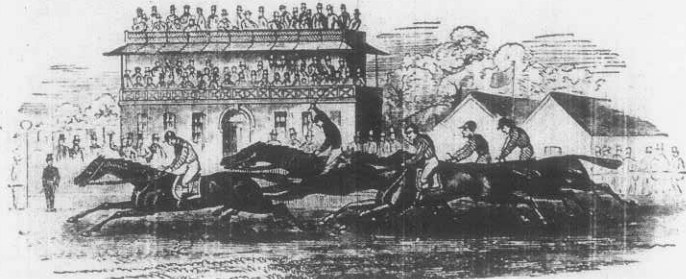


The last meeting on the Newcastle course

A DAY AT THE RACES



THE Greenpark St. Patrick's Day race meeting has for many years been a popular feature of the National Holiday, and many thousands will enjoy a good afternoon's sport there on Tuesday next in quiet and comfort. But, in the sixties of the last century, a day at the races held more hazards for spectators than for jockeys.

Limerick's famed racecourse in those years was at Newcastle, near Castletroy, and the final meeting was held on October 14, 1868. The course was a recognised battleground for drunkards and factionists, and their activities so incensed public opinion that the racecourse management were compelled to seek an alternative venue.

Although racing did not take place until mid-week, the fun of the fair started on a Sunday, when gamblers, thimble-riggers and the like prepared for a busy week. Refreshment price-lists indicated that one could have a good day for a pound: Lunch (beef and ham), 1/6; sandwiches, 4d.; brandy, per glass, 8d.; whiskey (best), 5d.; rum, gin and Scotch whisky, 6d.; porter (per bottle), 3d.; lemonade and soda water, 3d.; cigars, 3d.

It was, too, the era of the less conservative bookmaker, and their announcements in the sporting newspapers were not without a sense of humour. Typical of the advertisements was this one: "Tom Carey,

Turf Commissioner, has commenced business for the season. Will only be responsible for bets made with himself on the R.M.D. (ready money department) system, and as money makes the mares go—and the horse, too—business on the 'nod' will be limited. Hoping backers and layers may win and the year be void of uncomfortable 'objections.' Hurroo Yer Sowls." Another layer announced that "he will be happy to transact business in his usual legitimate, off-hand and humorous style."

Drunkness and homicide went hand-in-hand with the Old Newcastle meeting. So disorderly was the last meeting there that the proprietor of the

course declared that he would never again let his ground for racing. No inducement could make him change his decision.

Accordingly, the management of the races were compelled to seek for another course in the vicinity of Limerick. After inspecting various localities, they hit upon a promising ground at Ballinacurra, not more than two miles from the city. The site owners at the time were Hogan, Mrs. Burns, Mrs. Dawson and Mrs. Stokes. And while the ground was not as undulating as that at Newcastle, it inclined with sufficient steepness to make the contests severe for horses that were capable of leading on low, level ground.

THE LOCAL "EPSOM"

As usual, the Sunday before Newcastle races was what it had ever been in Limerick, a species of fair day. Principal item bought and sold however was intoxicating drink. The two-day meeting opened on a Tuesday, and from an early hour a multitude thronged in from the country to be present at the

local "Epsom." The road from the city to Newcastle was congested all through the day with every description of vehicle, from the popular ass cart and Mary's low-backed car to the obsolete stage coach. The old "Shandrennan" that had been laid by for years in a corner of the farmyard barn was pulled out and "reconditioned" for the occasion.

The course was a busy scene, too, with people erecting tents and sewing pieces of canvas together. Absent, however, were the best sheet and patched quilt, which formerly had given a colourful, if undignified aspect to the tented scene at Newcastle and other races. The coverings now used were the more conservative old ships sails or coarse canvas bags.

Crowded was the stand house, with the elite of the county, and crowded too was the hill on its right, known appropriately enough as "Blackguard Hill." The rising ground to the front of the Turret was also packed. Private carriages and vehicles were in one long line in the space fronting the stand house, which contained the rank and beauty of Limerick and surrounding counties.

The usual accessories, such as "timble riggers," "trick-o'-the-loop-men," roulette gamblers, dice men and card sharpers were as thick as blackberries. As a disapproving observer put it—"The savage expression of their disfigured faces told upon man, woman and girl the dreadful effects of a vicious and de-

praved life."

"AUNT SALLY"

Last, but by no means least, there was "Aunt Sally"—or rather a tribe of the name could be seen on the course. Thanks to his Grace of Beaufort this venerable dame had become famous in the 'sixties. No race meeting was complete without her. On Sunday, the Aunt was everywhere to be seen, in some places in the shape of a bottle or stick, or others in an old headless cap or in a roll of straw, encased in a piece of scarlet or black cloth. Racecourse patrons, if they did not keep a sharp lookout, were made aware of the Aunt's presence by a sharp blow on the extremities of a short thick stick or wattle, thrown by some half drunken wight who had failed to smash the Aunt's head. Many an innocent bystander that day retired from the course, his shirt drenched with blood, which streamed from his damaged nose.

In those days a police barracks was situated on the main road close to the course, and a specially augmented force was always on duty during race days. The first day's racing passed off uneventfully enough. But not so the second day's.

That cyclopedian individual, "the oldest inhabitant," had not seen a greater attendance at the meeting. From about ten o'clock in the morning to one o'clock in the afternoon the number of visitors in O'Connell Street was so great that movement on the footpaths was impossible, and pedestrians formed one crowded stream from Patrick Street to the course.

In the morning an itinerant who attended the racecourse with gambling tables was found smothered in a ditch. An inquest was held that day and the jury returned a verdict that death was brought about by excessive drinking.

FACTION FIGHTING

Shortly before the first race a faction fight took place near the entrance of the course. Two

respectable men named O'Grady, father and son, who occupied a farm on Caswell's Estate at Blackwater, were attacked on the course by faction fighters from the vicinity of Cappamore, who had an enmity towards them of twenty years standing. The O'Grady's, tall, powerful men, defended themselves, and sticks were whirled in the air like children's toys. Large stones from a road wall were resorted to. The two O'Grady's were struck with them on the head and knocked to the ground, the blood flowing freely from the wounds.

An official named Donnellan, who was entering the course at the time, raised the cry of "police." One assailant captured turned out to be a noted factionist from near Abington, one of "the three-year-olds" and he was conveyed to the barrack nearby. The O'Grady's were attended by Dr. Peppard, and one was so badly injured that his life was despaired of. But for an overwhelming force of armed police on the ground, it is impossible to say what consequences could have resulted if the savage factionists had commenced to riot.

SCENES AT RAILWAY

At the end of the day's "sport," males and females staggered back to Limerick. Many had narrow escapes from being run over by vehicles, and the police were well put to it all along the road to prevent accidents.

At the railway station the scene of lawlessness and riot enacted was indescribable. There were no policemen present to assist the Stationmaster and porters in keeping order. Sticks were used on heads and the hard sound could be heard like stones thrown against walls. Lamps were smashed and carriage windows stove in, and order was only restored when the last carriage left for Waterford.

Such was the last eventful meeting at the historic venue, and, as a racing ground, Newcastle was numbered with the past.



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