

Mad Professor wins the Derby

Chris Pitt *reports on the 2016 Kiplingcotes Derby...*

As the tens of thousands flocked to the third day of the Cheltenham Festival to witness Thistlecrack cement his status as the best staying hurdler in Britain or Ireland, so the faithful few hundred congregated along a single-track lane off the A614 Market Weighton to Driffield road for a far older institution – the 498th renewal of the Kiplingcotes Derby, England's oldest horse race.

Despite as glorious a spring morning as had ever dawned in the East Yorkshire Wolds, the attendance appeared slightly down on recent years. Perhaps the memory of Julia Bradbury's 'Countryfile' feature in 2011, which had served to massively enhance the race's profile, was beginning to fade. Or maybe it was the relative lack of publicity – the once popular website had not been updated – causing one couple to drive all the way from Sussex without knowing for certain whether they'd got the right day. They needn't have doubted, because the third Thursday of March has always been Derby Day, that of the Kiplingcotes variety.

A pair of portable toilets and the presence of a bookmaker are relatively recent innovations to this ancient ritual, likewise the catering truck, supplied by The Gait Inn at Millington, selling burgers at £2.50 each with proceeds going to the Kiplingcotes Derby race fund.

The number of runners was down too, although that was to be expected as last year's field of 22 had been a 21st century record. Just a dozen took part this time but there was no lack of quality, the majority being Thoroughbreds, mostly former racehorses, including the previous two years' winners.

The 2015 victors, Prince and rider Tracey Corrigan from nearby Sawdon, were back to defend their crown, although rumours began to circulate about the horse being "not quite right". Meanwhile, Tracey's fiancé Richard Mumford partnered 2014 Kiplingcotes hero Willy.

'Prince' and 'Willy' are, of course, mere subterfuges. The form book facts reveal that the former was the *nom de guerre* of Killary Bay. Previously with Charlie Swan and ridden to victory in a Limerick bumper by Nina Carberry in 2009, he was subsequently bought by Corrigan who trained him to spring a 50/1 shock in a Catterick hunter chase in March 2013,

'Willy' was more familiarly known as Willywont He. Now 17, he won a Bangor-on-Dee handicap hurdle for Tim Walford in August 2007 and was placed on several occasions. Corrigan had saddled him to win multiple renewals of the Derwent Hunt Members' race and, in 2012, to finish third in the corresponding Catterick hunter chase won by Killary Bay the following year.

Also back were last year's third and fifth, Mr P and Vinnie, or, to give them their racing nomenclatures, Mad Professor and Clowance House, both ridden by their respective 2015 jockeys.

Thirteen-year-old Mad Professor, the mount of Sam Osborne (Sam being a she, not a he) from Barton-upon-Humber, was making the 100th start of his long career – his 99th had been when finishing third here in 2015. He had won on the Flat and over hurdles before joining John Cornwall, for whom he had run 65 times, partnered throughout by the trainer's son Joe, winning at Southwell and Worcester and making the frame on a further 25 occasions.

Clowance House, a son of Galileo, had made all to win a Salisbury three-year-old maiden for Roger Charlton in May 2009 and twice finished second over hurdles for Venetia Williams before joining Barry Brennan, for whom he won a Towcester hurdle race in June 2012. He was subsequently purchased at Ascot Sales by Nantwich, Cheshire bookmaker Patrick Chesters. Together they had finished third in 2014 and fifth last year.

Local girl Katie Croft, from Nunburnholme, had won the 2006 Kiplingcotes on Etton Lad at her first attempt and had also finished third and fifth in the race. Her mount this time was Mill Lane, a 10-year-old Thoroughbred who'd been hunted with the Holderness.

The remaining seven riders were all Kiplingcotes debutants but four of them looked to have serious chances on former racehorses.

First to arrive and weigh out was Sophie Cavanagh from Drifffield, keen to ride her 11-year-old Kayfrou, who had won a Newton Abbot hurdle for Nick Mitchell before joining Brian Ellison, who saddled him to win first time out for his new yard at Bangor-on-Dee in December 2013.

Lindsay Harrison, from Retford in Nottinghamshire, was another early arrival. Her mount, the 12-year-old Quilver Tatou, had finished second in four consecutive bumpers in the French provinces prior to joining Charlie Mann, for whom he finished runner-up in two chases, and was then moved to David Easterby. His sole success had been gained in a point-to-point but he looked fit, having been got ready for a couple of subsequently abandoned team chases, leaving the Kiplingcotes Derby as the sole alternative.

Ten-year-old Trumpstoo, the mount of Emma Sanderson from Beverley, had won on his second start as a juvenile at Newcastle in 2008 when trained by Richard Fahey and ridden by Paul Hanagan. Fahey had also won with him over hurdles at Wetherby but he hadn't been seen in public since finishing down the field at Kelso in April 2011.

A similarly long hiatus had been the fate of 10-year-old Home Before Dark, an 11-race maiden trained by Richard Whittaker, his best effort being a fourth place finish at Ripon. He'd not seen a racecourse since July 2010 and, according to his rider Rob Douro from Ilkley, hadn't done much since.

Fifteen-year-old Jasper, ridden by Jan Ceella from Hessle, and 10-year-old Stella, the mount of Katie Mountifield from Welton, had both been regularly hunted with the York & Ainsty South but looked up against it in this company.

The field was completed by an 11-year-old skewbald cob named Pudding, partnered by Becky Oxley from down the road in Market Weighton. You could pretty much name your own price on this one. The bookmaker's odds of 25-1 hardly appeared generous, although one person – an optimistic sort, evidently anticipating a pile-up of Foinavon proportions – was spotted placing a speculative fiver.

Prince was installed favourite at 6-4 with stablemate Willy at 2-1 but rumours about Prince's fitness caused him to drift to 3-1, as did Willy, with Quilver Tatou shortening half a point from 7-2 to share co-favouritism. Kayfrou, Trumpstoo and Home Before Dark all attracted support in an open-looking market, while Mad Professor traded at 6-1 and Clowance House was available at eights.

As was ever thus, the horses assembled shortly before 11.30 and the rules were read out by clerk of the course Susan Hillaby, 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 doughty dozen made their way to the start in the parish of Etton, close to the old Kiplingcotes railway station, in preparation for the four-mile race incorporating grass verge, ploughed field, tarmac road, rutted track, a couple of road crossings and the disused Enthorpe Railway Bridge.

Meanwhile the racegoers stood and waited ... and waited ... and then waited some more. Mobile phone technology – even though reception is poor to non-existent in this particular neck of the woods – had at least ensured that the starter was able to relay the message that he'd dispatched the field on its way. An improvement on the bush telegraph at least.

When they eventually came into view, two horses had drawn well clear of the rest. Mad Professor was in front with Willywont He closing hand over fist, but the winning post came in time for 'Mr P' to hold on by around eight lengths.

A long wait ensued before the third horse came into view, that being Trumpstoo, followed at respectful distances by Clowance House, Kayfrou, Quilver Tatou, Mill Lane and the two hunters. Speculation regarding the wellbeing of co-favourite 'Prince' was borne out as Tracey Corrigan effectively pulled him up at the second road crossing, walked him back and dismounted approaching the final furlong.

Twelve had started out but so far only ten were accounted for. We would have to wait a while for answers.

Winning rider Sam Osborne was ecstatic, although it appeared the manner of the victory was not entirely of her own making. “Last year, when there were 22 runners and I finished third, I was about 12 horses back when we set off and I held on to him because I didn’t know what was going on,” she recounted. “This time Mr P took over. He bolted with me, went straight to the front and made all.

“That’s it now, though,” she added. “He’s 13 and won’t be doing it again. He’s going to be used by my daughter for hacking and some show jumping.”

Richard Mumford, second for the third year running, said he’d thoroughly enjoyed the ride. He was gaining fast on the winner but the post came too soon.

Patrick Chesters, fourth on Clowance House, reported that he was lying third when he felt his mount lose his action about a mile from home. He eased down, found that the horse wasn’t actually lame, so looked after him and coasted in. It seemed as though he’d picked up a flint, exhibiting a small cut on his off-hind which was duly treated by the vet in attendance.

At last, after the winner’s trophy had been presented, sponsors thanked, photographs taken and interviews given, along came Becky Oxley on the skewbald cob, who had either walked or trotted the entire four-mile trip. A heartfelt round of applause greeted their sporting return.

But still no news of the other runner, amid reports that one had “gone down near the cottages”. The missing horse was Home Before Dark, and one began to speculate whether he would actually accomplish the achievement his name bestowed upon him.

Eventually, a mud-bespattered Rob Douro returned, leading his mount, producing a smile and a wave for the cameras. He had indeed “gone down” and the horse had lain winded for a few minutes before getting to his feet. Fortunately, some superficial grazing appeared to be the extent of his injuries.

And so Kiplingcotes was over for another year. One more nearer its 500th anniversary. While some cars were promptly driven away, the tailgates of others were duly flung open to reveal impromptu post-race picnics of sausage rolls, pork pies, quiches and cakes, all washed down with champagne and/or wine. And high above all that merriment and conviviality, the larks of spring were singing their tunes, just as they’d done half a millennium ago at the very first Kiplingcotes of all.

The full finishing order was as follows:

1st: Mr P (a.k.a. Mad Professor) (Sam Osborne) 6/1

2nd: Willy (a.k.a. Willywont He) (Richard Mumford) 3/1 co-favourite

3rd: Trumpstoo (Emma Sanderson) 5/1

4 Clowance House (Patrick Chesters), 5 Kayfrou (Sophie Cavanagh), 6 Quilver Tatou (Lindsay Harrison), 7 Mill Lane (Katie Croft), 8 Jasper (Jan Celella), 9 Stella (Katie Mountifield), 10 Pudding (Becky Oxley). Did not finish: Prince (a.k.a. Killary Bay) (Tracey Corrigan), Home Before Dark (Rob Douro).

(Unofficial) Distances: 8 lengths, a distance.