

The Derby returns to Thirsk

Chris Pitt reports on a foggy 2012 Kiplingcotes Derby...

As has long been the case, those hardy souls who take their pleasures seriously gathered along a single track road in the East Yorkshire Wolds on a foggy March morning for England's oldest horse race. They witnessed local lad John Thirsk emerge victorious for the fourth time in five years.

Thirsk, from nearby Holme-on-Spalding-Moor, had won three successive renewals (2008-10) of the Kiplingcotes Derby on Maisie, better known by his official racing name of Minster Fair. However, he could only manage third last year on Bob, a.k.a. the former Mickey Hammond-trained Arctic Cove.

This time, with the benefit of course experience, Bob romped home 20 lengths clear of last year's runner-up Blue, the mount of Emma Herbert-Davies, with third place going to Formidable, ridden by veteran Terry Hardmate, who was having his first ride in the race.

First held in 1519 when Henry VIII was on the throne, it was originally called the Kiplingcotes Plate and has always run on the third Thursday of March. The race starts on a grass verge in the parish of Etton, not far from the old Kiplingcotes railway station, and finishes some 12 minutes later at Londesborough Wold Farm. The course comprises 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 A614 Market Weighton to Driffield road and finish down a quarter-mile strip of grass.

Just three of this year's twelve riders – six men and six women – had ridden in the race before. Besides Thirsk and Herbert-Davies, Danny Ablott, who rode Claude, had finished eighth on his one previous attempt five years ago. All the others were Kiplingcotes 'virgins'.

For the first time in 60 years a bookmaker was present on course; Chris Johnson of Doncaster, who received a good amount of business from the large crowd assembled at the roadside. He reported that, unlike other racecourses at which he stood, he hadn't been asked to pay five times the entry fee for his pitch but had voluntarily donated £50 to the race fund instead.

Johnson installed Bob and Formidable – who had warmed up for this near four-mile multi-terrain endurance test with a run over an extended mile on Wolverhampton's Polytrack six days earlier – as 2/1 joint favourites, with Blue at 5/2.

A hefty £30 wager on the unexposed Dai, the mount of Scunthorpe man John Pearce, caused his odds to contact a point from 4/1 to threes. However, the money looked fairly certain to remain in Johnson's satchel after Pearce's wife revealed: "John rides him to his mother's house for lunch every day and then rides him back, so he's a fit horse." It's an interesting training regime and, although she did not specify the distance between the two houses, it

could be construed as a form of interval training, albeit of a different type to that favoured by today's top trainers.

Realistically, it seemed that the winner must come from that quartet, as the other eight runners looked to be making up the numbers. While Claude remained solid at 4/1, the remainder drifted significantly in the market as race time approached.

Those who backed The Countess may have regretted their decision had they heard her jockey John Hudson admit "I can't really ride!

"I'm doing it in memory of my late father who was a well-known bookie in Hull," he added as the horses assembled at the start, and promptly took a hard swig from a friend's hip flask. "I'll be alright in a moment," he said following the quick blast of Dutch courage. I'm not sure what the BHA's response would have been but seemingly anything goes at the Kiplingcotes Derby.

Other first time participants included Amanda Herbert-Davies, sister of Emma, on the dun-coloured Valentino; self-confessed 'adrenalin junkie' Charlotte Richardson on the sheepskin nosebanded 16/1 outsider Earl Of Spectrum; and Jackie Linsdall, whose tactics on the mare Santa Anita did not appear to involve winning. "I just want to have a nice time, let her have some fun and come home in one piece," she offered.

For the first time, the runners all wore number cloths – borrowed from the previous weekend's Holderness Hunt point-to-point at Dalton Park. However, only the numbers from 17 upwards were available because 1-16 were in the process of being washed.

There was also a catering truck selling burgers for £2.50, sausage sandwiches for £2, soup £1.50 and tea £1.00, with all profits going to the Kiplingcotes race fund.

It seems that Kiplingcotes is fast coming into line with modern-day racecourses, with the arrival of bookmakers, number cloths and catering facilities. At this rate we can look forward to a big screen and live SIS coverage in the betting shops next year!

There was plenty of local media interest, with the BBC's 'Look North' cameras and coverage from Radio Hull. Emma Herbert-Davies, who last year had worn a jockey cam on her cap when second on Blue, when the race was featured on the BBC 1's Sunday night programme 'Countryfile', was this time equipped with a body camera to capture the action for another Beeb series, 'Escape to the Country'.

The fog was thick enough for concerns to be raised and there was initial debate about whether they'd run the race. It was impossible to see A614 road crossing from the winning post area – a distance of around two furlongs – and the police erred on the side of caution by deciding not to stop the traffic on the main road because of the poor visibility, reckoning that it would be more likely to cause an accident because they wouldn't see the police signs until very late.

Instead they instructed the riders to race as far as their police car at the crossroads, stop and walk across the road, then start running again!

When down at the start, all the riders agreed among themselves that, to simplify matters, whoever was in front when they reached the police car was to be the winner, and they would cross the road and gallop home in the order that they had reached the road crossing

Because of the conditions, the race started half an hour later than usual. When the runners eventually emerged from the mist, it could be seen that Bob was a runaway winner.

It was effectively a two-horse race after they'd gone a mile, with John Thirsk on Bob and Emma Herbert-Davies on Blue having dominated from the start.

“I'd got 20 lengths on Emma by Enthorpe crossroads but by the bottom of Enthorpe she was upsides me, then she was literally cruising alongside,” reported Thirsk. “There were parts of the course where we both wanted the same bit of ground and we were nudging and battling for it. I thought she had me beat until we started to race up the hill. As we got to the last couple of hundred yards at the top of the hill, Emma's horse began to find it tough but Bob just kept on going and outstayed her.

“Fortunately, there was nothing coming when I came to the police car and the police gave me the nod to carry on. He's flown home; he's run all the way to the line and finished fresh.”

Blue finished 20 lengths behind Bob, with Forbidden a long way back in third – what they used to call a "bad" third until the arrival of official extended distances.

All 12 horses came back safely, although one of them, Santa Anita, did so without her rider, who had fallen off half a mile from the finish. Fortunately, she returned unhurt.

There were no hard luck stories as such, although Danny Ablott, who finished fifth on Claude, claimed he had actually finished fourth in the race to the police car but the rider behind him – Sue Taylor on Amadeus – was unable to pull her mount up and so got a head start for the final quarter mile.

“My horse was plenty fit,” reflected Ablott, “but I need to get fit myself.”

Charlotte Richardson, who finished ninth on rank outsider Earl Of Spectrum, wasn't sure when asked if she'd enjoyed the experience. “Not yet,” she replied. “I probably will do later on but right now I'm just thankful I'm in one piece. I pulled up at one point and let everybody pass me because I thought I couldn't carry on at that speed. I've done it now; I don't need to do it again.”

And so, on the day that Big Buck's gained his fourth win in Cheltenham's World Hurdle, John Thirsk achieved his fourth success in the Kiplingcotes Derby.

This year's race was run in the murk but it is the storm clouds gathering over the Derby that may prove of a more serious nature. While little has changed as regards the race itself, health and safety regulations are starting to creep in.

Race trustee Guy Stephenson said that H&S regulations have made the race increasingly expensive to organise. He revealed that the Kiplingcotes Derby committee had had to spend £200 on new signs for the main road this year and £227 for liability insurance.

“It's costing us a fortune really,” he said. “It means we've got to go out and get sponsors these last two years, but whether we can keep doing that I don't know.”

Stephenson added that Humberside Police had suggested the organisers hire stewards for the race, because road closure rules now mean that ten officers are needed. However, hiring a private firm could cost £800, which would not be feasible.

The rules of the Kiplingcotes Derby state that if the race is not run one year, it may never be run again. It is now within sight of its 500th anniversary and it can only be hoped that it survives the intervening years to celebrate that historic milestone.

The full finishing order was as follows:

1st Bob (a.k.a. Arctic Cove) (John Thirsk)

2nd Blue (Emma Herbert-Davies)

3rd Forbidden (Terry Hardmate)

4 Amadeus (Sue Taylor), 5 Claude (Danny Ablott), 6 Dai (John Pearce), 7 Strawberry Fayre (John Boyce), 8 The Countess (John Hudson), 9 Earl Of Spectrum (Charlotte Richardson), 10 Valentino (Amanda Herbert-Davies), 11 Kaban (Joanne Odell), DNF Santa Anita (Jackie Linsdall) unseated rider.

(Unofficial) Distances: 20 lengths, long gap, long gap, 30 lengths, 30 lengths, 30 lengths, long gap, 10 lengths, long gap, very long gap.



The Neil Thwaites Memorial Winning Post signifies the end of the race