

Victory for Ireland on St Patrick's Day

Chris Pitt reports on the 2011 Kiplingcotes Derby...

The Irish dominated this year's Cheltenham with a record 13 winners – and Ireland has already won the Derby.

This particular Ireland, though, is a rider and not a horse from the O'Brien, Oxx or Bolger camps, for it was Sally Ireland who rode the winner of the 2011 Kiplingcotes Derby in a gripping renewal of England's oldest horse race, run on March 17.

Riding the 15-year-old Charlie, also known as winning point-to-pointer Rare Presence, Sally scraped home by length from Blue, ridden by Kiplingcotes first-timer Emma Herbert-Davies. Five lengths behind them in third came John Thirsk from nearby Holme-on-Spalding-Moor, riding Bob, with 12-year-old Meena, the mount of Laura Brown, a further six lengths away in fourth,

Charlie had won the race in 2007 and finished second in 2009 when ridden by his owner, Liz Stubbins. However, last year's race had had a very different ending for he had slipped up at the Enthorpe cross-roads, breaking Liz's wrist. His rider this year, Sally Ireland, had taken part in the last two Kiplingcotes, finishing third in 2009 and sixth last year.

John Thirsk had won the previous three runnings of the Kiplingcotes on Maisie, who had raced as Minster Fair when winning over hurdles for trainer Alistair Whillans. His mount this year, **Bob**, was formerly known as Arctic Cove when running on the Flat and over jumps for Micky Hammond.

Meena was called Patricia Philomena when successful on the Flat for David Barron. Her rider had been a successful apprentice jockey with Barron under her maiden name of Laura Crawford. Patricia Philomena had provided her with her first winner, at Ayr in July 2002.

Blue, however, had had no racing experience. He had arrived from Ireland without a passport and was very much the "dark horse" of the 12-runner field. A son of Castle Keep, he'd gone well in open team chases and looked more than just a "good hunter".

This quartet stood out and it appeared certain that one of them would be the winner of this year's Kiplingcotes Derby.

Blue's rider, Emma Herbert-Davies was one of seven who were taking part in the race for the first time. Among them was Julie Benton, riding the 18-year-old **Arthur**. Last year Julie had been an "extra" in the multi-award winning film "The King's Speech". *"I played a factory girl, one of the twelve that met the King in 1939. It was a great experience for me to see behind the scenes and meet the cast,"* she said.

Back for a second year were the "just for fun" entries of husband and wife Peter and Gaynor Nicholson. Peter again rode **Master Roberts** and Gaynor was reunited with **Jubilee Queen**,

both horses having been hunted with the Middleton. Last year there was just a length between them at the line, with Peter finishing in front of Gaynor. She was hoping to reverse the placings this year.

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 Drifffield road (closed for the latter stages of the race) and finish down a quarter-mile strip of grass to the winning post.

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 gathered 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". They then made 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.

Among the spectators this year was television presenter Julia Bradbury, complete with film crew, who was recording a feature for BBC1's "Countryfile". It was broadcast on Sunday, April 3. If you managed to catch it, you will have gained a feel for what the Kiplingcotes Derby is about. But to fully understand and appreciate this unique sporting event, there is nothing like being there to see it for yourself.

The 2011 renewal attracted the biggest crowd for many a year, who waited patiently, then wait some more, for the runners to appear. Eventually, there was the telltale sign of the police temporarily closing the main road, followed not long afterwards by somebody shouting "Here they come!"

And when they did appear it was clear that this would be the most competitive finish in recent memory, with four horses still in with a chance.

Crossing the main road with a quarter of a mile left to run, Charlie held a fractional lead over Blue, with Bob and Maisie both close up. But hard though Blue and Emma Herbert-Davies tried, they just could not make up the length they needed and it was Sally Ireland and Charlie who held on for a famous victory.

All twelve horses and riders completed the course safely. The Nicholsons got round in their own time, as last year, but this time Gaynor did get her revenge, beating Peter home by a length.

Getting the story of the race from the riders afterwards, Blue had set off in front, with Bob and Charlie lying second and third, with Meena fourth. Laura Brown had rushed Meena up to

take the lead half a mile out but her mount had weakened almost immediately. Blue regained the lead but was headed at the main road crossing by Charlie.

After the race Sally reported that Charlie had stumbled at precisely the same point as where he fell last year, but this time he was able to put himself right. She added: "I was happy to take the lead from Emma for most of the way, and then as we turned out of the bottom wood, she got a bit of a run on me. Then Laura took it up and I didn't know whether to go with her because it was still a long way from home. Luckily, Laura's horse stopped, but the other one didn't!

"I came across the main road just in front and it was then a case of keeping him there."

Runner-up Emma said: "Blue really wanted to go. It got to the point when I thought he was getting tired, then he took a deep breath and was off again. Sally got onto the verge a stride before I did and I could never quite make it up."

John Thirsk, who finished third on Bob, said: "I couldn't hold one side of him. The girl from Otley (Emma) led virtually all the way to the last half-mile, then Laura went for it on the hill but ran out of petrol. When I saw her go on I thought she'd gone too soon. One minute she was running away from us and the next minute we were going past her.

"Sally and I were second and third practically all the way but when she and Emma started to battle it out, I didn't quite have the tow to go with them."

Julia Bradbury presented Sally with the winner's prize of £60, plus the Kiplingcotes silver trophy presented by Beverley jeweller Philip Guest and a horse blanket donated by the local Ship Inn. As runner-up, Emma received £48, this being £4 out of the £4.25 entry fee for each runner.

And so ended another Kiplingcotes Derby, and while racing's aficionados were gathered at Cheltenham that day to witness Big Buck's win the World Hurdle for the third time, the goings on in the East Yorkshire Wolds once again held their own special significance.

By half past one, just as the first race at Cheltenham was getting under way, most of the loyal Kiplingcotes followers had dispersed and the horses and riders had left the scene. Not, as I concluded last year, to the cacophony of noise that greets the winner's entry into Cheltenham's winner's enclosure, but to the accompaniment 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 Charlie (a.k.a. Rare Presence) (Sally Ireland)

2nd Blue (Emma Herbert-Davies)

3rd Bob (a.k.a. Arctic Cove) (John Thirsk)

4 Meena (Laura Brown), 5 Batman (Sally Martin), 6 Callum (Elizabeth Platts), 7 Arthur (Julie Benton), 8 Paddy (Helen Wright), 9 Blaze (Jamie Sutherton), 10 Trent (Naomi Norton), 11 Jubilee Queen (Gaynor Nicholson), 12 Master Roberts (Peter Nicholson).

(Unofficial) Distances: 1 length, 5 lengths, 6 lengths, 30 lengths, long gap, long gap, very long gap, 15 lengths, 10 lengths, very long gap, 1 length.