

BASINGSTOKE DOWN RACES

A synopsis by Barry Dale

Basingstoke Down was the area of common land beginning in front of Buckskin Farmhouse and continuing in a rough triangular shape between Old Roman Road and what is now the A30. The Victoria County History states that racing was held on Basingstoke Down between 1753 and 1788.



1762 Duke of Bolton map showing the race course on the lower, (northern), slopes of Basingstoke Down.¹

Although there are records of horse racing from earliest times it was only following Charles II's accession to the throne in 1660 that racing became generally popular in England. Newmarket was the pre-eminent course but following the fashion many towns began to hold their own race meetings although, like Basingstoke, many of these courses have now disappeared.

Although the Victoria County History records that racing only began in Basingstoke in 1753 in fact racing began much earlier than that. The first reference found to racing is in The London Gazette of 15 August 1687, over 60 years earlier.

"The Steward for the Basingstoke Plate which is to be run the first Tuesday in October next desires all Gentlemen to enter their Horses, and pay their money to Mr John Coleman, Mayor of Basingstoke, or to Mr John Ansell at the Cross Keys Tavern in Covent Garden, a month before the said Plate is run for; where the Articles are to be seen."

Although only short, this advertisement tells us two important things, firstly that horses could be entered for the races either in Basingstoke or London indicating that these races were not just for local entrants but that horses from anywhere in England may have been entered. It is believed that the racing was flat racing as no mention has been found of hurdles and steeplechasing did not become popular until the late 1770s.

Secondly the mention of articles indicates that the races were regulated from an early stage. Articles to govern the racing at Newmarket were produced in the 1660s and presumably the articles for Basingstoke followed a similar form.

How do we know that these races were held on Basingstoke Down? In 1688 we know that the race was won by Edward Chute of the Vyne and "A History of the Vyne"² states:

"He kept racehorses at the Vyne and in the year of the Revolution³ won a handsome silver punch bowl at the Basingstoke Races, then run on the downs west of the Town.

This bowl, which is preserved at the Vyne, is nine inches in height and twelve in diameter and is richly chased with figures of Oriental character engaged in various field sports, it is surmounted with a crenellated rim and bears the date Oct:ye2nd1688."

It is interesting to note that the monteith was made in London by Robert Cooper in 1668-1669, nearly 20 years before Edward Chute's race. It is likely that Edward Shute rode this race himself.⁴ Today the monteith is to be found in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.⁵

Notices for the races in Basingstoke also appeared in the London Gazette in 1689 and 1690. The next notices found are for 1710 – 1713.

These notices began to be slightly more detailed than the earlier ones although from the weights given that the horses were to carry it would appear that as in 1688 when Edward Chute won the race, owners were still riding their own horses.

The next reference to the racecourse is from the Daily Post-dated 21 July 1729 reporting a private match as follows:

"On Wednesday last the Rev Mr Gerrard's Mare run against Mr St John's horse on Basingstoke Downs, for twenty guineas, twice round the two mile course, and one guinea a post. Mr Gerrard's mare got the start and beat Mr St John's horse every post and won the match."

So the course was two miles long and was marked out by posts.

Although the early information on the races is scanty and sporadic, I believe that regular racing was held during this time. The London Gazette printed advertisements for races from the early 1680s onwards however if there was a major news item there were no advertisements printed and although

major racecourses were regularly advertised, advertisements for smaller courses like Basingstoke also only appeared sporadically.

The fact that the racecourse was marked out by posts in 1729 would indicate that racing was held regularly. At this time Basingstoke Down was common land and if the racecourse had not been in regular use the posts would not have remained in place.

During the 1730's a number of advertisements for the races appeared in the national press, the races being held over 2, 3 or 4 days with prizes of between 5 and 30 guineas and more information on the organisation and running of the races was printed.

By this time the races fell into two categories, firstly what became generally known a Town Plates and secondly there were the subscription races where gentlemen would pay a sum of money to enter their horses for the race. This notice below from 1738 shows both a subscription race and a Town Plate together with two lesser races.

BASINGSTOKE RACES

Being oblig'd to be put off, on Account of Hounslow beginning at the same time, till July the 26th, 27th, 28th and 29th, and then

TO be run for on Basingstoke Down in the County of Hants, on Wednesday the 26th of July, the Gentlemen's Subscription Purse of Thirty Pounds, free for any Horse, Mare or Gelding, that never won above the Value of thirty Guineas at any one Time, four Year Olds carrying eight Stone, five Year Olds nine Stone, six Year Olds ten Stone, Age Horses eleven Stone; to run four Miles at a Heat, the best of three Heats, as must be certify'd under the Hands of the Breeder. No less than three to start. The Winner to pay out of this Purse one Guinea and a half, the second best to have his Entrance-Money return'd.

On Thursday the 27th will be run for, on the same Course, a Piece of Plate by real Hunters, that was this last Season at the Death of one Brace of Foxes, or two Brace of Hares, and that never won the Value of 5 l. as must be certify'd by the Owner, carrying twelve Stone, and rode by Gentlemen. No less than three to start, four Miles at a Heat, the best of three Heats.

On Friday the 28th will be run for, on the same Course, the Town Plate of Twenty Pounds, free for any Horse, Mare or Gelding, that never won above the Value of ten Guineas, (Matches excepted) carrying ten Stone. No less than three to start, four Miles at a Heat, the best of three Heats. The Winner to pay out of this Plate one Guinea, the second-best to have his Entrance-Money return'd.

And on Saturday the 29th will be run for, on the said Course, a Pony Plate.

All Horses, &c. that run for these Plates to be shewn and enter'd between the Hours of Four and Eight in the Afternoon, Wednesday the 19th of July, at Tho. Booth's at the Maidenhead Inn in Basingstoke, paying for the 30 l. two Guineas, or double at the Post; for the Hunters Plate one Guinea and a half, or double at the Post; for the Town Plate one Guinea and a half, or double at the Post. Each Horse, &c. paying half a Crown for Weights and Scales. If any Disputes arise, to be determin'd by the Majority of Subscribers to each Day's Plate. All Horses to stand at such Houses as subscribe half a Guinea towards the Town Plate, and plated by Smiths that subscribe five Shillings towards the same. There will be a good Ordinary each Day in the Town, and Halls at Night for the Ladies.

N. B. No Persons will be permitted to sell any Liquors on the said Down, during the Races, but what subscribe 5 s. towards the Town Plate.

Notice of Basingstoke Races 27 May 1738 to 30 May 1738. - London Evening Post⁶

The weights that the horses carried were now began to be given in more detail so it is possible that by this time jockeys were being employed for some of the races, although owners were still riding their own horses in the hunter's races, a practice which continued into the 1770s.

Although only one race was advertised for each day this is deceptive as each race consisted of up to three heats of up to four miles each.

The 1738 notice above also tells us that the funds for the Town Plate were raised as follows:

- Horses that entered for the town plates had to pay a fee on entry.
- Horses entering for the races were to be kept at a public house which had subscribed to the prize money – at this time 10s 6d.
- Horses to be plated only by smiths who had subscribed 5s.
- Anyone who wished to sell liquor on the Down to pay 5s to erect a booth
- It is also possible that tradespeople and leading citizens of the town could have contributed towards these plates due to the increased trade brought by the races. These and similar charges continued throughout the life of the racecourse, with variations in the costs.

An Ordinary, a fixed meal at a fixed price, was held each day of the races. These were held either in the Maidenhead or Crown Inns in Basingstoke, or the White Hart at Worting.

A ball was held at least one evening of the races.

An extract from a notice of racing for 1736 shows that cock fighting was being held on race days. Notices for cock fighting appeared sporadically over the years but in 1782 the race notice stated "Cocking each morning of the races as usual."

Reads Weekly Journal of 19 June 1736 show that Basingstoke was during the 1730s part of the national racing calendar:

"Black Hambleton in Yorkshire, on Saturday the 24 July next; and the Monday following the races at Yorkshire begins

The races at Swaffham begin on Wednesday the 20th Instant

At Basingstoke on Wednesday the 7 July

At Preston on Monday the 19th of July

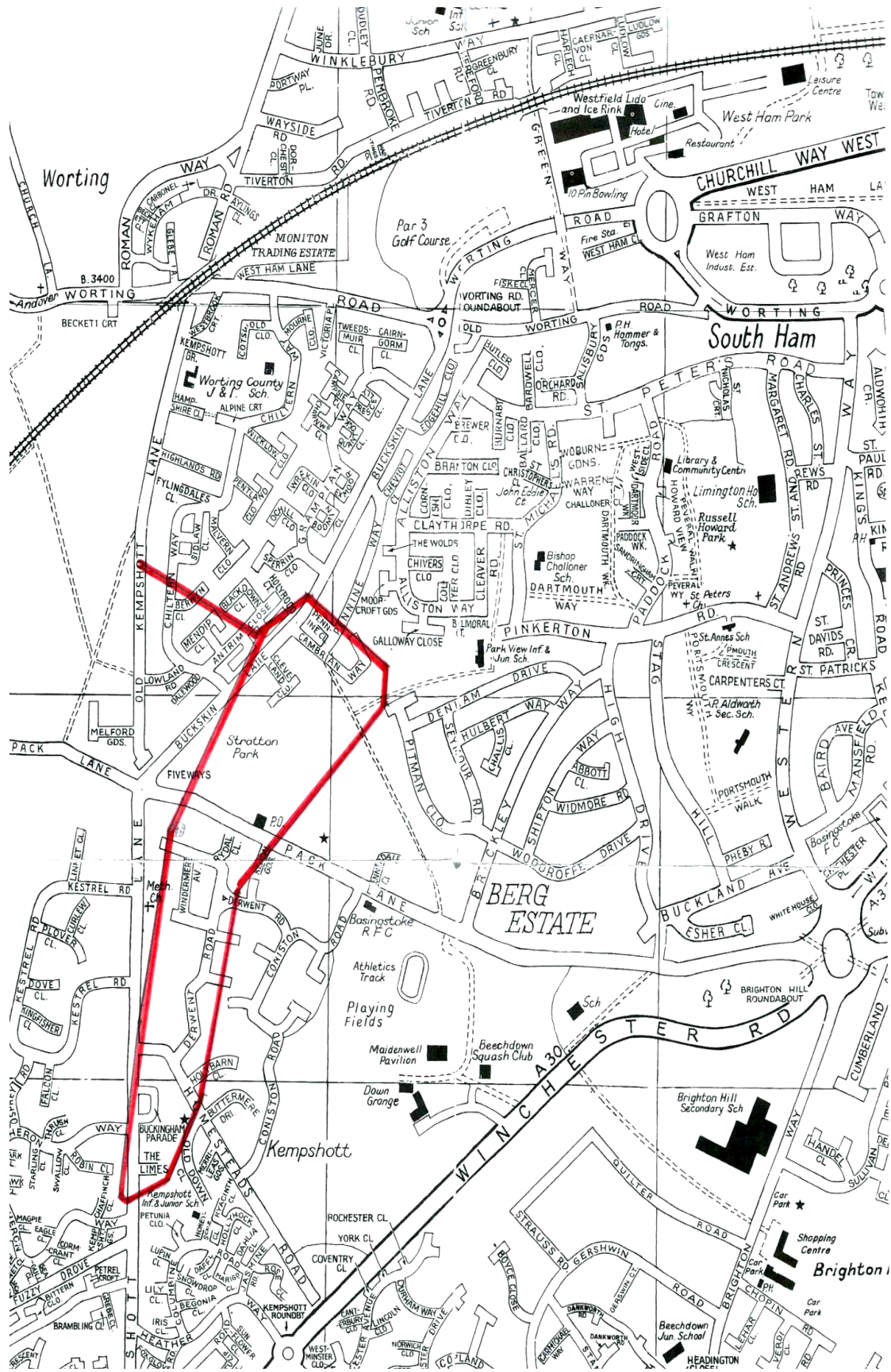
And at Halifax on Tuesday the 3rd August"

Before the 1730's only the advertisements for the races tended to be published but in the 1730s the results started to be published. Additionally in the late 1720's a gentleman called John Cheny started publishing an annual Racing Calendar which gave the results of all races in Britain. However these were not comprehensive, the general rule seemed to be that if the races were advertised in the national press then the results appeared in the racing calendar. If they were not so advertised the results were not published. For example in 1730 Basingstoke was advertised in the national press and the results appeared in the calendar, in 1731 it was not advertised and no results appeared.

In 1739 the notice for the races states:

"On Wednesday the 15th of August next will be run for on the new Course on Basingstoke Down...."

No map of the course before 1739 has been found but presumably this new course is as shown on the map of Basingstoke Down taken from a report on his lands commissioned by the Duke of Bolton in 1762. This clearly shows the racecourse giving the start post, the mile post and the finish. Like the course mentioned in the 1729 race this course was also 2 miles in length. The racecourse is also shown on the Ordnance Survey Maps of 1931 and 1946 and the map below shows the racecourse superimposed on a modern day map of Kempshott. ⁷



The racecourse superimposed on a map of modern day Kempshott.

Although the races in the 1730s had been between two and four days in length, this was about to change dramatically. In 1740 it was judged by Parliament that horse racing had become too common, that “idlers” were supposed chiefly to attend race meetings. Also it was wished to put a stop to meetings at which very paltry stakes were offered and at which indifferent animals were running.

“It was therefore enacted that, after the 24th June in that year (1740), no plate should be run for in the kingdom of less than £50 – the penalty for transgression of the law being £200.....”

As the total prize money for a four day meeting in the 1730s was not much more than £50 this had a great effect on Basingstoke and in 1745, as you can see from the article below, it was reduced to “Basingstoke Race”.

BASINGSTOKE RACE.
The Match as insert'd in our last being a Mistake we are desir'd to leave it out.

TO be run for on Basingstoke Down, in the County of Hants, on Friday the 16th Instant Fifty Pounds, by any Horse, Mare or Gelding, that never won above Fifty Guineas; four Year olds to carry eight Stone, five Year olds nine Stone, six Year olds ten Stone, aged Horses eleven Stone. The winning Horse to be sold for 40 Guineas to the Owner of the second-best Horse within an Hour after Running, if requir'd, unless he will resign the Plate to him; to run the best of three Heats; to enter at the Maidenhead Inn in Basingstoke, the Monday before the Day of Running, between the Hours of Twelve and Six in the Afternoon, paying, if a Subscriber, One Guinea, or Three at the Post; a Non-subscriber Three Guineas, or Five at the Post. Three reputed running Horses to start; if but one or two enters to be allow'd Five Guineas each, and their Entrance return'd, unless the Majority of Subscribers admit them to start.

No Horse to be enter'd to qualify the other; to stand at such Publick Houses as subscribe Five Shillings or upwards, and plaid by such Smith as do the same. If any Disputes arise, to be determin'd by the Majority of Subscribers present.

N. B. There will be Cocking in the Mornings, Ordinaries each Day, and a Ball each Evening.

By the early 1750s however the races had increased to two day events with a prize of £50 each day. It also became more common for the results of the races to be published. It has not been possible to verify whether horses racing at Basingstoke also raced at other course at this time. However two Racing Calendar for the early 1750s are available and by comparing the owners of horses running at Basingstoke in 1754 with the owners racing horses around that time it can be seen that some of them were also entering horses at other courses.

In 1756 the results given in St James Evening Post for 26 October state:

“Last week the aged plate at Basingstoke, was won by Mr Jennison’s grey horse, Whynot, got by Old Cartouch, beating Mr Dutton’s black horse, Nichodemus, and several others. And the four years old plate was won by Lord Craven’s colt, beating Mr Swymmer’s chestnut colt Captain, late Lord Portmore’s and for whom four hundred guineas was sometime since given. The odds were five to one on Captain.”

So good quality horses were being entered for the races.

Between 1757 and 1768 no record has been found in either the local or national press of racing in Basingstoke. As the Hampshire Chronicle only goes back as far as 1772 and there is a gap in the records of the Reading Mercury between 1757 and 1767 there is no confirmation that racing was held between these dates. However the maps published in 1762 and 1763 would indicate that the racecourse was still in use during this period, although possibly at a more local level.

The races in 1768 were advertised in the Reading Mercury and in 1769 were again advertised in the national press. From this time on the races appeared regularly in both the local and national press and Basingstoke was very much part of the national racing calendar – this slide shows the races for 1778.

The racing calendars first published by John Cheny were taken over by Reginald Heber in the 1750s and in the early 1770s by Weatherbys who also record the pedigree of all thoroughbred horses. BY this time they had been expanded to include information on the pedigree of winning horses, their owners and where they had raced during that year and although again very few are available they give much valuable information on the racing during the 1770 and 1780s.

1777 is one year where the calendar is available so it has been chosen as an example and is also typical of this period of racing.

By now in addition to the £50 Town Plate races, sweepstake races were also held where subscribers paid a sum to enter a horse with the stakes going to the winner. In the case of Basingstoke these sweepstakes were typically for between 10 and 25 guineas. These sweepstake races were advertised in the national press some months in advance of the races and those who wished to subscribe had to do so by 1 January before the races.

First day

£50 for 3 year olds – one heat of one and three quarter miles
£50 for 4 year olds – best of three heats, 2 miles and a distance per heat
10 guinea sweepstakes – one four mile heat

Second day

£50 for 5, 6 and aged horses – best of three four mile heats
25 guinea sweepstakes for 4 year olds – one two mile heat
Private match between Duke of Bolton and Mr Kingsman's horses for 100 guineas

Although the races for three year olds consisted of one two mile heat, races for older horses were still demanding, consisting of three or even four heats of two or four miles. In 1779 the race for 5, 6 and aged horses was advertised as being the best of three 4 mile heats. In fact from the results there was no winner after three heats so a fourth heat was run – a total of 16 miles with a half hour break between each heat.

These long races coupled with the fact that horses had to walk between meetings along bad or almost non-existent roads, meant that in the 1770s the career of a racehorse was only 2 years and very occasionally three years.

Private races such as that advertised between the Duke of Bolton and Mr Kingsman's horses were not uncommon and could be arranged some years in advance.

More details of the weights that horses had to carry were now being given and it is clear that jockeys were now being used for many of the races, although for some of the sweepstakes the owners were still riding their own horses. This from the Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette of 1 July 1773:

“Tuesday the hunters sweepstakes, rode by gentlemen, was won by Mr Penton's colt Euryalus (rode by himself) beating Mr St John's by horse Sandcrack (rode by Mr Buller) at two heats.”

The funding for the £50 races was very much the same as in the 1730s with variations in costs, e.g. in 1777 it was one guinea to erect a booth on the Down as opposed to 5 shillings in the 1730s.

Racing usually began at 5pm in the afternoon.

Stewards began to be appointed to oversee the races during the 1760s and the stewards appointed at Basingstoke represented the leading families of Basingstoke at that time.

From the 1760s onwards Basingstoke attracted some quite prominent owners who entered their horses at Basingstoke – H.R.H. the Duke of Cumberland, the Duke of Bolton, Mr O'Kelly and Sir John Lade.

The Stand

In 1773 the Mayor Aldermen and Burgers of Basingstoke signed an agreement with one Robert Cane, giving him the right for a period of 21 years to erect a stand for the accommodation of gentlemen and ladies at the racecourse. This stand was to be no longer than 100 feet and no wider than 30 feet and it would appear that it was to have been erected in the finishing straight and to have been a permanent or semi-permanent structure.

There is no proof that this stand was erected, however Robert Cane was still paying his two guineas a year in 1777.

Local Races Spin offs

The annual races would have brought significant spin offs to the whole town.

Obviously horses, jockeys, grooms and perhaps owners would have been staying in the town for up to a week before the races, staying in the appointed inns. Perhaps the more important owners would have stayed at the homes of the leading families in the area. As the races at Stockbridge and Winchester were usually held in the two weeks following Basingstoke, no doubt young gentlemen interested in the racing would possibly have come to the town and would also require accommodation.

No doubt many of the local farmers would also have attended the races, perhaps taking the opportunity to do business in the town beforehand.

Then there are the young ladies to consider. The wealthier families would no doubt have brought down outfits purchased in London but the lesser gentry would have purchased material, ribbons etc. to either make new outfits or refurbish old ones. There were no M&S, BHS or Primark in those days and all clothes had to be hand sewn either at home or by seamstresses. With two days of racing and a ball in prospect this must have made the milliners in the town rub their hands with glee.

As for the race days themselves – each day of the races began with a cockfight at a local inn, where no doubt there would have been plentiful refreshment.

Then on to the Ordinary at lunchtime at one of the inns in Basingstoke where liquid refreshment would also have been available.

Then on to the Downs for the 5pm start of the races where there were booths selling liquor

Although everything seemed to be going well in the 1770s, during the 1780s there was a gradual decline in the number of eminent owners entering their horses and the races were less well advertised and reported than previously.

At this time the Basingstoke Enclosure Bill was going through Parliament receiving Royal Assent in 1786 with Basingstoke Down being finally enclosed in 1787. The last races held on the course were on 29 and 30 June 1786.

1. Hampshire Records Office HRO M/23/M72/P1/1
2. A History of the Vyne. Pp83, published in 1888
3. William and Mary ascension to the throne
4. Mike Higgins pers.com mikehiggins@umbria.ac.uk
5. Museum Number M.25:1, 2-2002
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