboard **Jubilee Queen**, both horses having been hunted with the Middleton.

The other first-timers comprise Pete Pindar riding his home-bred hunter **Chris**, from Badsworth and Bramham Moor country; Dennis Brown on **Molly**, who hunts with the Saltersgate Farmers; and Kerry Freeman on her 12-year-old gelding **Barnstormer**.

Debbie Stabler finished ninth on her Holderness hunter **Colleen's Pride** last year but they are back for another go. And completing the line-up is the skewbald riding school horse **Reindeer Dippin**, who finished a creditable fifth in 2008 under today's rider Heather Buck. Although only 16, Buck is already having her fourth ride in the race. They believe in starting early up north.

Traditionally run on the third Thursday in March since its inception in 1519 and originally called the Kiplingcotes Plate, the race takes place in the East Yorkshire Wolds. The course incorporates grass verge, ploughed field, tarmac road, muddy track, the crossing of two country lanes and the long-abandoned Enthorpe railway bridge, before the runners negotiate the busy A614 Market Weighton to Driffield road (mercifully closed for the latter stages of the race) and finish down a quarter-mile strip of grass to the winning post.

To find it, take the A614 from Market Weighton, heading for Middleton-on-the-Wolds, and you will come to a left turn for the village of Warter. The finish is 400 yards down that road.

There have been no bookmakers present since the early 1950s. Not only is there no betting; there is no grandstand nor, in fact, are there any facilities whatsoever. Nobody knows how many runners will take part until eleven o'clock on the morning of the race, by which time all the riders must have weighed out on a set of 1940s coal miner's scales. The minimum weight is ten stone, all of which has to be carried on the rider's body, rather than in the saddle. This means that those who weigh less than ten stone have to be somewhat inventive, putting lead weights down their boots or in a body belt.

At 11.20, the horses and riders gather by the winning post to hear clerk of the course Susan Hillaby recite the rules, which include the proviso that "any rider that striketh another rider shall win no prize". Then they make their way, at a walk, to the start, a moss-covered stone post, standing in the shadow of a hedge in the parish of Etton.

Devoid of any form of commentary, let alone a big screen, the 300-strong crowd wait, wait some more, then wait a bit longer for someone to shout "Here they come!", the first indications being the temporary closure by the police of the main road crossing.

When the leaders finally appear, John Thirsk and Maisie hold a ten-length lead over Meena, an advantage they maintain to the line. They are followed by the riderless Charlie, generating speculation as to the fate of his rider.

In third place – what used to be known as a 'bad' third over jumps not all that long ago – comes Mariner's Jig, followed closely by the remarkable pony Reindeer Dippin.

A further wait ensues before Colleen's Pride leads home Mush and Shannon Style, then another long gap until Dennis Brown finishes on Molly, then a very long gap before the husband and wife pairing arrive in unison. A chivalrous husband may have let his wife enjoy the glory of beating him, but not so Peter Nicholson who kicks on to beat Gaynor by a length.

After an interminable length of time – so long that even the police give up waiting and reopen the A614 – Barnstormer finally appears, having negotiated his way through the traffic, and is given a suitably sporting ovation.

That just leaves Pete Pindar's mount Chris. Word on the bush telegraph reaches the crowd that he has collapsed in the closing stages.

But that's not the only drama to this year's race.

"Everything went fine until the Enthorpe cross-roads," says winning rider Thirsk. "Laura was leading, Liz Stubbins was second on Charlie and I was third. We closed up as Laura steadied the pace to cross the road. Her horse lost a leg, then found a leg, but Charlie lost all his legs and went crashing down on his side. I thought I was going to be brought down but Maisie somehow danced over Charlie and got to the verge.

"The next time I had chance to look round was at halfway, the only thing behind us was the loose horse. At that point the two of us were clear of everything.

"Laura had led from flag-fall and was still leading until just before the main road. Maisie went on there."

Until that point, Thirsk had been unsure whether he'd be able to pick off the leader. "I knew mine was getting tired but I couldn't see how tired Meena was," he said. "Maisie keeps on going, she's an out and out stayer and this race brings out the best in her. I was so fortunate to buy her two and a half years ago."

Laura Brown was critical of the course and its lack of maintenance. "It was a tough course this year, really tough," she said. "Everyone slipped going across the Enthorpe cross-road. Mine lost her legs. I was in front of Liz but I heard her go down.

"My horse gave everything. We led until she got tired moving up the last hill. It's getting more competitive, there are more thoroughbreds in the race now."

Third-placed Karen Hall was elated with Mariners Jig's effort. "He went absolutely great, did really well with his footing round there and looked after me. I was in front at first on my side but the three leaders were on the opposite side. They sailed away into the distance and then there was me and another lad (Pete Pindar) alongside. I stopped and trotted over Enthorpe cross-roads, then started again.

"Brilliant, loved it," she enthused. "I'll be back next year."

Debbie Stabler, who finished fifth, was equally chuffed. "I'm very, very pleased. She struggled a bit at the top of the first hill because we'd tried to keep up with the point-to-pointers and she's only a hunter. I found a rut, stuck in it and she just kept going. The cross-roads was a bit tricky because there were a lot of spectators stood by it, but she slowed up and picked her way through. I'll definitely be back next year."

Not so sure of a return visit were the Nicholsons, who nonetheless enjoyed the experience. "I thought I had him beat coming over the main road," reported Gaynor, "but then he upped a gear and he was away. My friends said I should have pushed him off!" (Presumably she was cognisant of the aforementioned "any rider that striketh another rider shall win no prize" clause.)

"But we're both back in one piece," she concluded, "and that's the main thing."

Barnstormer's rider, Kerry Freeman, also relished the experience, despite finishing some 20 minutes behind the winner and having to squeeze past the HGVs hurtling past on the A614. "The boy done good," she said of her trusty steed, "but I'll try and find something a bit faster next year."

Thirsk was presented with the winner's prize, plus the Kiplingcotes silver trophy presented by Beverley jeweller Philip Guest and a horse blanket donated by the local Ship Inn.

The winner traditionally receives £50 in cash, while the runner-up receives £4 out of the £4.25 entry fee, meaning that if there are more than twelve runners, the second comes away with more money than the first. With thirteen going to post, that would have been the case this year, except that the race's treasurer, Guy Stevenson, announced that they'd increased the winner's prize to £60.

Who said racing's prize money levels are deteriorating?

On the equine front, there was good news to end the day. Chris, who had been disputing fourth place when putting his foot in a rut and collapsing half a mile from home, lay winded for almost 40 minutes but eventually got to his feet. Having been checked over by the vet, he appeared to have suffered nothing worse than a cut tongue.

So ended another Kiplingcotes Derby, and while racing's aficionados were gathered at Cheltenham that day to witness Big Buck's retention of his World Hurdle crown, the goings on in the East Yorkshire Wolds once again held their own special significance among those who prefer to marvel at the race's history and longevity.

This year, for once, the sun shone and temperatures were nowhere near so bone-chilling. One could even describe it as "pleasant". Spring, it seemed, had arrived.

The big race over, its loyal followers slowly dispersed and the horses and riders left the scene, not to the symphony of music that greets the winner's entry into Cheltenham thronging amphitheatre, but to the tune of birds singing above the ploughed fields, just as they'd sung almost five hundred years ago when those sporting gentlemen rode in very first Kiplingcotes of all.

The full finishing order was as follows:

1st Maisie (John Thirsk)

2nd Meena (Laura Brown)

3rd Mariner's Jig (Karen Hall)

4 Reindeer Dippin (Heather Buck), 5 Colleen's Pride (Debbie Stabler), 6 Mush (Sally Ireland), 7 Shannon Style (Georgette Greaves), 8 Molly (Dennis Brown), 9 Master Roberts (Peter Nicholson), 10 Jubilee Queen (Gaynor Nicholson), 11 Barnstormer (Kerry Freeman), DNF: Charlie (Liz Stubbins) Fell, DNF: Chris (Pete Pindar) Fell.

(Unofficial) Distances: 10 lengths, long gap, 5 lengths, long gap, 10 lengths, 20 lengths, long gap, very long gap, 1 length, interminably long gap (traffic had restarted).

