



# Horse Racing at Marlow

By John Evans

**The first Race Meeting at Marlow to be recorded by the Jockey Club, took place in October 1752, and is described as "new this year". It was the only recorded race meeting in Buckinghamshire that year, though Berkshire had three (at Ascot, Maidenhead and Reading). The course was at Riverwoods, and Winter Hill provided a natural grandstand. All were "flat" races.**

There was only one race on each day, and each race was run in heats. This meant that the horses ran against each other over the same course, again and again, until one horse had won two heats.

The 18th century records do not tell us what distances the races were, but one hundred years later distances of two miles and one and three quarter miles are mentioned. The course seems to have been out and back to a distance post.

In 1752, the race on the first day was for horses that had never won above £50 at any one time, and the horses were handicapped by age.

We are fortunate to have an eyewitness account of this race. In the Appendix to the collected editions of *The London Magazine* for

1752, there is a copy of a letter from an anonymous young lady to her friend, describing her "very pleasant expedition" to see the races at Marlow, and "the fine prospects of the country in those parts". She concurs with her hostess's eldest son's promise of great sport and "a beauty of scene which perhaps has not its equal in England".

Six horses were entered in this first race. Our correspondent's favourite, a chestnut mare called *Camilla*, won it, taking the second and third heats. *Camilla* was owned by Lord March, eldest son of the Duke of Devonshire.

In 1753 and 1754 there were again three-day meetings in Marlow. In 1755 and 1756 the meetings were down to two days. Marlow then disappears from the Jockey Club records for 80 years. This does not mean there were no race meetings at Marlow. It implies that either the quality of the organisation, the quality of the horses entered, or both, did not meet Jockey Club requirements.

Other sources record that in 1820 there was a meeting held under the patronage of the Earl of Stow and the Hon Robert Smith of Wycombe Abbey, which 10,000 people are said to have attended. In 1821 there was a contest for a cup between The Hussars and The Buckinghamshire Yeomanry. In 1822 there was a similar contest between members of the 1st Regiment of Yeomanry Cavalry for a cup worth 50 guineas. In 1823 there were four races: "The Plate", "The Town Purse", "The Members' Purse" and "The Gentlemen's Purse". There was a meeting in 1827, which included races for ponies.

From 1837 to 1847, Marlow Races reappear in the Jockey Club's Racing Calendar. The races are now held in early August. There is more than one race a day, but each race is still run in heats. The 1837 meeting lasts two days; the 1838 only one day; and from 1839 to 1847, two days, Wednesday and Thursday.

In the last meeting to be recorded as taking place at Marlow (in 1847), four horses entered for each of the three races on the first day: "The Ladies' Purse" and the "The Stewards' Cup" were for 30 sovereigns plus a sweepstake, and "The Hurdle Stakes" for stakes of 3 sovereigns each. It is recorded that a chestnut gelding named *Deception*, belonging to Sir William Robert Clayton, KCB, Baronet, of Harleyford, came last in "The Stewards' Cup".

On the second day eight horses were entered for the first race, "The Selling Stakes" (the winner to be sold for £150), and six horses entered "The Harleyford Handicap". The very last Marlow race, run on the 5th August, 1847, is recorded as: "a Hurdle Race of 3 sovs each with 25 added, the winner to be sold for 90 sovs, once round six leaps starting at the Ditch". Five horses were entered, and the race was won by Mr Tollett's bay mare, *Variety*, ridden by "Oliver".

What were the reasons for the gaps in the history of horse racing at Marlow? Was it changes in fashion? Competition from neighbouring meetings? Agricultural economics? Or simply lost records? What exactly caused the breaks with the Jockey Club? Did all racing finally end in August 1847? Was this connected with the premature death of Sir William Robert Clayton's eldest son, Captain William Capel Clayton, two months before the races would have taken place? Was it connected with the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, or the incorporation of the High Wycombe Railway in the same year?

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