

Leamington Steeplechases

Alan Griffin, June 2016



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The first organised horse races in Leamington were held in the 1830's. They were rather an *ad hoc* affair which in the words of the local newspaper were 'got up only by a few spirited individuals for the gratification of such of the country-folk who keep 'high holiday' on Easter

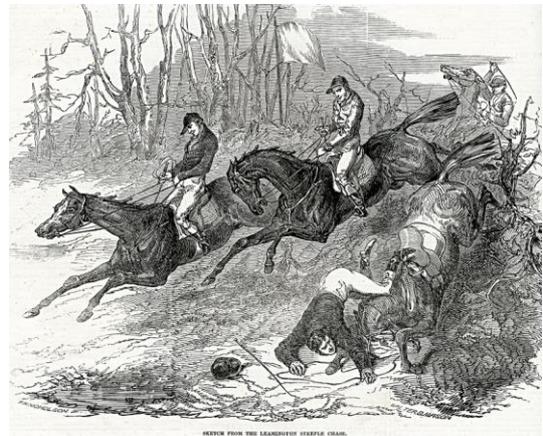


Monday'. *The Leamington Courier* of 5 April 1834 gives a report of the Leamington Races held on Easter Monday of that year. The four races on the card took place on fields adjacent to the Emscote Road occupied by Mr James Gill a Leamington saddler. The report goes on to detail the many diversions on offer for the 'great concourse' of pedestrians in attendance which included 'a dozen substantial & commercial booths' which we can assume to be a euphemism for beer tents erected by local pub owners. We also read that among the other

entertainments laid on were roulette tables and a cock pit for those who fancied a bit of cock-fighting. The principal race at the meeting The Leamington Stakes over two miles was occasioned by more excitement off the course than on when two of the first three horses to pass the winning post were the subject of objections.

Steeplechasing arrives

In the early 19th century, people developed something of a mania for steeplechasing which became a very popular sport both for participants and spectators. As the name suggests, it was originally a cross-country horse race over obstacles with church towers & spires serving as landmark guides for the riders. A number of steeplechases were held in Warwickshire and the first local event was held in November 1834 over a four-mile course laid out between Southam and Stockton. No record exists as to who organised this but the clues point towards the involvement of the Leamington hunting set since similar races were held over succeeding years in November and were advertised as the Leamington Steeplechases. Races were again held at Southam in 1836 and at Ashorne the following



year.

The first record of steeplechasing near Leamington is in 1839 when a course on the Newbold Hills (Campion Hills) was used for several years for November meetings. Early steeplechasing was entirely unregulated, there was no governing body and there was widespread corruption. There were disputes of every sort and frequent objections about the age of horses, the eligibility of riders and their residential qualifications. Races were frequently organised by local hoteliers to maximise their letting of rooms in the winter months and to cash in by providing the lavish dinners and subscription balls that were an important feature of the racing season. The other great motivator for the owners of steeplechase horses was of course money, both as prize money and in private wagers between them to determine who owned the best horse.



Race at Ashorne 1837

Through the 1830's and 40's the Leamington Steeplechases flourished and the number of races increased. What started as a one-day meeting became in time a two-day meeting and by 1846 thirteen races were run. The aristocracy came, as much to be seen as to admire the horseflesh and they generally stayed at The Regent. The 'sportsmen' and military types favoured the

Bedford and Copps hotels. As a service to their patrons, both the Regent and the Bedford set up betting booths for the duration of the meetings. Several hundred army officers arrived each year with their mounts to contest the Grand Military Steeplechase and many thousands of enthusiastic race-goers flooded into Leamington on race days. *The Courier* filled its columns with the lists of runners and riders and more importantly the latest betting odds. Magnificent trophies had been commissioned at huge expense and the prize money was much enhanced by donations from local business people and somewhat more contentiously by the Town Commissioners. On the face of it, the steeplechases were an unqualified success but that was a view not shared by everyone, not least by some of Leamington's most respected and eminent residents.

A famous horse

One of the best steeplechasers of the age was a horse named *Vivian* who just happened to be owned by a Leamington resident Captain Thomas Lamb. Lamb had served with the Bengal Native Infantry in India but had many business interest locally when he settled in Leamington. He owned extensive lime workings at Stockton and ran a stud from Villa Franca his residence in Holly Walk while also acting as commander of the Leamington Squadron of the Warwickshire Yeomanry. Following a steeple chase at Aylesbury, The

Marquis of Waterford a noted horse breeder and owner issued a challenge to Capt. Lamb that his



Becher on Vivian

horse *Cock Robin* would beat Lamb's horse *Vivian* in a steeplechase and the stake was agreed at 1000 sovereigns a side, a truly obscene sum of money. On a course at Market Harborough on a fine sunny December day in 1834, the match went ahead and the Marquis riding his own horse followed *Vivian* across the winning tape and Captain Lamb was handed two £1000 bank post- bills. One of Leamington's pubs is named the Fox & Vivian after the famous steeplechaser. The jockey on *Vivian* was one of the most successful riders of the time, a man named Captain Becher who would be later honoured by having the sixth fence on the Aintree race course named Becher's Brook. It is said that Becher's great party trick was to leap onto a mantelpiece from a standing jump.

Dissenting voices



Trophies 1851

By the late 1840's there were murmurings in the local newspapers about the Leamington steeplechases and the benefits that it was said they brought to the town. For most of the residents it was little more than a once-a-year annoyance which was invariably accompanied by drunkenness, boorish conduct and displays of conspicuous affluence. In 1850 the Courier felt compelled to redress the negative publicity by devoting a whole page of its 20th March 1847 issue to extolling the virtues of the Leamington steeplechases in what was little more than a panegyric. As things turned out, this had a quite opposite outcome to what was intended when the following week there was published in their letters column a devastating riposte from someone signing himself 'A well wisher'. The letter-writer spoke about the drunken brawls and the dubious attraction of the gaming tables and the concomitant evils that went with what he called 'this cruel and degenerate pastime'. What really sealed the fate of steeplechasing, not only locally but throughout the land, was the realisation of the cruelty that it involved. Newspapers regularly carried stories of horses being fatally injured or having to be put down after races because of broken limbs. It was clear that the overriding motivation was quite simply money and horses were frequently raced to death to satisfy the owner's vanity which is what happened to the famous *Vivian*. Two eminent local doctors, Henry Jephson and John Hitchman, both spoke out against what they saw as a cruel and brutal sport which in their view was pursued for no public ends of popularity or benefit, views that were widely held in the town but which most local people had been too afraid to articulate. Regular local steeplechases came to end in the 1860's but were revived briefly in 1884 on the old Newbold Hills course. Many of the events that had formerly made up the Leamington Steeplechase programme were thereafter run on Warwick racecourse. The first Leamington steeplechase took place in 1834 some five years before the Grand National at Aintree was first run; who knows how very different things might have been for the town had other counsels prevailed.

Sources and Illustrations

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