

Derby has romantic ending

Chris Pitt *reports on the 2014 Kiplingcotes Derby...*

A dry but blustery morning greeted a huge crowd of regulars and newcomers who turned up on Londesborough Wold for the annual running of England's oldest horse race on the traditional third Thursday of March.

First run in 1519, the Kiplingcotes Derby is fast approaching its 500th anniversary and its popularity continues to grow. There is little doubt that Julia Bradbury's 'Countryfile' feature of the race in 2011 generated huge publicity. Last year saw as big a crowd as had ever thronged the single-track road that leads to the winning post, and this year's attendance was every bit as large. It included a lady from Kazakhstan who was on a world tour. One can only guess what she made of such a unique event.

As last year, public parking had been prohibited on the grass verges for health and safety reasons, with a free shuttle bus service bringing racegoers from nearby Market Weighton.

The catering truck was soon doing a roaring trade, selling burgers at £3 each with all proceeds going to the Kiplingcotes Derby race fund.

Originally called the Kiplingcotes Plate, the four-mile race predates its rather more famous counterpart, the Epsom Derby, by 261 years. Starting in the parish of Etton, close to the old Kiplingcotes railway station, and finishes at Londesborough Wold Farm, the course comprises grass verge, ploughed field, tarmac road, rutted track and the disused Enthorpe Railway Bridge, prior to crossing the A614 Market Weighton to Driffield road and finishing down a quarter-mile strip of grass.

The devastating floods that affected so many parts of the country have been relatively lenient in their treatment of this part of East Yorkshire. Hence the ground conditions, which twelve months earlier had been the most testing in recent memory following a long drawn-out winter of rain and snow, were not so challenging this time. That, allied to the race's increased popularity, attracted 18 runners, only one less than the 21st century record turnout of 19 in 2009.

Only four of the riders, including Carolyn Bales on last year's winner Woteva, had previous Derby experience, the other 14 being Kiplingcotes first-timers.

They included several who were doing it for fun, to be a participant in such a historic contest, and those who genuinely meant business. Eight of the horses were former racehorses who had competed either on the Flat or over jumps, some of them at a decent level. In terms of in-depth equine ability, this was almost certainly the strongest field that ever assembled at Kiplingcotes.

Among those taking part for the fun of it was 70-year-old Bryan Hyland – no, not the one who had a top three hit with ‘Sealed with a Kiss’ in 1962, although the age would be about the same – on his 20-year-old hunter Brannigan B. With a combined age of 90, they looked to be long-shots.

At the other end of the age scale was 15-year-old Shannon Walker from nearby Howden, riding her feathery-legged four-year-old cob Kacie Mae, who had been out with the York & Ainsty pack half a dozen times during the last hunting season. They too were among the outsiders.

Another hairy white-legged outsider was Cantsfield, a cob cross whose forte lay in the show jumping arena, partnered by Iona Lane from Keasdon. She had a camera strapped to her body to record her participation in the race.

Tony Woodward had travelled up from Nottingham to ride his 15-hands cob Tosca, a retired open team chaser. He looked unlikely to have the speed to get into contention.

Celia Standring, from Goole, who had attracted much attention when completing the course side-saddle in 2000, was back for a third attempt, her first since finishing eleventh in 2002, but this year she was riding in the conventional style with one leg on either side of the horse. Her mount, the 16-year-old mare Whisper, by a 17-hands stallion out of an Irish draught mare, had competed in side-saddle events and been placed in hunter shows. She had also produced three filly foals and was now a grandmother twice over.

Celia also owned Nosey, a registered Irish draught gelding, to be ridden by her friend Joanna Peden. Now an 11-year-old, Nosey had not been broken in until the age of eight, although Celia had owned him from when he was six months old. Despite their stout breeding there was little doubt that both Nosey and Whisper would be rank outsiders.

Celia may not have been riding side-saddle but Heather Graham certainly was aboard Milo, a big 15-year-old hunter. Heather, who hails from Eastoft and had hunted Milo on 23 occasions with the Burton pack, wore full hunting regalia and was another of the outsiders. Evidently the superstitious type, Heather declined the number 13 saddle cloth when offered it and insisted on having number 14 instead.

The number 13 cloth was duly accepted by the evidently not superstitious Hannah Summer for her ride on Hope, another hunter. Hannah wore racing colours of maroon with a pink V.

Kiplingcotes veteran Heather Buck from North Wilton, partnered Dee, a hunting/dressage horse. Heather, who runs Fairfield Stables, was having her seventh ride in the race, her best efforts being a pair of fourth places, on Zak in 2009 and Reindeer Dippin in 2010. She had a jockey-cam attached to her helmet.

Prima Donna is by the successful stallion Mark Of Esteem but did not race and ended up as a dressage horse. This one was partnered by Angela Chomse from West Yorkshire.

And so to those horses who did compete on 'proper' racecourses. Independent Dancer, a 17-year-old gelding by Shareef Dancer, was unplaced in four starts (three bumpers and an all-weather seller) for Ann Duffield in 2001. He was ridden by Claire Caning from Easingwold, wearing red, green sleeves with white stars.

Look Again, a 13-year-old by Zilzal, was far more successful. He won a Nottingham maiden on his racecourse debut as a three-year-old for Amanda Perrett in August 2004, and finished a short-head runner-up to Mark Johnston's I'm So Lucky in a Class 2 handicap at Sandown the following year. Having joined Richard Fahey's yard in 2006, he was unlucky enough to finish a close second three times in as many weeks in good Class 2 handicaps at Newmarket, York and at Epsom on Oaks day. Look Again's rider David Tesseyman, from Linton-on-Ouse, was another equipped with a camera attached to his body.

Vinnie was better known as Clowance House. The son of Galileo made all to win a Salisbury three-year-old maiden for Roger Charlton in May 2009. He was runner-up twice over hurdles for Venetia Williams before joining Barry Brennan, for whom he won a Towcester hurdle race in June 2012, beating a Nicky Henderson-trained, AP McCoy-ridden 'hotpot' called Kings Destiny. Vinnie had travelled over from Nantwich in Cheshire and was the mount of off-course bookmaker Patrick Chesters, wearing light blue silks with green epaulettes, who had bought the horse last year at Ascot Sales.

There were two good-looking point-to-pointers, both owned by Tracey Corrigan from Sawdon, near Scarborough, and running under assumed names. 'Willy' is better known as Willywont He. The 15-year-old son of Bollin William won a Bangor-on-Dee handicap hurdle for Tim Walford in August 2007 and was placed on several occasions. Tracey later bought 'Willy' and trained him to win multiple renewals of the Derwent Hunt Members' race and finish third in a Catterick hunter chase in 2012. He would be among the fittest in the field, having finished a good third in this year's renewal of the Derwent Members at Charm Park just 11 days earlier.

Her other runner was 'Bob', also known as Calopocus. Now an 11-year-old, he was unplaced in three Irish bumpers in the 2007/08 season when trained by Philip Fenton. 'Bob' was ridden by Tracey's fiancé, Richard Mumford, who only learned to ride four years ago.

Eight-year-old Jingoism, by Belmont Stakes winner Empire Maker, raced nine times for Brian Ellison in Flat maidens, bumpers and a novice hurdle without once reaching the first three. He now runs under the name of Jingo and finished fifth in last year's Kiplingcotes, partnered, as today, by Katie Hobbs from Thornton.

In terms of jockeyship, rider Mark Gilbert could lay claim to be the most experienced, having been apprenticed to Luca Cumani at the same time as Frankie Dettori. Mark had journeyed up

from Stafford to ride Red O'Donnell, an 11-year-old by Presenting, sire of Gold Cup winner Denman. Red O'Donnell was trained by Donald McCain but did not possess Denman's ability, his best performance being a second place finish in a Wetherby selling hurdle in April 2008.

The last to arrive, in Malton trainer Nigel Tinkler's horsebox, was the 2013 Kiplingcotes heroine Woteva, an eight-year-old Kyllachy mare who Tinkler had brought back to action after two years off to win at Newcastle in May 2012. Woteva was reunited with last year's winning rider Carolyn Bales, who works at Tinkler's Malton stable.

Those, then, were the 18 starters for Kiplingcotes 2014.

Doncaster bookmaker Chris Johnson, standing at the Derby for the third successive year, understandably installed Woteva as the 6-4 on favourite in the early exchanges, though she eventually drifted out to 6-4 against. 'Willy' and 'Vinnie' were both available at 4-1 with 'Bob' and 'Jingo' were at sixes. There was money for Hope, whose price shortened from 7-1 to 5-1, while Red O'Donnell remained steady at sevens. Independent Dancer could be backed at 8-1, with the rest available at double figures. It was 10-1 Brannigan B, 12-1 Dee and Prima Donna, 16-1 Milo, 18-1 Look Again, 20-1 Tosca, Nosey and Whisper, with Cantsfield and Kacie Mae the rank outsiders at 25-1 apiece.

As was ever thus, the horses were called into line just before 11.30 and the rules were read out by the clerk of the course, including the stipulation that any rider who "layeth hold of any of the other riders or striketh any of them shall win no prize." Formalities over, the 18 runners made their way to the start.

An additional item of entertainment this year helped to shorten the wait for the runners to return. It was a chap with a ghetto blaster wearing a pork pie hat – the man was wearing the hat, not the ghetto blaster – dancing jigs to Irish reels and some old rock and roll favourites. His T-shirt revealed that he was there to raise funds for the World Cancer Research Fund. He was doing moderately well in terms of donations but when a young girl joined him in the dancing and proved far more aesthetically pleasing, the number of coins deposited into the collection bucket increased significantly.

The windy conditions abated slightly and as rumour began to circulate that the horses were approaching, the excited chattering descended to a murmur and then to an eerie quietness.

When they came into view, two horses were well clear of the rest. They were 'Willy' and 'Bob', the Tracey Corrigan duo. Both riders wore red and black quartered caps but Tracey's silks were all black whereas Richard Mumford's were black with a red diabolo. 'Willy' was in front and there he stayed, winning by 10 lengths.

It seemed like an eternity before the third horse appeared, 'Vinnie' leading home Independent Dancer, followed by Prima Donna and Dee, both outrunning their long odds, then a weary

Woteva and last year's fifth, Jingo, eighth this time. A gap, then along came Hope and Tosca; another gap before Red O'Donnell emerged, then Look Again finishing fastest of all, followed by the veteran combo of Bryan Hyland and Brannigan B, with cob cross Cantsfield just behind them. After a short interval, side-saddled Heather Graham cantered by on Milo, with Kacie Mae some 30 lengths behind her. Finally, Whisper and Nosey reached the main road crossing just before it re-opened to traffic and trotted home safely. We counted them all out; we counted them all back again.

It transpired that Woteva had struck into herself in the closing stages. The on-course vet was quickly on the scene to administer a heavy strapping to the mare's off-fore.

And so a delighted Tracey Corrigan was presented with the handsome silver Kiplingcotes Derby trophy, while her partner Richard Mumford collected the runner-up's prize. Tracey immediately announced that 15-year-old Willy had run his last race and had now earned an honourable retirement.

"It is quite an achievement," she said. "I couldn't believe Richard was behind me. He was carrying a stone-and-a-half more than me.

"When we set off I thought we didn't stand a chance because they went quite quickly. But when we crossed the first road I was first and was never headed thereafter."

She revealed that four-time winning rider John Thirsk had paved the way for her victory by riding the racecourse alongside her in a dress rehearsal a few days earlier, pointing out the line she should take. John had in turn learned these intricacies from Ken Holmes, the acknowledged 'Lester Piggott of Kiplingcotes', who had won the Derby ten times between 1983 and 2002.

Richard Mumford said: "It feels absolutely fantastic to finish second. I'm going to have a few beers and cigarettes to celebrate."

Tracey said she'd be back to do it again. Not so Bryan Hyland and Brannigan B. "That's it," he said after the race. "With a combined age of 90 I think we're both past it now."

The one problem for the Kiplingcotes Derby is that it is fast becoming a victim of its own success. Its rapid growth in popularity has resulted in steeply rising health and safety costs. Improved traffic control and crowd management, together with stewarding and marshalling, to ensure public safety, have all served to hike up the costs of what used to be a relatively low-budget occasion. Thankfully, sponsors were found this year to offset much of the expense.

The rules of the Kiplingcotes Derby state that if it is not run one year, it may never be run again. It is now within sight of its 500th anniversary. Its supporters are determined to see it survive and achieve the historic milestone.

The full finishing order was as follows:

1st: Willie (Tracey Corrigan) 4/1

2nd: Bob (Richard Mumford) 6/1

3rd: Vinnie (Patrick Chesters) 4/1

4 Independent Dancer (Claire Caning), 5 Prima Donna (Angela Chomse), 6 Dee (Heather Buck), 7 Woteva (Carolyn Bales), Jingo (Katie Hobbs), 9 Hope (Hannah Summer), 10 Tosca (Tony Woodward), 11 Red O'Donnell (Mark Gilbert), 12 Look Again (David Tesseyman), 13 Brannigan B (Bryan Hyland), 14 Cantsfield (Iona Lane), 15 Milo (Heather Graham), 16 Kacie Mae (Shannon Walker), 17 Whisper (Celia Standring), 18 Nosey (Joanne Peden).

(Unofficial) Distances: winner won by 10 lengths; long gap, then 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th & 8th finished close up; further long gap then 9th and 10th close together; another long gap then 11th, 12th, 13th & 14th close together; gap to 15th; gap to 16th; then last pair finished together.