

Sunny Wins Again

Chris Pitt reports on the 2026 Kiplingcotes Derby...

The acclaimed lawyer F. E. Smith was once reproached by a judge: “I’ve listened to you for an hour and I’m none the wiser.” Smith responded, “None the wiser, perhaps, my lord but certainly better informed.”

So it was for those who gathered along that narrow lane in the East Yorkshire Wolds on the third Thursday of the month when the hares go mad, for the annual renewal of the Kiplingcotes Derby, England’s oldest horse race. We left none the wiser, albeit, for some of us at least, better informed.

Who was this horse “Sunny”? He’d made all last year under owner-rider Sophie Faulkner-Smith from Slingsby, in Lincolnshire, coming home the best part of a furlong clear of a horse formerly owned by Gigginstown. Invariably a degree of detective work reveals the identity of former racehorses masquerading as “just an old hunter named Bob” but “Sunny” remained an unknown quantity. All we knew was that Sunny had been in training “somewhere in Wales”.

He’d proven quite popular with the punters in 2025, his SP having been cut from an opening 6-1 to half those odds, but it was hardly a coup of Gay Future’s Cartmel or Barney Curley’s Bellewstown phone-box proportions.

Your correspondent ended last year’s report with the words “Maybe by the time of next year’s Kiplingcotes Derby we’ll know the answer.” We did not know then and barely know now, despite having witnessed him lead throughout and pulverise the opposition for the second year running.

The most notable absentee this year was the catering van. Those spectators anticipating the welcome sustenance of burgers, hot dogs, sausage rolls or warming cups of tea were left disappointed. Advance notice had been given on Kiplingcotes’ Facebook page, hence those who were aware of its non-appearance were able to make their own arrangements.

Nobody knows how many horses will take part until 11.00am on the day of the race, the cut-off point for entries, by which time all riders must have weighed out on the traditional set of 1940s coal miners’ scales. Recent years have seen field sizes the BHA would give their eye teeth for. A record 36 for its 500th anniversary running in 2019 was followed by 19 in 2022, 20 in 2023, 19 in 2024, and 18 last year.

“I’ve got a gut feeling there won’t be as many runners this time,” the bookmaker’s ‘eyes and ears’ Robert Maltby confided to your correspondent before entries opened. He was wrong. By the time declaration closed, 22 riders comprising fifteen ladies and seven men, had signed up and weighed out, fourteen of them having their first experience of the Derby course.

Steven Crawford, who last year made Kiplingcotes history as the first person to not only start the race but also as ride in it – the regular starter was unavailable – this year officiated as Clerk of the Scales before joining the other competitors. It meant that at least he was able to start on level terms rather than send the field on its way and then chase after them (he still beat five, by the way). Four-time Derby-winning rider John Thirsk, who had been drafted in as Clerk of the Scales last year, could thus enjoy the build-up without the burden of an official capacity.

Kiplingcotes Derby 2026 – runners and riders

As before, the first to arrive was the one with the longest journey, former point-to-point rider and permit holder Richard Harper, all the way from Kings Sutton, near Banbury. He'd finished fourth, seventh, eighth and twelfth in the last four runnings, his declining positions perhaps indicative of the increased strength of the opposition with each year that passes. This year's race appeared, on paper at least, the strongest yet.

Richard was sporting a yellow T-shirt bearing the words 'Richard Benny 100', the combined age of horse and rider. I would not be so presumptuous as to reveal Richard's age, but the horse was 25. Benny, racing name Chapel House, had finished fourth in 2022 and seventh in 2023 but, unfortunately, was a late absentee due to a sore foot. Hence, Richard enlisted his reserve, 16-year-old **Thomas**, a.k.a. Thomas Blossom, winner of four on the Flat for Patrick Chamings plus two hurdles and a chase for Aly Stronge.

Last year's first and second, **Sunny** and former Gigginstown-owned **Wounded Warrior**, were back to renew rivalry. The latter, back in his prime when trained by Noel Meade, beat Grand National winner Rule The World in a Grade 2 chase at Naas, won a valuable handicap chase at the Punchestown Festival, and finished second in the Thyestes Chase and third in Cheltenham's RSA Chase.

Subsequently bought by the top point-to-point team of Tom Ellis and Gina Andrews, he had won at Duncombe Park in February 2022. Though by now 17 years old, Wounded Warrior was among the favourites. He was again partnered by the experienced Alyson Deniel, whose numerous successes in amateur riders' Flat races included two in the Queen Mother's Cup at York, on Step This Way in 2008 and Show The Way in 2017.

This year's Kiplingcotes Derby formed Leg 13 of the GB Hunt Scurry League, a series of 17 varied contests held between October and April, including cross-country chases such as the Golden Button at Ledbury, traditionally held on New Year's Eve. Among participants in those events were Morgan Raine and **Espoir De Guye**, winner of four handicap chases for Venetia Williams and a Wincanton hunter chase for Paul Nicholls in 2024. Morgan was having her first crack at the Kiplingcotes.

Another first-timer was Jonathan Scutt, riding the 18-year-old **Connor**, who, in his younger days when known as One Connemara, had dead-headed in a Uttoxeter bumper and won a Ludlow novice hurdle for Nicky Henderson. His last victory was gained in a Hexham point-to-point with the lanky Jack Andrews on board in May 2021.

The mother and daughter combination of Julia Wrightson and Charlotte Wrightson from Withernwick in the East Riding of Yorkshire, were both riding former racehorses. Julia's mount was eight-year-old **Zoffalay** (by Zoffany) and Charlotte's the ten-year-old **Dee** (by Black Sam Bellamy) whose racing name was Black Sam Melody. Both possessed near identical records under National Hunt rules, each having raced three times unplaced for trainer Rebecca Curtis and on two occasions being ridden by future champion jockey Sean Bowen.

Also having her first ride in the race was Alison Garner on **Bert**, a ten-year-old who raced by the name of Ali Star Bert and possessed by far the best current form. A winner of one hurdle and nine chases from 46 starts for Worksop-based trainer Shaun Harris, his last victory came at Southwell in November 2025, finishing fifth on his most recent start at Chepstow in January. This one had solid credentials.

Another winning chaser with a Kiplingcotes first-time rider was **Dallas**, the mount of Chris Inman. Now 16 years old and formerly known as Dallas Cowboy, he had won three times over fences, all in 2019, when with Malton trainers Tim Easterby and Paula Smith.

Two more former racehorses were last to arrive. Nine-year-old **Jean Baptiste**, the mount of Tyler Walker, won four Flat races and was second ten times from 48 starts. His wins comprised a Chelmsford City maiden for Sir Michael Stoute in October 2020 (ridden by Ryan Moore), a Newmarket Rowley Mile victory for George Boughey in 2021, and a brace of handicaps at Chester and Hamilton for Roger Fell. Six-year-old **Maisie**, the mount of 15-year-old Ella Calvert from Malton, was originally named Lady Lingamore but was unraced on the Flat or over jumps.

Another unraced thoroughbred, seven-year-old **Farah**, was partnered by Kiplingcotes first-timer Lara O'Donnell from Pickering. Unfortunately, connections were unaware of the rule stating all participants must weigh at least ten stone and that those weighing under must make up the excess on their body, rather than in the saddle. O'Donnell was under the required ten stone and was unable to make up the difference. She was informed that she could still compete but, should she win or finish second, she would be disqualified for not carrying the correct weight, nor would she be entitled to the prize money. "That's a shame," she dejectedly but bullishly responded, "as I think we're extremely likely to win."

This year's race witnessed a notable first and last. **Ferkin** – formerly known as Ferroverie, unplaced in a pair of three-year-old Pontefract maidens for Ollie Pears in 2011 – was looking to become the first horse to complete the course eight times. "Fortunately," said his 70-year-old owner and partner Steven Crawford, "like his elderly jockey – me – he will be carefully ridden to ensure such." This was also Crawford's 17th and final Derby ride, almost 30 years after his first. Horse and rider would retire after the race.

He had first ridden in the race in 1997, barely six weeks after first sitting on a horse, by way of raising funds to buy a scanner for the East Riding NHS. He came second on Memorable and, furthermore, enough money was raised to purchase the scanner. Memorable had a long and happy retirement, living to the good age of 28. One of his racing shoes lies buried along the track in his memory.

There's supposedly a stipulation in the ancient rules, added in 1619, that should the race not take place one year, it would cease forever. Crawford kept it alive by walking the course, twice with Memorable in 2001 (foot and mouth restrictions) and 2018 (waterlogged course), and twice on Ferkin in pre-arranged dead-heats for the 'behind closed doors' Kiplingcotes of 2020 and 2021.

Crawford has also founded something of a Kiplingcotes dynasty, his daughter Laura Crawford winning it in 1999 and finishing second under her married name of Laura Brown in 2010. Now his granddaughter, Jessica Brown, aged fourteen, was bidding to become the youngest rider (at least in living memory) to win the race aboard the six-year-old **Ally**, who raced under the name of Accwest and was last seen in action finishing fourth and fifth in maidens for Adrian Nicholls during the summer of 2025.

Those, then, were the fourteen racehorses of varying abilities. The eight non-Thoroughbred contingent included Dales Pony **Rudy** (a.k.a Rudders), partnered by Rebecca Stewart from Thirsk. This was their fourth attempt, having finished 12th in 2023, 16th in 2024, and 17th last year. The 'Four Feathered Feet Factor' is a necessary rule of thumb at Kiplingcotes, whereby

horses so attired can safely be eliminated from calculations. Despite Rudy's course experience, the FFFF looked set to remain intact.

Heather Buck – formerly Sparkes, now reverted to her maiden name – was having her thirteenth Kiplincotes Derby ride. Sadly, her mount of the previous two years, former racehorse Choungaya (who participated under different aliases), had since died of colic. In his place she was reunited with **Murphy**, an 18-year-old hunter cob on whom she had finished 20th in the 500th anniversary race in 2019 and eighth in both 2022 and 2023.

The grey Connemara **Connie**, the mount of Jo Wiper, had finished 13th in 2024. A larger field this time meant that there was little hope of improving their finishing position. Charlie Greenwood, from “just down the road” in the hamlet of Warter, had finished a respectable eleventh on Sixmilebridge Sally in 2024. Her mount this year was **Nunwold Sal**, a nine-year-old grey hunter. They also looked unlikely to be involved in the closing stages.

The remaining quartet, all having their first Derby rides, comprised Coriena Moon on the ten-year-old warmblood showjumper **Joegento**; Laura Kolovos from Chester-le-Street aboard the nine-year-old Irish Sports Horse-cross **Angel**; Gordon Braniff, wearing hunting black, on **Chrissy**; and Daniel Mottishaw from Willoughby-on-the-Wolds on the 19-year-old skewbald hunter **Matilda**. All non-Thoroughbreds could be backed at long odds.

The build-up

At 11.05 the runners and riders assembled adjacent to the winning post – or half of them did, the latecomers arriving a few minutes later – where Clerk of the Course Clare Waring read out an abridged version of the original rules, including the stipulation that “any rider who layeth hold of any of the other riders or striketh any of them shall win no prize.”

Only two jockeys were bedecked in racing colours, Alyson Deniel in yellow with maroon hoops, and Richard Harper in yellow and black quarters. The others wore a variety of jerseys and jackets in all contrasts, with just the odd racing cap aiding identification: Bert's rider's was light blue and white striped, Ally's wore a quartered cap in different shades of blue. Luckily, they were all wearing number cloths, enabling a modicum of recognition before they made their way to the start.

Bereft this year of the hot food and drink stand, spectators queued up to place their bets, avail themselves of one of the two portable toilets, engage in conversation with those they hadn't seen since last year's Derby, or just stand around and wait for the horses and riders to return.

With no less than fourteen Thoroughbreds in the field, Doncaster bookmaker Chris Johnson, the Kiplingcotes on-course bookie since 2012, opened cautiously, with last year's winner Sunny heading the market at 5-4. Those for whom there was little money saw their prices drift accordingly.

The finish

As little can be seen of the race until the closing stages, post-race feedback from the participants is vital. In fact, it took little describing. Sunny set off to make the running, led by 100 yards after a mile and was never headed, finishing a distance clear of his rivals. There was cut-and-thrust for the placings, with Bert scraping home in second, narrowly fending off Ally, who outran his long odds, and last year's runner-up Wounded Warrior.

Behind that trio came Espoir De Guye in fifth, followed by Connor, Farah and Dallas, former racehorses all. A lengthy gap ensued before Steven Crawford and Ferkin, both making their final starts in the race, came home in ninth. In doing so the rider retired with a record surely unique in the annals of Kiplingcotes history: the only jockey to have successfully completed four walkovers, finished the race eight times on the same horse, start the race as well as take part in it, and act as Clerk of the Scales.

Next to finish was the first of the non-Thoroughbreds, Angel, then another gap before the rest of the field came in at lengthy intervals. Twenty-one of the 22 starters completed the course safe and sound, the only non-finisher being Dee, whose rider aggravated an old shoulder injury and was forced to pull her mount up.

The race was supported by Spillers Horse Feeds but it was longstanding sponsor Philip Guest who presented Sophie Faulkner-Smith with the silver trophy, along with £50 in cash and a horse blanket.

There was more than adequate financial compensation for the runner-up. The race conditions stipulate that £4.00 of the £5.00 entry fee goes to the rider of the second, so with 22 taking part, Alison Garner received a total of £88, £38 more than the winner, whose prize-money is capped at £50.

As a postscript, three days after coming fifth, Morgan Raine partnered her Kiplingcotes mount Espoir Du Guye to finish a creditable fifth of 32 starters in The Harborough Ride, leg 14 of the GB Hunt Scurry Series.

Post-race analysis

The one remaining question was the precise identity of dual Derby winner “Sunny”, the horse formerly trained “somewhere in Wales”. It was time for further investigation.

Owner-rider Sophie Faulkner-Smith wasn't being coy; her horse wasn't a well-known former racehorse running under an unlikely alias. He was definitely not a “ringer” despite trouncing a field comprising more than a dozen other Thoroughbreds. Sophie genuinely did not know.

“All I know is that he's a registered Thoroughbred by Terimon,” she said. “I got him as a gift four years ago this May and have hunted him with the Brocklesby. His original passport had been lost so Weatherbys issued a duplicate one. It states that it cannot be used for racing or breeding.”

The passport confirms that “Sunny” was foaled on 14th June 2009 from the final crop sired by Terimon, 500-1 runner-up to Nashwan in 1989 Derby and voted European Champion Older Horse in 1991. Sunny's dam, Valley's Choice (foaled in 1989 by Morgans Choice out of Colm Valley) was bred by Chris Down and ran seven times under National Hunt rules at the south-west courses between February 1995 and May 1996 for owner B.K. Madden and trainer S. Stevens (no, me neither), never finishing nearer than fifth.

But that's where the information stalls. Searching a variety of sites including Pedigree Query, Sport Horse, At The Races and Racing Post revealed no progeny listings for Valley's Choice either on the Flat over jumps. Nor is there any record of Terimon having been mated with Valley's Choice in 2008, or at any other time. It was his last season at stud (he died later that year). Valley's Choice was 20 years old when she produced Sunny.

It remains a bit of a mystery. When last speaking with Sophie, she was going to contact Weatherbys to see whether they had any further information. Hopefully something will emerge before the 2027 renewal of the Kiplingcotes Derby.

Full finishing order (*official racing name where known in italics*)

1st: Sunny (Sophie Faulkner-Smith) 5-4 fav

2nd: Bert (*Ali Star Bert*) (Alison Garner) 3-1

3rd: Ally (*Accwest*) (Jessica Brown) 50-1

4 Wounded Warrior (Alyson Deniel), 5 Espoir Du Guye (Morgan Raine), 6 Connor (*One Connemara*) (Jonathan Scutt), 7 Farah (Lara O'Donnell), 8 Dallas (*Dallas Cowboy*) (Chris Inman), 9 Ferkin (*Ferrovierie*) (Steven Crawford), 10 Angel (Laura Kolovos), 11 Chrissy (Gordon Braniff), 12 Joegento (Coriena Moon), 13 Nunwold Sal (Charlie Greenwood), 14 Connie (Jo Wiper), 15 Murphy (Heather Buck), 16 Zoffalay (Julia Wrightson), 17 Thomas (*Thomas Blossom*) (Richard Harper), 18 Matilda (Daniel Mottishaw), 19 Rudy (Rebecca Stewart), 20 Jean Baptiste (Tyler Walker), 21 Maisie (*Lady Lingmore*) (Ella Calvert). Did not finish: Dee (*Black Sam Melody*) (Charlotte Wrightson).

A Brief History of the Race

Results of the 'Annual Prize', as the Kiplingcotes was then known, were published in the Racing Calendar between 1764 and 1789. With the Epsom Derby's inaugural running not having taken place until 1780, nobody is quite sure when the 'Derby' suffix was attached to its predecessor, which over time had acquired the title 'Kiplingcotes Plate' before becoming the Kiplingcotes Derby.

One thing is for sure, though. Neither global wars, snowdrifts, waterlogged courses, animal or human epidemics have prevented the Kiplingcotes taking place. Records show that in both 1915 and 1916 Mr Joseph Foster's horse Kimberley, from nearby North Cave, won back to back renewals. Not a year was missed during World War II when the race was dominated by the dual winners Sandy and Slip In.

In the freezing winter of 1947, local farmer Fred Stephenson defied four-foot snowdrifts on his steed Londesborough Lad to keep the race going, taking an hour and a half for what is usually a winning time of around 15 minutes.

The race's organisers had a far more modern outlook to the misogynistic Jockey Club. Whereas women weren't allowed to ride under JC rules until 1972, Miss Jean Farrow had paved the way for female jockeys when winning the Kiplingcotes Derby way back in 1939. Between 1960 and 1978, female riders won all bar three runnings, with Jean Cole-Walton landing the prize six times during an eight-year period between 1967 and 1974.

But even she must tip her hat to the Lester Piggott of the Kiplingcotes Derby, equine dentist Ken Holmes who rode the winner ten times between 1983 and 2002.

Since the turn of the 21st century, the Kiplingcotes Derby has become ever more competitive. What was once merely a local affair with the runners being mostly farm horses or, at best, hunters, a Thoroughbred racehorse is now required to win it.

The foot and mouth epidemic of 2001 may have done for Cheltenham but it was never going to derail Kiplingcotes. Local farmer Stephen Crawford saddled up his horse Memorable and walked over for the prize, thus perpetuating the race's long tradition. Faced with a waterlogged course in 2018, the organisers arranged for Crawford to weigh out and do it again.

The Covid years' races of 2020 and 2021 took place behind closed doors, with Stephen Crawford on Ferkin and John Thirsk on Harry riding the entire course both times and finishing in pre-arranged dead-heats.

There's supposedly a stipulation in the ancient rules that should it not take place one year, it would cease forever. Something about a farmer being able to refuse permission for the race to be run over part of his land. No-one knows for certain whether that's true. They've never chanced it.

The Course

The race starts by a small, insignificant stone post in the parish of Etton. Following calls for something more elaborate to mark the starting point of England's oldest horse race, a local blacksmith was commissioned to make a special horseshoe which is now affixed to the stone.

The three and three-quarter-mile course begins 160 feet above sea level and heads in a north-westerly direction. The horses gallop along a grass verge, climbing steadily to 368 feet over Goodmanham Wold, before dropping down to Enthorpe crossroads and over Enthorpe railway bridge.

The ground then drops slightly downhill before a steady climb up to 438 feet above sea level. This part of the course often comprises thick, clinging mud, so the experienced jockeys tend to keep well to the side by the adjacent field, rather than riding along the middle of the track. From here the course climbs further to the main A614 road crossing where it levels out with a straight two-furlong gallop along grass verge to the winning post on Londesborough Wold.