

1986: Racing memories course back in Clounanna

■ Soup and port was on the menu at the famous coursing venue 25 years ago - but our reporter didn't have much of an appetite for the spectacle

Patricia Feehily

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THEY don't arrive in Clounanna in Rolls-Royces any more. "That day is gone," said Dr Hilda O'Malley, nominator of Mov On Hero, who by midday on Friday was said to be "in with a good chance for the cup". Dr O'Malley, who inherited the nomination from her late husband, Donogh, remembers "great times at Clounanna" with the Rols, the picnic baskets, the fashionable women. "I don't see that any more," she said.

A lot of people came from the North, Hilda said, especially from Newry. Brney Eastwood was one of those who came in a Rolls-Royce and he was so small that the car looked as if it was self-propelled.

Attendances were down on the opening day at Clounanna this year, partly because they had changed the traditional lay and partly because of the previous night's heavy frost, which secretary Pat Holland said had "people ringing me since seven o'clock this morning to know if it was still on".

There was, however, a group of German visitors and an Australian film crew portraying the annual event of what the Earl of Dunraven proudly described as "the oldest club in Ireland".

The earl, whose family has been associated with Clounanna for decades, and who is himself chairman of the County Limerick Coursing Club, said that they continued to enjoy the support of farmers, landowners and "lots of town people from Limerick".

He admitted that "attendances were down this first day", while viewing the scene from the privileged circle where everyone was either sipping soup or port. "But wait until tomorrow," he added confidently.

"Very few hares are killed at Clounanna," the earl says when you express misgivings about the sport.

"They came in sheepskin coats and other trappings of respectability"

The atmosphere was enticing, even catching. Paddy O'Neill, chairman of Bord na gCon, summed it up: "It's really a great social occasion. Old friends meet old friends."

Faces were beaming in the early spring sunshine and Dr E J Fitzgerald of Mitchelstown was back in the news again. He

didn't know if he was the only man to win the cup, the plate and the purse at Clounanna, but had done it anyway - starting off with Dash Off Dick in 1946 and winning the purse with Flashy Man two years ago.

The bookies were somewhat rueful. Big money was still changing hands and the favourites at 10-1 each were Write It Down, Moygara Ron and Townbrook.

Jack O'Rourke of Abbeyfeale added the recession and the fact that they were only running one round of the cup on opening day to the reasons given for the smaller than usual attendance. Everyone else looked happy. They mightn't have come in Rolls-Royces but they came in sheepskin coats and other trappings of respectability.

"They're off!" somebody shouted and across the bare sunlit field you saw your first chase and first kill and the sickening spectacle was nothing to the frightening detachment of those around you, even when you had to hang on to a pole as a hare was ripped asunder.

"They don't understand what it is all about," Mrs O'Malley had said. "We don't come here to see a hare gobbled up."

It was the sixth hare killed at Clounanna that day.



Recognise this youthful coursing enthusiast? Yes, it's a smiling JP McManus, pictured quite a few years before he became the multi-millionaire he is today



The late Dr Hilda O'Malley, wife of legendary politician Donogh, at Clounanna 25 years ago



What do we fancy, lads? Dermot Dillon, left, Rathkeale, Gerry Costello and Ned Reihan, Adare studying the form on the opening day of Clounanna in 1986



Lord Thady Dunraven, who died earlier this year, pictured at Clounanna 25 years ago. He spoke to our reporter Patricia Feehily for her article, opposite



Dedicated coursing men Val O'Dwyer, left, from Tipperary and Michael Field, Patrickswell, were at Clounanna back in 1986



Brian Costello, left, and Pat Hennessy, both from Adare