

## **Shincliffe Race Course – a brief history**

*compiled by Mike Syer, based mainly on notes taken at talks given by David Butler*

*This account is based mostly on notes taken of two excellent talks given by David Butler, at meetings of firstly the Shincliffe Local History Society, on 20 November 2000, and secondly of the Cassop-cum-Quarrington with Bowburn Local History Society (as it was then known), on 21 June 2001.*

*Any errors, of course, are my own. – Mike Syer*

### **Racing in Durham County**

The first record horse racing in Durham county was at Woodham Moor, near Aycliffe, about 1613. This was not the first racing there, but the first known reference to it. In that year, James I visited these races.

Further references to racing record it as having taken place at Hunwick Moor in 1662, and at either Etherley or Byers Green in the mid 18th century – there was a four-day meeting in 1753. It is not known for how long racing at these locations continued. There are just these odd references.

There were galloway/pony races in one lead mining area (?) in 1815/1816.

Other races were held at Stockton and, under John George Lambton, at Lambton Park. They ceased at the latter location when JGL turned his attention increasingly to politics.

In 1870 there were races on the Whitworth estate at Spennymoor. These continued for a few years but they were not well managed and the Whitworth Racecourse Company disbanded.<sup>1</sup>

All racing in Great Britain was on the flat until the 19th Century. Steeplechasing first became fashionable in England in the 1820s and the first steeplechase in Durham County was at Birtley in 1844.

Racing at Sedgefield began in 1846. This was not on the site of the eventual race course but cross-country. The present race course was established in 1890.

### **Racing in Durham City**

In the Durham City area, races were held on Durham Moor (i.e. near where the Salutation Inn now stands) in 1690 and at High Brasside in 1694.

In the 18th century, according to Surtees, races were held at Smithy Haughs in Elvet. This became Durham race course. (These haughs had been used in the Middle Ages for pilgrims' horses. Hence probably the name "Smithy"?) There was a three-day meeting here in 1751.

The first known regular race meetings in Durham were in 1770, at Smithy Haughs. In 1792 and 1793 they moved to Framwellgate Moor but in 1795 they were back at the haughs.

In the 1830s (1830?), Smithy Haughs came into the ownership of the new University of Durham. Racing continued there till 1887. The University refused renewal of the lease in that year, giving one year's notice.

The last meeting was Wed–Thurs, 14th–15th July 1887. Admission through the turnstile cost 1/- and attendance at this last meeting was good. The combined City and County police forces were present. But many watched without paying, from across the river or from the top of Maiden Castle or other vantage points. There was a Fair and a lot of people came for that, after the racing had finished.

The weather was good and the races, as always, were popular with the public. They all had a good view of what was going on (even those who paid!) because the course was compact. It had sharp bends and this made it less popular with horse owners.

There were six races on each of the two days of the final meeting. Prizes were in the order of 100 guineas or £150. The lowest was £100. The racing was poor, however. Only two horses took part in the Durham Handicap.

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<sup>1</sup> See Dodd (1897/1922) A History of Spennymoor, pp192-4.

The Durham Grandstand Company was established in 1867. Its lease included responsibility for maintaining the infrastructure of the course and also for the upkeep of the river banks. This was an onerous commitment. (There were floods in the 1886/87 winter, which had caused severe damage to the banks.)

In 1879, the directors had decided to abandon this commitment because the company was £300 in debt. But in 1880 new directors came forward and paid this off.

Then in 1887 the University refused to renew the lease, apparently because some members of Senate disapproved of racing.

The company held its final meeting in the County Hotel in June 1888. It was chaired by Alderman Smith, whose speech was reported in the press from which this information is obtained. (The company's books and records were probably all destroyed, as was normal practice, in accordance with a decision of that final meeting.)

The company had residual funds of just under £900. While this seemed a lot, that was justified (said Alderman Smith) by the heavy losses that could be incurred at a single meeting if bad weather hit attendance figures. It was suggested that these funds should be used to set up a new company. But this was, the meeting was told, not legal. [!] Moreover, Arthur Henderson (of the carpet factory) reported that there was no suitable land near enough to Durham City.



*Shincliffe Race Course on the 2nd edition Ordnance Survey Map (surveyed 1895)*

## **Shincliffe**

The search for a new site continued and in February 1895 one was selected at Shincliffe. 50 acres were eventually leased and leveled where necessary. New backers (directors) were found.

Land was cleared etc. to prepare the course. (Evidence of the removal and replacement of hedges can be seen by comparing the first and second edition OS maps.)

The wooden grandstand held 1,000 people. It was situated west of High Grange Farm, 400 metres NE of the later grandstand site. This gave a good vantage point, except for the start and the finish of races. It also gave a good view of the surrounding parts of Durham county.

The corner near the Judges' box was said to be difficult and "the Turn" needed skillful handling.

The first meeting – "The North Durham and Steeplechase Meeting" – was held on 15 February 1895. 5,543 people paid an admission charge of 1/- and another 1,500 had pre-subscribed. receipts of £400 to £500 produced a profit of £178, according to the Durham Advertiser, and that was after accounting for £111 of non-recurrent expenditure. (The Durham Chronicle claimed profits were even higher.)

There were 6 or 7 hourly races, from 2.30pm till 5.30pm. The highest prize was £50. One winner was the 5-6 favourite. Another was joint favourite. Seven people were arrested for illegal gambling etc. (including two people from Leeds and one from Bolton). Horses came by train to Shincliffe Station. The 5-4 favourite won the Croxdale Handicap Hurdle (prize £40).

George Menzies' *Lambton* won the 3 o'clock race, ridden by S. Menzies. (This was presumably the owner's nephew Sidney, who was living in his household at the time of both the 1891 and 1901 censuses.) George Menzies<sup>2</sup> had horses in four or five of the races. He was later a shareholder in the Company.

John Edwin Rogerson won the 4.30 on Beta, by 40 lengths. This was a private handicap, i.e. the riders owned their horses. (JER<sup>3</sup> became Chairman of the company and he used the ground for training his own horses.)

A public company was formed, Shincliffe and North Durham Steeplechase and Racing Company Ltd., with capital of £2,000. All 400 no. £5 shares were quickly subscribed.

The company had a 42 year lease @ £50 p.a. from Thomas Ford, of Shincliffe Sawmills, who was a director of the company and underwrote it. The lease was to be void if there was no racing for two years.

If the profits were not enough to pay a dividend, then Mr. Ford would get no more than half the agreed rent – or even a maximum of £10. Such deficit would be recoupable in better years. (By 1910, Mr. Ford seems not to have been satisfied with the company, as the footnote below, about James Menzies, reveals.)

The land leased included two acres at Strawberry Lane, measuring 200 yards by 40 yards, for a paddock. This was just north of the site of the last grandstand and surrounded by trees. 100 horses could be accommodated in the stables. Parking space for 300 cycles was provided.

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<sup>2</sup> I think D.B. gave name as "J. M. Menzies" but the County Durham Advertiser gives "George Menzies". George Menzies lived at Quarrington Grange and had stables there, some of which are still standing having been converted into housing. George Dixon Menzies, his father, previously lived at the nearby Hill Top farm.

James Menzies, who lived at the Sands, near Sedgfield, was his eldest brother, and heir of George Dixon Menzies who had died in 1887. James was Durham Rural District Council's sanitary (or "nuisance") inspector in the early 20th century. He lived in Avenue House, Shincliffe. It was presumably his son Sidney who rode *Lambton* at this 1895 race meeting.

Avenue House was next door to Park House, the home of Mr. Ford, the timber merchant, after he moved from the Sawmills. In 1910, Mr. Ford attended the audit of the accounts of Durham Rural District Council, Mr. Menzies's employer, and "objected to the payment of the Nuisance Inspector's salary on the ground that he did not devote the whole of his services to the duties of his office. He had been allowed, said Mr. Ford, for many years, to hold the office of Clerk of the Course at Shincliffe Races, which occupied a considerable portion of his time, for which he received about £100 a year, in fees. Mr Menzies emphatically denied that he performed the duties of Clerk of Course, or that a single penny of the fees had ever gone into his pocket. After hearing evidence the Auditor said he did not think this was a case in which he ought to disallow. He thought the proper course was for the Council to recover from Mr Menzies the fees he had received as Clerk of Course. He would report to the Local Government Board if Mr Ford was satisfied." {Dur. Co. Adv. 25/2/1910, p.8}

<sup>3</sup> J. E. Rogerson, ironmaster, formerly of Croxdale Hall and then of Mount Oswald, Durham, was Master of the North Durham Foxhounds, a JP, Deputy Lieutenant and High Sheriff of Durham and a director of the Weardale Steel Coal and Coke Company, among other industrial concerns.

Also included were:

- the exclusive use of these 2 acres of paddock and of the grandstand area.
- 89 acres for no more than 21 days p.a. (being used as pasture during the rest of the year) and
- the power to erect tents and booths etc.

A new masonry grandstand was built to hold 1,500 to 2,000 people, 400 metres SW of the original, temporary wooden grandstand of 1895. It was 50 metres long and had 15 steps. Under the grandstand, there was a 25 metre refreshment bar, in 4 sections, and separate changing rooms for the professional and gentlemen jockeys.

A new judges' box was built, as were new ticket booths, which were situated at the NE corner, nearest the railway station.

A large refreshment building was built in the centre of the course (for those who couldn't or wouldn't use the grandstand).

The course was re-sited as an oval, 1.25 miles (2 km) long, possibly running in the opposite direction to 1895. (David Butler suggested this might now have been a clockwise course, as the final straight was described as uphill. This is not certain, however, as it would have been very slightly uphill coming in the other direction too.<sup>4</sup>) The course had 8 jumps, including a water jump – probably at the far western end of the course.



*Shincliffe grandstand, before it was demolished in August 1999*

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<sup>4</sup> The County Durham Advertiser descriptions of the races on this first day are more consistent with the races having been run anti-clockwise on that occasion. For the final straight was after the [first, wooden] stand, which D.B. located west of High Grange Farm, 400 metres NE of the later grandstand site.

The company chairman, John Edwin Rogerson, who kept and trained his horses on the course, described the course as very soft in wet weather and hard when it was dry.

In Feb. 1896, a new road was built from the Shincliffe–Bowburn road, just north of Moor House Farm, replacing the one through the saw mills yard. (That old road is still shown on the 1897 OS map, however.) It is not clear whether this new road ran the entire length, north of the course as far as the grandstand (as the road eventually did), or just by-passing the saw mills etc. and then joining the road that ran past the new ticket booths [which were located at the the extreme north east bend of the track].

In May 1896 the second meeting was held. Successful.

The third meeting was held in October 1896. Not successful.

May 1897 saw the only meeting in that year. It was reported to the Annual Meeting of the Company that work was needed at the far end of the course, as it was waterlogged.

In 1898, an additional, wooden grandstand, 400 metres long, for 500 people paying 2/6 a head, was built just west of the main grandstand.

In 1902, £100 was spent on a new numbers board (?), a new members' room and a ladies cloakroom (no gents was mentioned) and it was agreed to put a roof on the grandstand. (This was completed in March 1904).

On 28 March 1905, J. E. Rogerson's steeplechase, *Druidical*, a candidate for the Grand National, was killed on Shincliffe Race Course.<sup>5</sup> (The day before, JER, Master of Fox Hounds of the North Durham Hounds and chairman of the Shincliffe Race Co., had been "picked by the king" as High Sheriff of the County of Durham.)

In March 1909, "large numbers of hooligans from Sunderland attended Shincliffe Races and managed to intimidate the bookmakers. Their modus operandi was to place a shilling on each horse in a race and then, at the end, stating that they had placed a sovereign, not a shilling on the winner. So threatening did the hooligans become if the bookmaker did not pay up that the unfortunate individual had to do so in the end."<sup>6</sup>

In 1909, the ground was in an "appalling state" after snowfall. Motor cars sunk in the mud. At the next annual meeting of shareholders, the directors reported, "Owing to the inclement state of the weather at both the March and May meetings, we have to report a loss on last year's workings of nearly £170. During the year we were able to effect a much-needed improvement by removal of the shed immediately opposite the enclosure, and to secure the tenancy of stabling, whereby we are now in a position to offer better facilities to owners of horses, which will doubtless induce an increased entry. We have effected other improvement on the course, with a view to bringing our meeting up to date."<sup>7</sup>

In 1910, a further new road was built (although there appears to be no difference between the roads on the 1897 and the 1915 maps). Previously, the road crossed the track twice. The new road only crossed it once.

The sharp bend in the course, nearest to the station, was widened.

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<sup>5</sup> Dur. Co. Adv. 27 March 1930 p.10 (in the "25 Years Ago" feature)

<sup>6</sup> Recorded in "25 Years Ago" feature in Durham County Advertiser 23 March 1934, p.14.

<sup>7</sup> Dur. Co. Adv. 4/3/1910, p.7

Also in 1910, a telegraph link was established. However it still involved some one having to cycle to Durham.

£10 debentures @ 10% fixed interest were issued to pay for all this work.

### **Transport to the Course**

The North England Railway was crucial in bringing visitors and horses to the track. In 1896, the first special train was introduced. It had to reverse at Leamside. Chartered (privately hired) trains also appeared, for instance in 1901, when the crowd waited half an hour (?) for horse boxes and a charter train. (This led a journalist to make a most unfair comparison with the much larger Chantilly station, near Paris.) But things were more efficient in 1902, when the whole course was cleared within an hour of the last race.

Transport by road in 1896 cost 1/- per occupant for a 4-wheeled carriage, which then stood near the grandstand. A 2-wheeled vehicle, which stood near the water jump (just SW of the grandstand? or at the west end of the course?), costing 5/- per occupant.

In 1898, the number of private carriages increased, including refreshment vehicles.

In 1899, "all types" of vehicles were there.

In 1903, local newspaper reports mentioned motor cars for the first time. (One got stuck in the mud!)

In 1905 (?) some motorists arriving late crossed the course and in doing so interfered with a race in progress – much to the anger of all. (Note that this means that the road still crossed the course at that time.)

By 1913, more or less all road transport was by motor cars.

### **Summary and end of Shincliffe races**

In total, 44 meetings were held at the course, including:

- March 1898 and May 1898 (the only Saturday meeting),
- three meetings p.a. (in March, May and October – all Wednesdays) between 1899 and 1904,
- 2 meetings in 1905 (March and May – none in October),
- 3 in 1906 (one in March and two in May) and then
- 2 meetings (March and May) p.a. from 1907 till the end.

Three meetings were postponed or cancelled in the history of the course:

- The March 1906 meeting was cancelled because of intense frost.
- The 11th–12th May 1910 meeting was cancelled because of the death of Edward VII (on 6th May).
- The 20th March 1912 meeting was cancelled because there were no trains during the miners' Minimum Wage strike.

The last meeting was in May 1914. It was expected at that time that there would be a further meeting in May 1915 but this never took place. In August 1914, the course was used for a collecting station for cavalry remounts. In October 1914, recruits were gathered by Rogerson for the army.

The course never re-opened. Rogerson blamed the distance from Durham. There appears to have been no mention in the newspapers of any attempt to re-start racing at the course.

In 1925, Moor House Farm, including the course and its buildings, was put up for sale. But this was withdrawn at £3,050. Some of the stone is said to have been taken to Mountjoy Crescent for house building.

The company was wound up. It had not existed long enough to build up any capital. It made a loss in 1907 (?) and whenever there was poor weather. But the directors were not in it for the money. It was “the plaything of wealthy men”, especially John Edwin Rogerson, of Mount Oswald.

J. E. Rogerson was born at Tynemouth on 8 January 1865, the son of John Rogerson, of Croxdale Hall. He was a county councillor for Wolsingham and became MP for Barnard Castle Division<sup>8</sup> in 1922. He died in 1925<sup>9</sup>. He became Master of the North Durham Foxhounds in 1888 and was still so in 1921<sup>10</sup> and was chairman of the Shincliffe race course company throughout its existence. He used to train his horses on the course.

Other directors included two members of the Ferens family, Maynard, Richard Freeman, Forster and George Menzies, of Quarrington Grange.

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### ***Postscript — When did the Shincliffe race course close?!***

#### **(1) Durham Race Company**

The Durham Race Company held its third annual dinner at the Brewers Arms, Durham in March 1925. George Greenshields, chairman, presided. Mr. I. R. H. Ebdon who was retiring as treasurer and so was presented with a gold medal, said that the organisation was one of the healthiest under the Amalgamated Racing Association. Its financial position was better than ever. Its policy was to spend money on improvements to the course and make it one of the best. (*Durham County Advertiser 20 March 1925, p7*)

Where and what was this?!? Was it Shincliffe... again!? Did it re-open in 1922 (with first annual dinner in 1923 and second one in 1924)? Or did this Durham Race Company operate elsewhere?

#### **(2) Capt. Rogerson**

Capt. J.E. Rogerson, of Mount Oswald, was chairman of the Shincliffe race course company throughout its existence. He used to train his horses on the course. (*Obituary in Durham County Advertiser, 27 March 1925, p5*)

(This is consistent with the course's closure before WWI...)

#### **(3) Trotting Races at Shincliffe**

Andy Carr, of Bowburn, told me there were silkie trotting races at Shincliffe race course after WWII – i.e. in the late 1940s. (*Conversation 30 May 2004*). Perhaps National Hunt racing ended in 1914 but trotting races commenced later?

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<sup>8</sup> See article in Durham County Advertiser, 16 March 1923, p10.

<sup>9</sup> See obituary in Durham County Advertiser, 27 March 1925, p5.

<sup>10</sup> See article in Durham County Advertiser, 18 November 1921, p18, which also refers to a biographical sketch in the current issue of Bailey's Magazine.