

The Newmarket Town Plate was run on Saturday August 26th this year, rather than on a Sunday as has been the case for some years. But, under Royal Statute of King Charles II given in 1665, the “Plate is to be rid for yearly, the second Thursday in October, forever”. To change it to Sunday just to make it a – very minimal – commercial occasion is another instance of Newmarket giving up a unique birthright for a mess of pottage. Ignoring such a specific condition after three hundred years was historic vandalism.

A day at the races in the seventeenth century was fundamentally different to what we see today. Most travel at that time was on horseback due to the awful state of the roads; fast horses were the Porsches and Subarus of the day. Gentlemen who thought that they could ride their horse further and faster than their friends inevitably got together to try the issue. Even a single race like the Town Plate would provide an all-day social event for the County set. The race conditions stipulated that “no man is admitted to ride that is either a serving man or groom”.

Under the original articles the Town Plate was to involve three initial heats over the Round course. Both the start and finish of this course were at Thomond’s post which stood near the Cambridge gap in the Devil’s Ditch, at about the present July course winning post. There is a Tillemans painting of the round course start at Thomond’s post with a rubbing house nearby. This course ran parallel to the Cambridge road for about a mile, turned right for another mile across the far end of the present July course, made a sweep of about another mile outside the line of the A14, and rejoined the July course at the head of the straight. This was a wider circuit than today’s, which starts opposite the Well gap near the two-furlong marker and turns sharp onto the end of the July course instead of swinging outside it.

“Start of a race at Newmarket” by Wootton depicts a chaotic scene of mounted spectators. Thomond’s post can be seen in the background, so this is a race on the Dukes course starting near the entrance to the National Stud and making a shorter loop to join the Beacon course somewhere near the Cesarewitch start.

Half an hour was allowed between heats for rubbing down, and the finalists had an hour and a half before running the decider over the Beacon course of about four miles. A replica starting post for that course stands by the pine trees in the angle between the A1303 and the A14. After about a mile the Beacon course followed the Cesarewitch start, and after the current winning post it bore left for the final six furlongs finishing where the cricket pitch is now. In the vernacular it went left at “the turn of the lands” and it finished at “the top of the town”. Until the 1960s The Whip was run over the last half of the old course, [from the] “Ditch in”, but by then this race was invariably a walk-over, so there was no need for the horse to go down to the start.

Another Wootton painting has been variously described as a race on the Round Course and as one on the Beacon course: as the runners have the ditch on their left it must on the Round course. The first and third heats of the Town Plate were to be run right-handed and the second left-handed, but Wootton's perspective is so poor that it is unclear whether the field is running parallel to the ditch or towards it. White posts and cords marking the run in of the Beacon course from the turn of the lands to the winning post at the top of the town can be seen at top right.

Heats races were usually a simple best-of-three or best-of-five heats. In either case extra heats might be required until someone gained the required two or three. The most extreme example was a best-of-five race for pacers over a mile at Independence, Iowa in 1891: Birchwood won 2 heats, Jessie L. the 3rd and 4th, and Maud M. the 5th and 6th. The race then went over to the next day, when Rahleta won the 7th heat, Ialene the 8th, and Fred K. the 9th before Dandy O. descended from the clouds to take the 10th, 11th and 12th heats and the race! Birchwood was only a two-year-old at the time and took 3rd place based on his two winning heats and his placings in later heats.

However, the Town Plate rules stated that any horse able to win all three heats "shall win the plate or prize without running the course"; that involved just twelve miles, rather than sixteen if the heats were split. The final race between the winners of the heats was over the Beacon course. Winning this took precedence over winning two heats on the Round course; there was to be no "two all" draw, and that the fourth heat took precedence prevented the contest from being indefinitely drawn out by conspiracy and collusion

Heat racing obviously loaned itself to sharp practice more than our sudden death format. As each heat stood on its own for betting purposes there was obvious scope for in-and-out running during the heats. If a race run in heats looked like being a long drawn out affair, it made sense to reserve energy for the later rounds. Attempting to settle such a race too quickly risked knocking up your own horse if the plan failed.

In a big field it would obviously pay to watch your main opponent battling third parties in the first two rounds, especially if those third parties had a partisan view. Even in the Town Plate it was only necessary to win a single heat to qualify for the final, which left obvious scope to bet on a rival and against one's own horse in the other two heats.

Combination or team tactics could either stop a rival in his tracks or make his horse run too free, and the Town Plate articles anticipated some type of free-for-all. They state that "every rider that layeth hold on, or striketh any of the riders, shall win no plate or prize", and that "whosoever doth stop or stay any of the horses... if he be owner, servant, party, or bettor, and it appears to be willingly done, he shall win no plate, prize, or bets".

If two competitors could not be separated by the judge the race was a “dead heat” and declared void. Dead heats were still run off in regular races in Britain until 1930 if the two owners declined to divide the stakes. The run-off normally took place after the last race of the day.

Most of the early rules were framed to protect owners from the gamesmanship of other owners: in fact, “jockey” was originally a term with distinct implications of villainy. A rider in the Town Plate might be weighed after all or any heats and if found “to have fraudulently cast away any of his weight and want any more than his pound and a half, he shall lose the plate, prize, and stakes”.

To prevent runners from cantering gently round in any heat which they were not particularly set on winning, all heat racing was based on the concept of “saving your distance”. Any horses not within the distance flag as the winner passed the post were distanced and automatically eliminated from the rest of the contest.

Obviously the cut-off distance was measured differently for races of various lengths, but it was calculated to ensure that all runners made at least semi-serious effort in every heat whilst allowing some leeway for horses which had suffered bad luck in running or had been forced to retrace their steps after an opponent had pushed them to the wrong side of a post. Seventy yards or about twenty lengths was the distance for mile heats. “The distance” in common usage amongst modern day race callers is the 240 yards used in four-mile races. The chair fence at Aintree is sited where the distance judge used to sit.

Almost the only descriptions of racing in heats are in histories and biographies of American trotting turf in the late 1800s. Harness racing was then more popular than baseball and American football put together, and some of the strokes that were pulled are very entertaining. Trotting trainers have written much more extensively, as well as more informatively, about the art of training and managing racehorses than have trainers of gallopers.

Fred Archer went to America for a break following the death of his wife. In conversation with leading driver John Splan he enquired as to the most important “fixed races” – meaning those equivalent to our Classics. Splan was a noted wit and replied that they were nearly all fixed! On one occasion the judges replaced Splan as driver in the middle of a contest, suspecting insufficient effort in a heat, but in subsequent heats the official substitute could do no better. The following morning the chief steward called him to his carriage and admitted that the suspension might have been uncalled for. Splan was not amused and replied that “yesterday you insult me in front of ten thousand people, and today you think to it back in front of your ****er!”

Has our racing improved since 1665? The horses certainly run much faster, if not as far,

but you need far more horses than for racing in heats! Racing for the improvement of the Thoroughbred has been replaced by racing for the benefit of the betting industry. Newmarket seems more interested in pop concerts and liquor sales than in nurturing emotionally invested supporters of the sport. And in running Sales Races than hosting the only Group I in the world run over a straight ten furlongs.

Racing was once an attractive sport which also happened to be attractive to gamblers and merrymakers: those priorities have been quite reversed. Whereas it once mirrored Somerville's view [of hunting], as "the sport of kings; image of war, without its guilt", it has resigned itself to a supporting role in a world of problem gamblers, corporate entertaining, and drunken revelers. Obviously, the original course and the heats had to be consigned to history, but the Town Plate should have stayed on the second Thursday in October.

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