

**STRANGE** STUFF

Racing Post Chronicles

# STRANGE STUFF

GRAHAM SHARPE

**RACING POST**

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If this quote sums you up, you'll absolutely love this book ... if it doesn't, you'll absolutely love this book for showing you what can happen when you buy in to loving horse racing:

'A sad, dyed in the wool old fart, who spends four hours at a racecourse watching horses run round in circles for the sum total of 15 minutes of action.'

Julian Muscat, father to two sons in their early 20s and a teenage step-daughter, tells *Racing Post* readers what they think of him.

## **Dedication**

To our beautiful Kiwi-Brit granddaughter, Georgia.

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# ALPHA-BETS

**ADELAIDE** racecourse in Australia was the scene of a 1955 gamble from 33/1 to 7/2 on Thundering Legion, only for stewards to discover a battery-powered whip being carried by jockey Bill Attrill, who was taken away to be dealt with and later banned for 10 years. A substitute jockey was permitted to take over – and the horse won anyway!

**BEN KEITH**, of Star Sports bookmakers, summed up the essence of a true bookmaker in his comment to *Racing Post* editor Bruce Millington in a December 2019 interview: ‘I’ve had punters go one or two million up on me before I’ve won the money back, because I fancy beating them.’ He added: ‘When you are a bookie you are the bank, and your security and radar should be on 24/7.’

**CATHERINE UNSWORTH**, a Liverpool doctor’s wife, was the only punter at Haydock Park to back Coole to win a 15-runner handicap on 30 November 1929, so scooped a 3,410/1 payout for her two bob – 10p – winning bet.

**DOROTHY PAGET**, a real eccentric but mega-wealthy owner of five-time Cheltenham Gold Cup winner Golden Miller, was such an honest, heavy gambler, that her bookmaker, the eponymous William Hill, permitted her to place bets after the races had been run, as she would often sleep all day and rise at night.

**EDWARD HODSON'S** 5p yankee, placed on 11 February 1984, produced four winners at accumulative odds of 3,956,748/1 – but his Wolverhampton bookie had a maximum payout of £3,000 – which is the amount he was paid.

**FREDDIE THE FOX** was heavily backed to win the inaugural Mascot Grand National at Huntingdon racecourse in September 2001, which attracted a field of over 100 bizarrely clad clowns. Freddie bolted up, then was revealed as 24-year-old Matt Douglas, who twice competed over hurdles in the Olympics. Bookies Sportingodds.com complained, ‘We’ve been done over for a four-figure payout.’

**GHOST** was the name of a racecourse bookie at the Chicago racecourse where, in 1891, popular jockey Monk Overton won all six races he contested, the first US rider to achieve such a feat. Ghost ‘took on the appearance of one’ it was reported, as his and other firms lost ‘a combined, jaw-dropping \$120,000.’

**HUNTINGDON** racecourse was the scene of betting on a most unusual race staged there in 1763 when, reported the Racing Calendar, ‘a Quarter of a Mile Match was run for 100Gs between a Gentleman and a Grey Gelding with one Leg tied, and won by the former. The Horse’s Leg untied in running.’

**ILE DE CHYPRE**, well supported from 6/1 to 4/1 to win during the 1988 Royal Ascot meeting, was clear under jockey Greville Starkey and set for victory, only to inexplicably swerve and unseat his rider. It was later alleged that criminals had targeted the horse with a ‘stun-gun’ to stop it winning.

**J P McMANUS**, bookie, owner and punter, confessed his first bet was one shilling – 5p – each-way on Orchardist, 25/1 for the 1962 Cesarewitch. The horse duly passed the post in front, but was disqualified and placed second.

**KIM JONG-UN**, boss of North Korea, may have been planning a betting coup, it appeared, when it was revealed in February 2020 that ‘Mr Kim’s secretive and impoverished state spent \$75,509 (£58,000) on 12 thoroughbred Russian horses last year.’ They were apparently ordered from the Altai stud farm, which had previously sold 14 to Pyongyang in 2015.

*J P McManus; leading owner.*



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**LINDA O'NEILL'S** husband, trainer Owen, stopped her backing his two runners at Bath in August 1993. They won at 66/1 and 50/1, a 3416/1 double. 'You wouldn't be able to print what she said to me,' commented Owen.

**MARIE LAZENBY** ended up in hospital after winning £22 by backing Miinehoma to win the 1994 Grand National – as the horse crossed the line she jumped for joy and cheered, upsetting her pet dog so much that it also jumped up – and bit her on the left nipple.

**NEW** security technology introduced by William Hill in 1992 to record bets placed by on-course punters had unexpected results when at Kempton it set off a fireworks display earlier than scheduled, and at Newbury it broadcast details of bets being taken over the course pa system.

**OLIVE HARRISON**, June Muggleston and Dorothy Harrison made betting history on 15 June 1967 when the trio made a book at Uttoxeter's evening meeting. The sisters already owned eight betting shops.

**POSTAL ORDERS** to the value of £500 were in the letter received by your author in April 1990 when he was working for William Hill – together with a letter signed 'Mr M' explaining that 'I won £475 four years ago in a bet involving two horses, but I now do not want the money. An extra £25 has been added for the trouble to which this puts you.' I sent it to a racing charity.

**QUEEN MOTHER** reportedly placed a bet from the cockpit of Concorde while travelling over the Irish Sea on a day trip to celebrate her 85th birthday in August 1985.

**ROSS BRIERLEY** introduced himself as a new columnist for the *Racing Post* on 16 February 2020, telling readers: 'They say you don't choose the betting life, the betting life chooses you. And by they, I mean me. "Congratulations, it's a gambler!" is the second least popular greeting card in the new baby section (after "Sorry! It's not yours"), but betting runs in my blood.'

**SWINGER** was the eyebrow-raising name of a new bet introduced by the Tote in 2008. They denied that there was any sexual connotation to the wager, which involved picking two horses to finish in the first three in any order.

**TRODMORE** was the entirely invented name of a fictitious racecourse which, in 1898, gullible bookies were scammed into accepting bets for, with the 'runners' and, later, results being published in racing paper *The Sportsman*. The scammers were never unmasked but made fortunes before their plot was revealed.

**URQUHART** was how the boy whose christian names were Tom Arkle was known at his Herefordshire Roman Catholic boarding school in 1989. That middle name was a clue to his interest in racing, which resulted in him consistently tipping winners, to the extent that

when his father visited, bringing the *Sporting Life* for the boy, he was called into the office by one of the monks and asked whether he and his colleagues could be informed of the tips.

**VICTOR SASSOON'S** Hot Night started 9/2 second favourite for the 1927 Derby, for which the owner had backed him each-way at 1000/1 as a yearling. The horse finished runner-up, at least landing the place part of the bet at 250/1. As the wager's stake had been one penny each-way – Sir Victor feared higher stakes might jinx the horse – he collected £1 in settlement.

**W F WILLIAMSON** staked £10 on his Russian Hero at ante-post odds of 300/1 to win the 1949 Grand National at ante-post odds. Starting at 66/1, he duly obliged.

**XENOPHOBIA** is what top trainer and former England footballer Mick Channon was accused of by *Mail on Sunday* sportswriter Patrick Collins, who took exception to Mick's opinion about then-England manager Sven Goran Eriksson, calling him 'banal and risible, with a streak of xenophobia'.

**YATES** was the surname of lorry driver punter, Barry, who, in 1991, listened to a telephone commentary of a race in which his £2 treble's final selection won him £50. So excited was he that he forgot to put the receiver back properly – resulting in a £50+ phone bill.

**ZAHIA** looked set to land a gamble worth £12,500 for owner N F Gee as the 100/1 outsider came to lead the 1948 Grand National with just the last fence to clear – but jockey Eddie Reavey inexplicably took the wrong course, missing out the final fence, thus being disqualified.

# EVERYBODY KNOWS ... DON'T THEY?

Everybody knows ...

... that Becher's Brook on the Grand National course is named after the jockey of that name who fell into it ... YET, most don't know that Captain Becher – for it was he – actually DIVED into the brook to avoid injury as other runners bore down, after his mount stopped dead, unseating him.

.... that the first Derby was run at Epsom in 1780 ... NOT a bit of it – the Derby Plate, the inaugural race with such a title, was staged on the Isle of Man in 1621.

... that the term 'Sport of Kings' has always been used in the context of racing ... only, since 1918, according to Gerald Hammond's 1992 *Horse Racing, A Book of Words*, in which he writes: 'only lately synonymous with horse racing. First it described war, the hunting. Its first use to describe racing does not seem to be until 1918, in a poem, "Weep for the King of Sports, the Sport of Kings".'

*Becher's Brook, one of the iconic fences at Aintree.*





*Heading towards Tattenham Corner.*

... that heavily backed 1836 St Leger winner Elis was believed to be the first horse to be transported to the races, wrong-footing bookies who didn't believe the colt could make it from his Goodwood stables to Doncaster in time ... HOWEVER, it emerges that in October 1816 the Newmarket St Leger was won by 30/1 Royal Sovereign, whisked there from his Worcestershire base by owner Mr Terrett via his 'bullock float'.

... the Derby runners swing round the Tattenham Corner bend during the race ... EXCEPT that the 1929 Bloodstock Breeders Review proved that this piece of land used to be called Tottenham corner, from the name of the family owning the land, which was somehow corrupted to Tattenham, and also pointed out it is also incorrect to talk of horses 'coming round Tattenham corner as the (original) corner is on the opposite side of the course.'

... that the first evening race meeting in the UK was at Hamilton Park on 18 July 1947 ... ALTHOUGH, *The History of Horse racing in Scotland* by racing historian J Fairfax points out, 'I have records of night racing at York as early as 1784.'

... that the short-leather style of riding which revolutionised jockey styles was introduced to Britain by American rider Tod Sloan in late 1897 ... BUT NO, declares the 1927 *Bloodstock Breeders Review* in an obituary of black US jockey William Simms, who arrived in England in the mid-1890s, 'it was he who first demonstrated to English sportsmen the advantages of the crouching style of riding so brilliantly exploited by Tod Sloan a year or two later.'

## YEAR WE GO ...

### 1504

Racing was held at Leith, Edinburgh, on a 'long stretch of bare sand', reported accounts of the Lord High Treasurer for Scotland, noting that this piece of ground was 'also notable as the grim scene of executions for piracy'.

### 1634

A report of a welching punter appeared in a letter, dated 20 March, and complaining that 'The Earl of Southampton, they say, hath lost a great deal of monie latelie at the Horse Races at Newmarket; but true it is, he hath licence to travel for three years and is gone in all haste to France.'

### 1641

Two horses taking part in a 1,000 crown-a-side race between two French noblemen were prepared on bread made with beans and aniseed, and were given between 200 and 300 fresh eggs two days before the race.

### 1654

Cromwell banned horse racing, fearing it might bring together crowds of people with Royalist sympathies and result in political disturbances.

### 1679

Believed to be the first racing form book, John Nelson of Newmarket's *Register of Horse Matches* appeared for sale.

### 1718

Early skulduggery at York races when 'Crutches started a very hot favourite, but jockey Thomas Black, finding his horse winning, in spite of all his efforts to stop him, with courage worthy of a better cause, threw himself off when leading at the distance post.'

### 1731

Probably the first race for three-year-olds attracted nine runners at Beldale in Yorkshire.

**1771**

‘In order to save Mr Quick, Mr Castle, or any of the Ascott [sic] Confederacy the trouble and expense of training, they are desired to take notice that none of their horses will be allowed to run,’ at Chester Races, ‘nor will Thomas Dunn be permitted to ride,’ declared the *Racing Calendar*.

**1774**

A winner at Chester races was called Mine-Ass-in-a-Band-Box.

**1775**

The Stewards of Morpeth Races in the North East ‘ordered five pounds of the subscription money to be distributed amongst the prisoners in the jail, an example worthy of imitation,’ declared the *Newcastle Journal*.

**1788**

York staged a race between two runners, set to carry 30 stones for 100 guineas. Former MP George Baker’s (any relation, one wonders?) grey horse was 1-2 favourite but was beaten by Mr Maynard’s un-named bay mare.

**1798**

In a freak accident at Chester races, Mr Lockley’s Hairbreadth bolted ‘when leading near the winning posts, jumped the cords and struck his head against an officer’s helmet, being killed instantaneously,’ as the point of the spiked helmet entered the horse’s brain.

**1800**

At the turn of the century, a blind Scottish jockey, Willie McGilvray, competed on a regular basis at his local racecourses. It was reported that ‘as he never went upon unknown ground his lack of sight did not appear to be much detriment.’

**1803**

There may have been more exciting race meetings than the four day one held at Kelso, as it attracted a total of three runners and every race actually run was a walk-over.

**1812**

This year’s 2,000 Guineas winner had a baffling-to-pronounce name of Cwrw.

**1815**

The Portuguese name of 1815 St Leger winner, Filho da Puta, translates as ‘son of a whore’.

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### 1820

Having been discovered watching trials on Newmarket Heath through a telescope, William ‘Snipe’ Taylor became the first ‘tout’ to be warned off of the Heath.

### 1826

The 1776 St Leger winner was un-named at the time – but 50 years later a racing historian dubbed her Allabaculla – which stuck.

### 1846

The weather was so foggy at Newmarket’s Houghton meeting that ‘men were stationed at intervals on the course to guide jockeys, and the line of the course was tracked with tan and sawdust.’

### 1854

Leading the fabled Charge of the Light Brigade, Lord Cardigan rode a racehorse, Roland, who had won the Wolverhampton Stakes.

### 1857

They staged a race at Hartlepool in September of this year, open only to riders who were ‘captains of vessels’. The Mariners’ Stakes saw three skippers going to post, with Captain Thomson sinking his rivals’ hopes by sailing to victory on Phoenix.

### 1863

Lanark Silver Bell winner was named Dick Swiveller.

### 1898

A trial of a newly invented Starting Gate Machine was arranged at Epsom’s summer meeting – and by 1901 they were being used at most meetings.

### 1909

Minoru, Derby winner this year, was exported to Russia only to be reportedly seized by Bolsheviks during the Revolution and executed for being an aristocrat.

### 1914

Connections finally realised Mr Solly Joel’s Poor Boy would never win Goodwood’s Stewards Cup, as he finished unplaced, having been runner-up in 1908 as a three-year-old; unplaced in 1909; runner-up again in 1910; unplaced in 1911; runner-up in both 1912 and 1913.

**1944**

After the racecourse had suffered from air raids, the Romanian 1,000 Guineas was finally run – and won by Bombi.

**1948**

Sheila's Cottage won the 1948 Grand National – but showed scant gratitude to jockey Arthur Thompson – when he visited her after the race, she bit off the top of his finger.

**1983**

Huntress Grace was pulled up during a Fakenham meeting in May 1983 – twice, as she took part in two races on the card.

**1986**

During the Christmas holiday students from Widnes Sixth Form were blamed for damaging the stuffed remains of great racehorse Brown Jack, which had been kept at the Stable Grill, Widnes, only to be found lying on the ground, minus one ear.

**1993**

Peter Upton-trained Mansfield House raced on an unfamiliar surface in February this year, after his horse-box crashed on the A604 near Huntingdon, and he charged off down the fast lane, somehow being caught before damaging himself.

**2009**

Tony McCoy received a gift from Fakenham racecourse in March this year to mark his recent achievement of 3,000 winners ... an apple tree.

**2021**

Celerity shocked racegoers at Haydock on Friday evening, 6 August 2021, by finally shedding her maiden status at the 106th time of asking with a front-running victory under 7lb claimer Erika Parkinson.

The seven-year-old, trained by Lisa Williamson, had amassed the longest losing streak in British and Irish racing history, having failed to score in a career that began at Dundalk in April 2016.

And Jockey Gary Bardwell rode his first winner for 18 years on 8 September 2021. Having retired back in February 2003, he teamed up with Natural Colour in the St Leger Legends Classified Stakes over one mile at Doncaster, and stormed to an 11/1 victory – afterwards attributing his win to 'no sex, no drink'!

## DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION

- Starter in Hong Kong during the 19th century Sir Henry May would trot up on a pony to each flag start, wearing top hat and formal dress.
- ‘Love-locks flowed out from the front of his cap to frame his forehead, and he was much addicted to the wearing of frills, while bunches of ribbons adorned the tops of his boots’ read a description of early ‘superstar’ dandy jockey Sam Chifney senior, 1753–1807.
- Riding his own horse in a late 19th-century hurdles race at Melbourne, Australia, when his jockey failed to turn up, George Owen won on Modesty, but was fined £5 for being improperly dressed in white shirt and ‘shepherd’s plaid trousers’.
- Top jump jockey Graham Thorner finished a race feeling somewhat exposed, remembered fellow rider, Philip Blacker, who described ‘watching Graham ride a finish without his trousers. The bottom had popped early in the race and by the time he’d jumped the last he was down to jockstrap and ladies’ tights.’ Thorner rode Well To Do to win the 1972 Grand National and afterwards insisted on wearing the same pair of underpants every time he raced until, said fellow jockey Richard Pitman, ‘He wore them until there was nothing left, just a bit of elastic round his legs. He even had to keep them on with another pair – but there was no way he’d ride without them.’ As for Pitman – he always had to put his right boot on first.
- Punters are often said to have lost their shirts but in 1992 racecourse bookie Norrie Drummond of Lanarkshire accepted a bet of 50 shirts to £250 at Edinburgh for an even money chance – which was beaten.
- Trainer Martin Pipe’s wife Carol was with him at Taunton in 1993 when their Elite Reg’s tongue strap went missing. Carol dashed to the ‘ladies’, removed her tights – which were then used to hold down their runner’s tongue. The horse was pulled up in the race.
- Here’s an eye-witness description of owner, steward and starter Lord George Bentinck (1802–1848) at Doncaster races – ‘Dressed in buckskin breeches in the hides of his own stags, with exquisitely made boots of antique colouring in top, a buff waistcoat of reddish brown, double breasted coat, ornamented with the buttons of the Jockey Club; a quiet



*Carol Pipe came to the rescue of husband Martin (left) in 1993, pictured here with Peter Scudamore MBE, eight-time Champion Jockey and trainer in National Hunt racing.*

beaver placed neither at right angle, nor yet at left, but in the juste milieu of gentlemanly taste, on a well-formed head of auburn hair, with large whiskers of the same colour.' Eat your heart out, Matt Chapman.

- Goodwood staged a series of meetings during the 1820s in which a weight allowance was given to riders who wore a cocked hat.
- A fraction over the weight he was set to carry to ride Langley Vale at Goodwood in September 2015, former champion jockey Seb Sanders realised drastic measures were called for – so jumped on the horse and went out to ride in stocking feet, without boots – reportedly the first time such a thing had happened in modern British racing history.

The horse finished fourth and Sanders faced some criticism for his decision, but hit back: 'I got held up getting to Goodwood and didn't have time for a sweat, so I left the boots off to make the weight. That's all it was and I think a mountain's been made out of a molehill.'

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In November 2014 French jockey Pierre-Charles Boudot had ridden without boots when Noir Garçon finished runner-up in a two-year-old newcomers' race in Japan, having weighed out without them to make the required 55kg weight. Boudot told the Tokyo stewards, 'We often do it in France,' but was reprimanded for his actions.

### **KHADIJAH UNIQUE**

The 2019 Magnolia Cup, a charity race staged at the Glorious Goodwood meeting, saw a unique achievement by 18-year-old student Khadija Mellah who rode the Charlie Fellowes-trained Haverland to victory, in the process becoming the first rider to win a British race wearing a hijab.

Goodwood's 1900 July meeting saw American jockey 'Little' Johnny Reiff, nicknamed 'Knickerbocker' after the garment he wore on his nether regions, win eight races.

*Khadija Mellah, the first rider to win a race wearing a hijab.*

