

SANDOWN RACECOURSE

by Mr Stephen Wallis, Racecourse Manager

Sandown Racecourse was once farmland attached to Sandon Priory, whose entire brethren died of the plague in 1338. We can only assume that it remained farmland until the 1860s, since there is no record of dramatic happenings in the intervening 500 years.

In 1870 the land came up for sale, and a battle royal ensued. Esher had a population of roughly 1800 people at the time, who were filled with horror when they were faced with the possibility of the construction of either a lunatic asylum, or a small town 'complete with a fine church', or, most radical of all, a racecourse to be run by a group of young London Society men who were friends of the Prince of Wales. Incredibly, quite a few people fought long and hard for an asylum in preference to a racecourse, because at the time the racecourse epitomised all that was worst about low-life: cheats, crooks and welshers mixing together to pursue both business and pleasure of any kind.

The idea of actually building a racecourse was considered preposterous - particularly on the basis that it would attract the Gentlemen and Ladies of London Society, when it was well-known that such venues were full of the roughest, foulest-mouthed, and coarsest members of society, and certainly no place for a lady.

But Sir Wilfred Brett and his young partner Hwfa Williams had already thought their arguments through, and they won the day. How different Esher's history might have been had they lost.

Sandown Park Racecourse held its first meeting on 22nd April 1875, and immediately stunned press and public alike with social innovations that helped overcome previous scepticism about the whole racecourse plan. A boundary fence costing £2000 had been erected to enclose the whole estate so that everybody who came racing that day had to pay an admission fee - nobody had ever had to pay to go racing before; but it meant that the public now had a stand from which to both watch the races, and have a drink. At a single stroke the concept of giving 'more for more' was born. The equally badly behaved, but wealthier race-goers' excesses were reined in by building a separate French designed grandstand, and forming a club to which ladies would be admitted as guests - a radical innovation at that time. Brett and Williams wanted to attract society gentlemen to their club by allowing them to bring their wives and daughters with them. One hundred and twenty years later there are still gentlemen's clubs in London that refuse women entry at all.



Brett and Williams must have been remarkable personalities because they very quickly succeeded in establishing Sandown as 'the ladies racecourse, par excellence'. By 1879, the club had 1800 members - the same figure as the number of residents in Esher, ten years previously. They never lost their zeal for improving the appearance of their club, and when Kensington House in Kensington Gore was to be demolished, they acquired the ornamental gates that can still be seen from the Portsmouth Road.

The club concept alone was not enough to make Sandown Park the success that it became. Williams was a remarkable innovator in the variety of races that were run - he had Sandown laid out for both NH and flat racing. The Grand National Hunt meeting was moved from its previous venue in Rugby, which was far from universally approved by the hunting fraternity at first.

Royal patronage was obviously a great bonus to Sandown, and there was widespread delight when Hohenlinden, a horse owned by the Prince of Wales won the Grand Military Gold Cup of 1887. Unfortunately, the horse was disqualified following a successful objection on the grounds that as the Prince was not an officer on active service, his horse was ineligible to run.

As Sandown Park grew in social importance, so Brett and Williams became more involved in the local community. Brett was a churchwarden, whose brother became Lord Esher. Williams remained in charge of the racecourse for fifty years, until his death in 1926. Between them they began the process of integration with the people of Esher.

In 1887, 1500 people took part in the procession to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee. Led by the Rector, the Duchess of Albany and the young Duke and Princess Alice, a long procession snaked its way through the village, to be honoured with a Royal Salute in the Sandown Paddock. The Esher band, cricket team and volunteers from the fire brigade all took part. Tea was served for all 1500 people on the lawns. Medals were given to all the children; obstacle races, tugs of war and general sports competitions were held - the winners were presented with a Jubilee threepenny piece. The whole party ended with a torch-light procession to a bonfire on the green.

For some reason, Williams was not keen to encourage further sports days, but the community continued to have access to the course facilities, with flower shows being an annual event.

On 6th November 1909, Sandown Park was the stage for Paulhan, one of the early aviators, when he attempted to beat the altitude record. The event was well publicised in advance, and drew a huge crowd. Paulhan broke the official record of 601 feet, but failed to reach the unofficial one of 720 feet - not surprising, considering he was flying a machine that weighed half a ton, at a mere 30 miles an hour! A few years later Paulhan was to be the first man to fly from London to Manchester.

The mood of the country changed with the outbreak of the Great War, and much of the park area in the centre of the racecourse was ploughed up and sown with crops. The army came too, with both the Royal Engineers and the recently formed Welsh Guards being based there. The latter were to cement their links by returning with their training battalion for the whole of World War II. In fact, Sandown Park recently honoured the fact that the regiment went to the Normandy Beaches from Sandown Park, by naming a race the D-Day Reunion Handicap. One veteran located where he had been billeted during the war for over two years - in the Weighing Room!

Among the Regiment's officers were two well-known racing men, Peter Cazelet and Lord Mildmay, and a race is held in their memory every year. Peter Cazelet is also remembered as the man who brought a young French chef over to England to cook for him at home. The chef's name was Albert Roux.

Post War

Attitudes changed with the end of the war, and in order to survive, Sandown Park had to change too. The crops that had been produced to help the war effort were now produced for financial gain. The Post Office rented an old Nissen hut to sort the Christmas mail.

Sandown reasserted its self-appointed role as the leader of the racecourse pack with two innovations which were to transform the industry. In 1939 the Stewards had dismissed the approaches from the 'upstarts' at BBC Television, as unsuitable and not worth the 15/- facility fee on offer. On 24th January 1948, two steeplechases and a hurdle race were broadcast by the BBC - the first time that horse racing was televised live anywhere in the world. Just nine years later in 1957, Sandown Park staged the first ever sponsored race - the Whitbread Gold Cup, which continues to be one of the highlights of the racing year.

During the sixties when motorways, by-passes and urban expansion were considered to be the signs of social progress, Esher and Sandown Park could not avoid the trend with a long-running dispute as to the best route for the by-pass, together with an attempt to turn the racecourse into a housing estate for 5000 people having to be fought. At the same time, the grandstands which were nearly one hundred years old were in need of replacement as maintenance costs were soaring.

A three-day public enquiry was held at Sandown Park in March 1963 at which the local community and racing world combined to save the racecourse from the fate of development. The well-known breeder John Hislop told the enquiry that "Sandown Park was as much a part of English life as the Oval or Wembley Stadium".

The development plans were rejected, both locally and on appeal to the Minister of Housing. The Inspector reported that he did not believe that the proposals made planning sense, and that he felt Sandown Park was better used as a racecourse than as an area to ease the housing burden in the south east. Brett and Williams must have smiled in their graves - they had won the same battle ninety years previously. However, Sandown Park's viability remained precarious as the threat of the by-pass still hung overhead.

In 1965 plans to merge Sandown Park and Epsom racecourses were proposed. Initially the Sandown shareholders rejected such an idea, but eventually in 1966 the merger took place and United Racecourses was formed.

A £300,000 grant was given for a new grandstand, but this was suspended indefinitely when the Mole Route for the still unbuilt by-pass was proposed. However, this battle was won, and in 1969 the racecourse was effectively nationalised when the Levy Board acquired United Racecourses in order to preserve racing at both Sandown Park and Epsom, so ending the topsy-turvy future of the racecourse in the sixties.

The new grandstand was opened on 22nd September 1973. At a stroke, Sandown Park regained its reputation for innovation by having constructed a grandstand that was both a leader in comfort and had facilities for all race-goers, whichever enclosure they chose, and designed in such a way that it would be used for exhibitions, conferences and banqueting on non-race days. As had happened in the 1870s, not everyone approved at first, but as the racing public came to know the grandstand, so the awards tumbled in. Sandown Park has won the Racecourse of the Year title more times than all the other courses put together. Non-racing activities continue to develop - so much so, that Sandown is now the 5th biggest exhibition centre in the country.



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