

MICHAEL BROKE – TOUR OF THE TRACKS - 2010

Haydock Park - 4th September 2010

Haydock Park is a Grade A racecourse between Manchester and Liverpool and stages high class racing both on the flat and National Hunt. The day of my visit was the racecourse's premier flat race meeting, including the Group 1 Betfred Sprint Cup, two listed races and a Heritage Handicap. Not surprisingly this card attracted a large crowd on a warm and sunny Saturday afternoon.

Haydock Park is not well designed to accommodate such a large crowd. It is on a long narrow site with very little space between the stands and the track. This area became badly congested, a situation which was made worse because race-goers are allowed to take drinks there and on to the stands. To get from the Parade Ring to the rails bookmakers involved negotiating a passage through plastic pints of lager.

The stands did not have enough capacity for the numbers to view the racing, particularly as the steps of The County Stand are mainly seated. As a result many of the race-goers had to try to watch the races from ground level, which was not easy as the track is completely flat. Although there was a large screen it was difficult to view it through people's heads and pints of lager. I had a share in a horse running that day, so was privileged to be able to watch the racing from the Owners and Trainers Stand, where there was enough room. If I had not been, I would have been reduced to watching the racing on a television screen.

Haydock Park Racecourse is owned by Jockey Club Racecourses and has four separate enclosures. In declining status and entry price they are the Premier Enclosure, the County Stand, the Tattersalls Stand and the Newton Stand. This is an unusual degree of social apartheid, although I expect that the racecourse management would describe it as market segmentation. Surprisingly an Owner's badge gives admission to the County Stand, but not to the Premier Enclosure; the only racecourse I have been to where an owner on the day does not have access to the leading enclosure.

The track is small for a Grade A racecourse, consisting of a 13 furlong left handed oval and a 6 furlong straight from a chute. The Parade Ring is attractive with several large trees shading the horses as they circulate. In other respects the facilities are below the standard of a leading racecourse. The only toilets at ground level in the County Enclosure are small and basic and appeared not to be serviced during the afternoon.

The feature race, the Betfred Sprint Cup, caused a surprise with the defeat of the Ballydoyle superstar, Starspangledbanner, who had previously won the Kings Stand Stakes at Royal Ascot and been touched off in the Nunthorpe Stakes at York. The race was won by Markab, who at seven years old seems to have made remarkable improvement. The filly in which I have a share ran a little disappointingly in the closing 3 year old handicap, but she had been put up nine pounds for winning her previous two races.

As a Jockey Club owned racecourse the catering is managed by their joint venture with Compass. There are two main silver service restaurants Harry's Bistro and Colours Restaurant, charging £170 and £120 per head respectively for a pre-booked package that includes racecourse entry. The menu in the two restaurants is similar and I was told that the price difference is because the food in Colours Restaurant has lower quality ingredients. The prices in both restaurants seemed high for the offer in a basic ambience with shared tables. Both restaurants are only available to Premier Badge holders. As an owner I was able to use the Owners and Trainers Bar, which provided hot ham or turkey rolls and

salad free of charge. A County Stand badge-holder, who was not an owner on the day, would have had a limited choice. There was a small seafood counter in the champagne bar, which would only sell champagne by the bottle, or pies and burgers from vans.

The nearest main line railway station to Haydock Park is Warrington Bank Quay, eight miles away, with direct services of less than two hours from London Euston. The racecourse does not provide a bus service from any railway station, but generously reimburses the £20 each way taxi fare to owners. A race-goer, who is not an owner, travelling by train would have to factor in that cost. The arrangement for leaving the racecourse by taxi was unsatisfactory. The entrance is at the end of a private drive from the main road and the police did not allow taxis, including the one I had pre-booked, to enter it after the last race. Although a few taxis had been parked inside they were all quickly taken, so my party had to walk the three quarters of a mile length of the drive to find a taxi on the main road.

Leicester - 31st August 2010

Leicester Racecourse is well located in the heart of England and conveniently close to the training yards at Newmarket. As a result it is well patronised by Newmarket trainers, particularly in maiden races. Even on the minor racing day of my visit several leading Newmarket trainers were present in person.

The racecourse is independent and privately owned. The track itself is undulating with a 7 furlong straight, which has a steep downhill start and an uphill finish. Horses running at Leicester have to get the trip.

It is perhaps unfair to form an opinion of a racecourse from a visit on a minor day when a low attendance is expected. My visit was on the day after the August Bank Holiday and, as at Ayr the previous week, some of the expected facilities were missing or closed. There was no big screen at Leicester, which on an undulating track with a long straight made viewing the racing very difficult. I understand that the £1800 cost of hiring a mobile screen may seem a lot on a day when few paying customers attend, but I think that a screen is now an essential facility.

Leicester Racecourse does its catering in-house. The main restaurant was in the Nelson Suite, which unusually is located in the Grandstand and not in the Premier Enclosure. On busier days this is available for pre-booked packages, including racecourse entry, for £57 per head, which is competitive with similar offers from most of the other racecourses I have visited. On the day of my visit they were offering two courses to walk-ins for £16.95 per head. That seems a reasonable price, but the menu was basic, e.g. sausages and mash or fish pie.

A less formal meal of pies or pre-packed sandwiches was available in the Quorn Room, which is tatty and in need of refurbishment. On previous visits to Leicester I had enjoyed having a snack and a drink in the Wine and Champagne Bar, which is at the top of the main grandstand and overlooks the track. Sadly this was closed on the day of my visit. Probably the best food on offer at Leicester Racecourse is from one of the two stalls on either side of the entrance to the track. I had an excellent crab sandwich made for me at the seafood stall while the hot beef rolls from the other stall were strongly recommended by the distinguished journalist and gourmet, Eddie Fremantle.

The most interesting races were the two year old maiden races, which were won easily by Unex El Greco and Midnight Caller, giving a double on the day to trainer John Gosden and jockey William Buick. The wins were impressive and both colt and filly look to be good prospects.

Leicester Racecourse is not only an easy journey by car or horsebox from Newmarket, but it is also a simple 75 minute train ride from London St Pancras and ten minutes in a taxi from Leicester Railway Station.

Ayr - 26th August 2010

Ayr claims to be Scotland's premier racecourse and draws large crowds for its major races, including the Scottish Champion Hurdle and the Ayr Gold Cup. There was a small attendance on Scottish Publicans' Day, the day of my visit for a card of moderate flat racing.

The entrance to the racecourse for owners and trainers is through the Western House Hotel, which is owned by the racecourse and in its grounds. In the hotel dining room owners and trainers are provided with a magnificent buffet lunch including wine free of charge. It is the best facility for owners and trainers that I have seen on any racecourse. The quality of the food and service was exceptional.

Ayr does its own catering. The Roman Warrior Restaurant follows the pattern of the other Scottish racecourses in offering a pre-booked package of racecourse entry, three course lunch and afternoon tea, but it differs in that they charge £120 per head, compared with £65 per head at Musselburgh and Hamilton Park. The Ayr package includes a Bucks Fizz on arrival and house wine with the meal, but the differential of £55 seems a lot for that. The racecourse also has a Carvery and a Seafood Restaurant, but they were both closed on the day of my visit, so the only food available to a race-goer who was not an owner on the day or had pre-booked in the Roman Warrior Restaurant was a snack from the bar. The Champagne Bar was open, but as it only sells wine by the bottle and not by the glass it was not surprising that it had no customers.

The track is a flat one and a half mile oval and is famously fast. The best race of the day was the 7 furlong handicap, which was won in a blanket finish by last year's winner, Zomerlust, giving a double to jockey Tom Eaves and confirming the improvement in the form of trainer John Quinn.

At the racecourse I met Stephen Little, whom I mentioned in a previous report as having visited all the mainland racecourses by bicycle. He was at Ayr prior to taking the ferry with his bicycle from nearby Stranraer to Northern Ireland in order to complete a set of British racecourses by visiting Dundalk and Downpatrick. He suggested that I should join him on the ferry, a proposal that I resisted.

Ayr is the most awkward to get to of all the racecourses on my Tour of the flat racing Tracks. Not only is it a long way from where I live in London, but on none of its race-days is there a meeting on the day before or after at any of the relatively nearby racecourses which I could combine with it. So I had to visit Ayr as a day trip, flying from Heathrow to Glasgow, then by train from Paisley to Ayr. Ryanair flies between London Stansted and Prestwick, which is not far from Ayr, but the flight times are inconvenient and, anyway, I would rather use Charon's ferry service across the River Styx than fly on that airline.

The railway line between Paisley and Ayr passes alongside the Firth of Clyde, with fine views of the sea and a seemingly endless succession of links golf courses. The journey went smoothly until the return flight from Glasgow to Heathrow was delayed for two hours, followed by a taxi problem at Terminal 5 forcing me to return home very late by Underground.

Carlisle - 18th August 2010

Carlisle Racecourse has an attractive location high on the hill above the city of Carlisle, with a fine view from the grandstand across the city to the Cumbrian Fells. The racecourse is owned by Jockey Club Racecourses, who have invested in new facilities including a new grandstand, incorporating a restaurant, bars and boxes. Another building is under construction to provide new facilities for owners and trainers, which are needed as the present Owners and Trainers Bar is badly congested. It was nice to visit a racecourse which is thriving and expanding.

As a Jockey Club Racecourse the catering is managed by Compass. Swift's Restaurant offers a standard pre-booked package of an ordinary three course lunch, afternoon tea and racecourse entry for £60 on the day of my visit and, if not fully booked, accept walk-ins who can have three courses for £40 or two courses for £28. Silks Cafeteria offers a range of meat pies, ham carved to order and sausages. All these products are made by Cranstons, a local Cumbrian firm and the largest manufacturers of pork products in Britain. They are available at all the bars and restaurants on the racecourse; a nice local promotion. There is also an outdoor barbecue using the same products and a proper fish and chip shop, battering and frying to order. Brighton Racecourse could usefully copy it. Overall there is an excellent range of food and drink outlets, particularly for a small country racecourse catered by Jockey Club/Compass.

The track itself is undulating with a sharp right handed dogleg three furlongs from the winning post and a steep uphill finish. It seems to be an advantage to be drawn high. The quality of the racing was poor, which was not surprising as it was competing with Ebor Day at York and a more valuable card at Hamilton Park. Nevertheless there was a reasonable size crowd, possibly because it was promoted as Family Fun Day, with the usual attractions of face painting and bouncy castles. There were also some Cumbrian craft stalls, another good example of the racecourse linking itself to the local community.

I travelled to Carlisle from York via Newcastle. There is a direct railway service between Newcastle and Carlisle on an attractive route beside the upper reaches of the River Tyne and then across rolling hills through Cumbria. The views on the return journey in the evening sunshine were delightful.

I also had a good time on the final leg of the train journey from Newcastle back to York as I bumped into a hospitable group of eight Scotsmen making their annual visit to York Races. They had boarded the train at Aberdeen at 3 o'clock, so the party had already been going for three hours by the time I joined it at Newcastle, to be plied with Sancerre and cheese straws. One of the party, Mike, said that he based his punting decisions on listening to Tommo on the radio every morning without much success, a confession which caused the rest of us to question his judgment.

Nottingham - 13th August 2010

Even under the best conditions Nottingham is not an attractive racecourse. On this afternoon with a sparse crowd and rain setting in from the third race the atmosphere was pretty depressing.

Despite the weather, viewing the racing was fine as the track is a completely flat two mile oval and there was a good quality big screen. There was one decent quality race, the 10 furlong handicap worth £6000 to the winner, which had attracted runners from some big yards. There was a gamble on Sea of Galilee, trained by Henry Candy, which was backed down on course from 7/4 to 11/10, but could only finish third to Bahamian Music, trained by Richard Fahey. There was a nasty smell of burnt fingers. There was an even bigger surprise in the next race in which Godolphin's Forest Runner started at 1/4 and also finished third.

Nottingham Racecourse is owned by Jockey Club Racecourses and, therefore, the catering is managed by Compass and follows that company's formula. The Grandstand Restaurant, with a view of the track offers pre-booked packages of lunch, tea and racecourse entry for £62.50. A less formal meal was available in Frankie's Bistro, with chicken curry, fish pie or seafood salad, described as seafood tapas, for £9 to £11. I could not find out whether the name of this facility was an homage to Signor Dettori or a franchise from which he earns a royalty.

The racecourse is a fifteen minute taxi ride from Nottingham Railway Station, which is normally an easy train journey of less than two hours from London St Pancras. Unfortunately, for the second successive week, my journey was disrupted because vandals had stolen some trackside signal cables causing many trains to be cancelled and the rest congested and delayed. I eventually managed to arrive at the racecourse just before the first race. I suppose it serves me right for arranging to travel by train on Friday the Thirteenth.

Salisbury - 12th August 2010

Salisbury Racecourse is difficult to classify. It is a small country racecourse, which punches above its weight and stages some high grade racing, including the Group 3 Sovereign Stakes, which was the feature race on the day of my visit.

The racecourse is about five miles from the City of Salisbury and is closer to Wilton, but from the top of the grandstand there is a fine view of the famous spire of Salisbury Cathedral, framed by a gap in the trees. It is an attractive racecourse which manages to combine an air of elegance with a friendly atmosphere. As Brighton Racecourse reminded me of the novels of Graham Greene, Salisbury reminded me of those by Anthony Trollope.

For a midweek meeting at a small rural racecourse there was a large crowd, presumably attracted by the high class field for the Sovereign Stakes. Although the race was classified Group 3, six of the nine runners had previously raced at Group 1 level. Despite that, the race was won by Sea Lord, trained by Mark Johnston and ridden by Kieren Fallon, running in a Group Race for the first time. It was a brave front running performance, typical of horses from that yard and ridden by that jockey.

Salisbury is one of the few individual racecourses to do all its catering in-house. The Bibury Restaurant offers a full 3 course lunch, with a choice of hot roasts or cold seafood salads, plus afternoon tea for £40 per head, which seemed reasonable for the quality and location. The Bibury Bar, next to the Restaurant, has a cafeteria with a good selection of hot freshly made meat or fish pies, sausages and bacon as well as salads, ideal for race-goers who want a less formal meal. Unusually for a racecourse, there is a coffee bar near the parade ring providing a range of iced coffees and frappes as well as the more usual selection of hot espressos, cappuccinos and lattes.

The racecourse provides a complimentary bus service between Salisbury Railway Station and the racecourse, which I used and much appreciated. The only disadvantage is that, for some reason, the only journey from the Station is timed to reach the racecourse two hours before the first race, which is a long time to wait for the action to start. Nevertheless it was an enjoyable ride through the attractive, flower bedecked streets of Salisbury with occasional glimpses of the Cathedral.

Wolverhampton - 9th August 2010

Wolverhampton is a pure all weather racecourse built to the American pattern of an eight furlong left handed oval. It is one of three all weather tracks owned by Arena Leisure.

It is not a beautiful place with road access through a housing estate and past a car repair workshop. Once inside, however, everything is immaculately maintained, if a bit clinical. The cleanliness belies its description as the Black Country Racecourse. Entrance to the racecourse itself is through the reception of the on- course Holiday Inn Hotel.

Wolverhampton has made a great success of Saturday evening floodlit meetings, particularly in winter. It has a tiered panoramic restaurant called Horizons, which is almost always fully booked for those evenings. The crowd was small at the afternoon meeting which I attended as the racing was low quality.

Arena Leisure manage the catering themselves at all their courses and always provide a good range of food and drink outlets. For £26 per head The Horizons panoramic restaurant offered a 3 course lunch and tea at a table with its own television screen as well as an excellent view of the track, which is outstanding value. In the Premier Enclosure Bar, which has an upmarket look with a carpet and leather armchairs, light dishes can be ordered and brought by a waitress to one of the bar tables. Sandwiches and other snacks are available in the Grandstand Bar, which is also carpeted and has leather sofas some of which are arranged round a coal-effect fire. It was not lit on the warm afternoon of my visit, but it is apparently popular on winter evenings.

Of the last four races two were worth only £1365 to the winner and the other two £1706, yet in the four races there was a total of 57 runners, of which two had come from Ireland and three others had travelled over 150 miles to get there. It is hard to understand why owners and trainers are willing to travel and race their horses for so little. The most interesting race was the 6 furlong 2 year old maiden, which was won by Sadifiya, trained by Ed Dunlop, who narrowly beat Godolphin's Busker. They might both be decent prospects.

There was no big screen. Although the racecourse is compact enough for the whole race to be visible from the grandstand, the lack of a screen made judging the finish difficult as the viewing steps of the Grandstand Enclosure and of the Premier Enclosure are respectively several yards before and after the winning post. The only part of the grandstand in line with the finish is a narrow balcony accessible only to guests in the corporate boxes.

On the grandstand steps I met Adriano Sacilotto, a charming Italian from the beautiful island of Torcello in the Venetian Lagoon, of which I have many happy memories. We both backed Fitzolini in the 10 furlong handicap, for which he had been given a tip. Sadly It was bad advice, but we had an interesting discussion about the history and attractions of the Venetian Lagoon islands.

There is a fast direct train service between London Euston and Wolverhampton taking less than two hours and Wolverhampton Railway Station is a ten minute taxi ride from the racecourse. Unfortunately there is no special bus service.

Chepstow - 3rd August 2010

Chepstow is, with Ffos Las, one of the only two flat racing courses in Wales, but unlike Ffos Las it is only just into Wales across the River Severn. There was a meeting at Ffos Las on the same day, which seems inept race planning.

Chepstow Racecourse is in an attractive location among rolling hills with a backdrop of woods and the Severn Estuary. Unfortunately the view from the grandstand is ruined by three tiers of ugly advertising boards in clashing colours mounted on the opposite running rail either side of the winning post, almost as bad as at Brighton. An attractive feature is a footpath between the pre-paddock and the grandstand cut into the slope like a cliff path and landscaped with flowering shrubs.

The track is one of the few with a straight mile with deep undulations where the horses disappear completely from sight. This makes viewing the race very difficult, particularly as there is no big screen, typical of a racecourse owned by Northern Racing which seems to have a policy of not providing them.

The racing was low quality with total prize money for seven races of only £29300. The only performance to show much promise for the future came from Kalks Bay, trained by William Haggas, who won the 7 furlong 2 year old maiden. Richard Hughes, fresh from his record nine winners at Glorious Goodwood last week, had six rides without one winner, a good example of how racing can raise people up at one moment and let them down at the next.

The caterers are Lindleys, with a limited offer of standard sandwiches or fast foods available in the bars. There is also a Silks Restaurant, a Northern Racing brand, which offers a package of a 3 course meal and racecourse entry for £70 at a table by the windows overlooking the track or £60 at a table further in. These packages normally have to be pre-booked but they accept walk-ins on quiet days like this one. In the restaurant and up the staircase leading to it there are several large mirrors mounted inside carved gilt frames, which look as if they came from a dispersal of portraits from a stately home. I am not sufficiently knowledgeable about carved frames to tell whether they are originals or reproductions, but they are good enough to prompt the question.

Travelling by train to Chepstow Racecourse is normally straight forward, with trains from London Paddington to Chepstow, including a change at Newport, taking just over two hours. Chepstow Railway Station is a ten minute taxi ride to the racecourse. Unfortunately my journey home suffered from signal damage by vandals near Reading, causing cancelled and slow running trains returning me to Paddington an hour late.

Goodwood - 30th July 2010

Goodwood is the most beautiful racecourse in Britain. Set on top of the South Downs, through which the track winds, providing a magnificent view from the stands. There is another fine view from the back of the stands over the Solent Estuary to the Isle of Wight. Its exposed location makes the racecourse vulnerable to bad weather. Occasionally racing has had to be abandoned because of a sea fret destroying visibility, but this was not a problem on the lovely day of my visit when the racecourse looked its best.

Goodwood Racecourse forms part of the estate of the Duke of Richmond and was created by one of his ancestors more than 200 years ago. It is now run by the Duke's heir, Lord March, who aims to stamp it with an appropriate aristocratic style, particularly in the Richmond Enclosure where military bands play and strawberries and cream are offered free of charge. The stylish atmosphere is let down by the men's and women's lavatories, which are tatty and badly in need of refurbishment. It is surprising that the racecourse management, which gives so much priority to appearance, should have neglected a facility which every race-goer visits at least once during the day.

The parade ring behind the stands is cleverly landscaped into the contours of the site to provide several levels of viewing without being obtrusive. Goodwood is one of the few racecourses where the horses parade anti-clockwise. This is said to be for safety reasons as it avoids the risk of the groom leading the horse or the trainer legging up the jockey being crushed against the rail by a misbehaving animal. If that is the case it is surprising that it has not been adopted at other racecourses. As far as I am aware Windsor is the only other course to do it. The Goodwood parade ring has a commentator providing form and condition information about the horses as they go round the ring. This is an excellent innovation which could usefully be adopted at other racecourses.

Goodwood's main meeting takes place over five days at the end of July and has become a major event of the horseracing and social seasons. It used to be called the July Meeting, but is now better known as Glorious Goodwood, a name which Lord March professes to dislike. It particularly attracts the bourgeoisie of the Southern Home Counties, who do not patronise the restaurants as they prefer to picnic as they do when they go to the opera at Glyndebourne or The Grange. Goodwood benefitted from the temporary closure and rebuilding of Ascot Racecourse as many people who used to make an annual pilgrimage to the Royal Meeting and were unhappy at the changes switched to Glorious Goodwood for their annual social and sporting outing.

The racing is top class, second only to Royal Ascot in quality, and comparable to York's August Meeting. I went on Friday, the fourth day, when the feature races were the Group 2 Richmond Stakes for 2 year old colts and the very valuable Totesport Mile handicap. The Richmond Stakes was won comfortably by Libranno, trained by Richard Hannon and ridden by Richard Hughes, giving them a clean sweep of the three Group races for 2 year olds at the meeting. The Totesport Mile featured a fine front running ride by Royston French on Sea Lord, ironically beating Frankie Dettori on Invisible Man as Sea Lord is normally his ride.

None of this comes cheap. A day badge for the Richmond Enclosure costs between £67 and £77, depending on the day of the week. A race-goer who is not an annual member or an owner on the day and who wants a haven to sit and have a drink and something to eat has no real alternative to paying a further £50 for entry to the Oak Tree Club, a temporary pavilion beside the parade ring. That price does not include the sandwiches which are the only food on offer at lunchtime. When the Oak Tree Club was created about five years ago the entry price was £15 and there was a nice buffet. Since then the quality on offer has declined as the price has risen. Goodwood is also one of the few racecourse which charges for car parking. The total cost of a day's racing at Glorious Goodwood is steep, higher than at any other race meeting, with the possible exception of Ascot's Royal Meeting. It can be justified, however, by the fact that so many people are prepared to pay it. I just hope that the racecourse does not increase the cost to the point that they kill the goose that lays such a golden egg.

The racecourse caterers are Compass and the prices in the restaurants take their cue from the racecourse entry prices with careful market segmentation. The Charlton Hunt and Double Trigger Restaurants are aimed at corporate parties. The Charlton Hunt is the most expensive charging £270 per head for lunch and tea, including champagne and wine. The Double Trigger offers the same menu as a buffet, but the price of £270 includes racecourse entry, worth an average of £70. The main restaurant for people who are paying their own bill is the Old Paddock Restaurant, which charges £97 per head for a 3 course meal with all drinks extra.

The nearest railway station to Goodwood is Chichester, about five miles away, with a direct but slow service from London Victoria. There is a special bus service from the railway station to the racecourse,

which I took. I had to take a taxi back to Chichester railway station as the first shuttle bus was leaving too late for me to catch my train back to London. Although there are several taxi firms in Chichester only one is allowed to pick up passengers at the entrance to the Richmond Enclosure, a concession which is presumably another profitable revenue stream for the racecourse.

Overall the quality of the racing and the beauty of the location make a day at Glorious Goodwood most enjoyable, if slightly tainted by an overriding impression of financial greed.

July Course Newmarket - 8th July 2010

Newmarket has two racecourses under one management: The Rowley Mile, which holds meetings in Spring and Autumn and The July Course, which holds meetings in Summer. The Rowley Mile, which I visited and reported on in May, is the serious headquarters of British horseracing, whereas The July Course is more relaxed with a holiday atmosphere. There are gaily planted flower beds round the parade ring and winners enclosure creating a festive look. It rivals Ripon as the Garden Racecourse.

The grandstand, weighing room and winner's enclosure are built of wood and have an old fashioned rustic appearance. As at The Rowley Mile there is no circuit and the horses run straight towards the stands. There is a head on stand facing down the track. The pre paddock is delightful, totally shaded by trees, with the horses walking round as if in an enchanted forest

Many regular Newmarket race-goers have told me that they prefer The July Course to The Rowley Mile, perhaps because its old fashioned appearance reminds them nostalgically of horseracing as it used to be. I do not share that view as nothing can match the sense of occasion experienced at The Rowley Mile.

The July Course is compact. On busy days it can become badly congested, making it difficult to circulate. Movement between the parade ring and the grandstand is impeded by bottlenecks either side of the head on stand. The rails bookmakers are positioned a long way down the track. A punter who wants to place a bet with them having viewed the horses in the parade ring has a long hike having fought his way through the congestion. Apparently the bookmakers are placed so far away in order to leave clear a large area in front of the stage used for pop concerts after racing. I hope that this does not indicate the relative priority attached by the racecourse management to the two activities.

The main meeting at the racecourse is known as The July Meeting and is a major festival of the high summer horseracing season. I attended the middle day of the three day meeting, which happened to be Ladies Day, although, following my bad experience on Ladies Day at Epsom, I had intended to avoid Ladies Days in future. Although the racecourse was over congested the experience at Newmarket was much better than at Epsom because the Newmarket management do not allow any food or drink to be taken on to the stands or the lawn in front of them. It is interesting that Newmarket manages to control that, unlike Epsom, Sandown and Kempton, which are also owned by Jockey Club Racecourses. It should be a rule at all racecourses.

The July Course has a very good range of places to eat and drink, much better than at the other racecourses owned by the Jockey Club that I have visited so far. The top restaurant is the Summer House, which offers packages including racecourse admission at prices ranging from £75 up; expensive but not outrageous for the location. Mozart's Restaurant is more casual and has an a la carte menu allowing the diner to have one, two or three courses. Stravinsky's Restaurant has a range of pastas, salads and sandwiches at lower prices. All three restaurants are seated with full service. On this,

admittedly busy, day the Summer House was sold out and there were queues for Mozart's and Stravinsky's.

The racing was high quality, including two Group 2 races, one Group 3, a Heritage handicap and a competitive Conditions Stakes. The Group 2 Princess of Wales's Stakes had a surprise result with the eclipse of Spanish Moon, the obvious form horse. The race was won by Sans Frontieres, who had finished fourth in the Hardwicke Stakes (Gr 2) at Royal Ascot, giving a boost to the form of Harbinger, who won that race. The other Group 2 race, the July Stakes for two year olds, produced an even bigger shock with the defeat of Elzaam, who had been narrowly beaten in the Coventry Stakes at the Royal Meeting and started at odds of 4/7. The form of the Coventry was further knocked when Roayh, who was third in that race, was another beaten favourite in the Conditions Stakes.

Travel to the July Course by train from London is easy, with fast services from Kings Cross to Cambridge and a connecting service to Newmarket Railway Station. There is a special bus service between the railway station and the racecourse.

Catterick Bridge – 30th June 2010

Catterick Bridge is a minor racecourse attracting racegoers from North Yorkshire and County Durham. Surprisingly it does not accept the ROA/RCA Passcard at any of its meetings. As far as I am aware, it is the only racecourse in Britain never to do so. It seems a shortsighted policy, as any gate receipts from racegoers with a Passcard must be minimal and the message it sends about the attitude of the racecourse to owners is terrible.

The track is so tight that the 6 furlong start is opposite the stands, but on the far side of the racecourse. The racing was all low grade. The best race, the 6 furlong Handicap, was won by Gap Princess, trained by Geoff Harker. It was the third horse trained by him that I had seen win in the last three days. Before then he had not saddled a winner for a long time. It shows that it can pay to follow a trainer who strikes form after a lean period. There was a mobile "large" screen, but smaller than usual, so it barely justified the description

The racecourse buildings are basic, with little sign of any recent investment. The caterers are CGC, who make the best of the space available. As at the other courses that they handle they offer a range of sandwiches and hot beef and pork rolls as well as a full service restaurant. In the restaurant each dish is priced separately to allow diners to have a single course or a full three course meal. This is a system which could usefully be adopted by caterers at other racecourses.

I went by train from Edinburgh to Darlington, which is 15 miles from Catterick Bridge and is the nearest railway station to the racecourse. There is a scheduled bus service from Darlington to Catterick at a convenient time to arrive before the first race. Unfortunately the promised bus failed to turn up. There was a group of 5 elderly men also waiting for the bus to go to the races and we eventually agreed to hire a minibus together, which got us to Catterick just before the first race. I had the unusual experience of being the youngest member of the party. After that experience I decided not to risk taking the bus back to Darlington to catch my train back to London, but took a taxi instead.

Hamilton Park – 29th June 2010

Hamilton Park is an unusually attractive racecourse, which comes as a surprise situated in a suburb of Glasgow and close to Motherwell. It is in a former park owned by the Dukes of Hamilton, which

included the site of the family mausoleum. The whole racecourse is surrounded by mature trees, including the Parade Ring.

The Grandstand is an interesting building. It was built as a racecourse grandstand in 1927, but from the back it looks like a country house, with a dovecote (obscured by an ugly Tote advertisement), a tall clock tower, architraves and several flag poles, all equipped with fluttering flags. The racetrack side is a contrast in an attractive modern design with glass fronted bars and restaurants overlooking the track. The other buildings are well designed around the Parade Ring, including new state of the art saddling boxes.

Everything looked impeccably maintained and clean. There were staff picking up any litter. The jockeys said that the track was also in excellent condition. It was overall a credit to the management and ground staff. The track is undulating with a steep downhill start to the sprint races and a very steep uphill finish.

The racing was low grade with all the races rated Class 5 or 6. As at Musselburgh the previous evening, the main feature was the riding of Paul Hanagan, who rode another treble, making it eight winners in 24 hours. I had the added interest of my part owned filly, Cat o'Nine Tails, running in the mile and a half Handicap. She finished a close up fourth, having led for much of the race. I fear that she is too high in the handicap.

The catering at Hamilton Park is done by the Scottish subsidiary of Sodexo. The main restaurant is on the top floor of the grandstand and overlooks the track. It is only available to pre booked customers at a price of £65 per head, including admission to the racecourse, which seems to be a local standard offer. The 3 course menu is fine, but there are no choices and the wines offered, which are not included in the price, are at London restaurant prices.

Owners and trainers are particularly well looked after with free meals in their own restaurant. For other race-goers, however, there seemed to be a lack of something less than a 3 course meal and better than a burger from a van. On this day this gap in the catering offer could be filled by grazing the stalls from the Hamilton Farmers Market, as this was designated Hamilton Farmers Market Day, with stalls on the racecourse offering an enticing range of home grown and/or cooked food to eat there or take away. This could provide an ideal light racecourse meal and is an idea that could usefully be adopted by other racecourses, if they could overcome any contractual issues with their main caterers.

The nearest railway station is Hamilton West on a commuter line from Glasgow, but the racecourse is more easily reached from Edinburgh and places further South by trains to Motherwell Station, which is on the main East Coast Line and which I used to travel to and from Edinburgh. Unlike Musselburgh, Hamilton Park Racecourse does not provide a courtesy bus service from either station. There is in fact a commercial bus service, (Number 255), between Motherwell Station and a stop immediately outside the entrance to the racecourse, which I used to travel back to the railway station. There is no information about it on the racecourse website, which, at least, should have a link to the bus timetable. I got the impression that race-goers by public transport are a low priority for the racecourse management, but I am sure that more could be attracted by better information and, if possible, a dedicated bus service.

Musselburgh – 28th June 2010

Musselburgh Racecourse is about 8 miles East of Edinburgh on the Firth of Forth and close to the sea. Apparently it is the lowest lying racecourse in Britain. In summer it holds several Monday evening meetings, which provide the same opportunity of an evening out for the people of Edinburgh as the Monday evening meetings at Windsor Racecourse do for the people of London. Sadly the festive spirit of a social evening was dampened by the dismal weather. The rain started as I arrived at the course and continued throughout the evening.

Musselburgh is not a beautiful racecourse. The track is a flat and featureless 15 furlong oval. It is all visible from the stands and on a murky evening the viewing was helped by a mobile large screen. This is organised by Scottish Racing and is used by all the Scottish racecourses.

The racing itself was low grade. The most interesting race was the 2 year old maiden, won by Alben Star first time out, The short priced favourite, Miss Mediator, was balked in her run and finished third, which must have been a disappointment to her owner, who made a spectacular arrival at the racecourse by helicopter. Paul Hanagan rode a treble which put him four wins ahead of the suspended Ryan Moore in the Jockeys' Championship. It would be a great achievement if he could become the first Northern based Champion Jockey since Kevin Darley.

There are a number of places to eat and drink at the racecourse. The Epperston Restaurant is at the top of the Grandstand with a view of the track and offers packages of a meal and admission to the racecourse at a price, on Monday evening, of £65 per head. It was mainly occupied by corporate parties. The ground floor of The Queens Stand, which is normally used as the Owners and Trainers Bar was taken by another corporate group. I was surprised at how well the corporate entertaining market is holding up in these doom ridden, deficit reduction times. Perhaps the miasma of gloom has not yet reached Scotland. There is also a more casual restaurant, The Bistro, serving a good selection of hot and cold dishes at reasonable prices. I was pleased to see a champagne bar offering it by the glass, but less pleased when I discovered that it was a tiny plastic glass at a price of £7, which is exorbitant when compared with York at £5.25 or Doncaster at £5.00.

I travelled to Musselburgh Racecourse by train from London to Edinburgh, followed by a 13 minute commuter train to Wallyford and a courtesy bus for the short journey to the racecourse. A number of racecourses now provide courtesy buses from the nearest railway station and they are very welcome. I am sure that they must attract some people to go racing who would not go otherwise.

Windsor - 26th June 2010

Windsor is an attractive racecourse. It is situated on the promontory of a bend in the River Thames, giving the impression of being surrounded on all sides by water. The Parade Ring is particularly beautiful with mature trees providing shade for the horses and their connections.

The track is a curious figure of eight with the finish straight towards the stands. This can make viewing difficult with the naked eye, particularly at summer evening meetings, when the horses emerge in front of a setting sun. The racecourse is, however, generously equipped with three large screens: one facing the stands, one facing the hospitality boxes which are after the winning post and one near the Parade Ring behind the stands to provide viewing for those picnicking on the lawn. The sprint course has a sharp dogleg to the left. Concern has been expressed that a horse drawn wide that fails to handle the bend might run straight into the river, but I am not aware that it has ever happened.

Windsor Racecourse is well known for its summer Monday evening meetings, which attract large attendances many of whom picnic on the lawn behind the stands in a relaxed atmosphere. The meeting I attended was on a Saturday afternoon, which also had a large crowd and a festive mood. A bookmaker told me that afternoon meetings are better for him as most of the race-goers come to the front of the stands to watch the races and have a bet. The evening meetings are more a social event and most stay on the lawn and watch the racing on the large screen provided there.

The racing itself was reasonable quality although there were stronger cards on that day at both Newmarket and Newcastle, including The Northumberland Plate. There was a Listed mile race won by The Rectifier, trained by Stef Higgins, which seems to be an improving colt and a valuable 6 furlong handicap, won by Parisian Pyramid.

Windsor Racecourse is owned by Arena Leisure, which has its own catering operation. Arena seems to have found the formula to provide a range of outlets offering the food and drink that different race-goers want. By the standard of Southern racecourses their prices are reasonable. At Windsor the outlets range from a full service Restaurant and an outdoor Seafood Brasserie, with umbrellas to provide shade, to a number of vans arranged as a food court on the lawn behind the stands. The range of offers from these vans is more upmarket than usual and includes a champagne bar offering by the glass. It also seems less sleazy than the food courts at other racecourses because there are plenty of tables and chairs and staff to clear the empties. I was pleased to see Ian Renton, Racing Director of Arena Leisure, spending his Saturday afternoon walking around the racecourse and casting his beady eye on everything.

There is a direct train service from London Waterloo to Windsor and Eton Riverside which, conveniently for me, calls at Putney. The transfer between the railway station and the racecourse is most enjoyable by a shuttle riverboat service from the embankment near the railway station to a dedicated jetty at the racecourse. On a nice day it is a delightful 15 minute journey and the atmosphere on board is jolly as at the racecourse. The return journey provides a spectacular view of Windsor Castle, which seems to overhang the river.

Royal Ascot - June 2010

The Royal Meeting at Ascot is a completely unique event in the racing calendar. It is as different from other race meetings at Ascot as from meetings at other courses. It is at least as much a social occasion as a race meeting and it is still a centrepiece of what used to be called the Social Season. Morning dress with a top hat for men and the smartest clothes with a hat for women are required to enter the Royal Enclosure, but it is not just an occasion for the privileged few. Royal Ascot attracts a wide variety of people to the Grandstand and Silver Ring and nearly all make an effort to dress smartly. The opportunity to dress up is a big part of the attraction of the meeting, if only to the women.

Although many people attend the Royal Meeting in order to dress up or to see The Queen, it consists of five days of the highest quality horse racing and forms the apex of the British flat racing season. Owners and trainers want to win a race there more than at any other meeting and all the horses are trained and groomed to look and be at their best. There are no horses which "will come on for the run". The prestige of Royal Ascot draws runners from Australia, South Africa and USA, as well as from all the European racing countries.

The whole Royal Meeting was a triumph for Highclere Thoroughbred Racing. Wins by the 2 year olds Approve in the Group2 Norfolk Stakes and by Memory in the Group3 Albany Stakes were capped by

the romp to victory of Harbinger in the Group 2 Hardwicke Stakes. Theology was beaten by the narrowest margin in The Queen's Vase and Martyr ran an excellent race to finish 3rd in a very competitive Duke of Edinburgh Stakes.

Ascot Racecourse was completely rebuilt five years ago at a cost of £200 million. The new Grandstand and Parade Ring have been the subject of much criticism, mostly from people comparing it unfavourably with what was there before. I think that is no longer appropriate. It should be judged by how well it performs its purpose now by comparison with other top level racecourses.

The new Grandstand was designed by an international firm of architects, who appear to have based their thinking on the major racecourses in Australia and USA, where race-goers watch the races from seats in which they stay all day. In this country most race-goers like to wander around, meet their friends, view the horses in the pre-paddock or parade ring, go to the bookmakers to have a bet and then watch the race standing on steppings. The opportunity to walk around and meet friends is particularly important at the Royal Meeting. Circulation is inhibited by the different enclosures being separated vertically with the Grandstand/Standard Enclosure on the ground floor and the Royal/Premier Enclosure on the fourth floor. This arrangement has never worked successfully in this country, although it has been adopted in the new stand at Doncaster.

The exterior of the grandstand is strikingly designed. I personally find it exciting and attractive, but it may be too modern for more traditional tastes. The interior is less successful. The ground floor concourse was presumably intended to be a circulation space where both Grandstand and Royal/Premier Enclosure race-goers would mingle. Unfortunately it does not work like that. The space is broken up by banks of escalators which turn it into a narrow corridor with bottlenecks on both sides of the base of each escalator.

The parade ring is behind the Grandstand and is in the form of a sunken Greek or Roman theatre, which should be ideal for viewing of the horses. Unfortunately, on busy days, as at the Royal Meeting, access to the steps below is blocked by the crowd gathered at the top. In order to create room for the parade ring the new Grandstand was built further infield. This made it necessary to build a new finishing straight while retaining the existing round section of the track. The new straight track has more effective drainage than the old track and the going there is often firmer. Horses racing on the round course have to go from a softer surface to a firmer one during the race, which is far from ideal.

The Grandstand has plenty of places to eat and drink, ranging from full service restaurants to bars with a selection of platters and sandwiches at prices that seem reasonable for the location and occasion. The peak of the gastronomic facilities, in both senses as it is on the sixth floor, is the Panoramic Restaurant. This offers a package consisting of lunch and tea, including canapés and wines for £900 per head on the Wednesday of my visit, increased to an astonishing £1,400 per head on the following day, Ladies Day. I find it hard to understand who is prepared to pay those prices, but it seemed to be well patronised with only a few empty tables. The restaurant is run by Michel Roux's Waterside Inn at Bray, so I have no doubt that the cooking and the service will have been impeccable, but the wines provided were an ordinary Australian Chardonnay and Shiraz. For those prices I would expect first growth white Burgundy and red Bordeaux.

There is a direct service to Ascot railway station from London Waterloo and extra trains are put on during the Royal Meeting. There is an uphill footpath from the station with a branch which passes under the main road and emerges in the racecourse ticket office. The ticket office closes before the end of racing and there is, therefore, no access to the underpass for train passengers leaving after racing

who have to join the crowds trying to cross the road by the badly congested police controlled crossings or temporary pedestrian footbridges. It must make sense to relieve some of that congestion by allowing access to the underpass.

The situation is made worse because the police direct rail passengers for London away from the footpath to the station and round by Station Road, which adds considerably to the length of the walk at the end of what for many race-goers will have been a tiring day. Most of the women were struggling barefoot, carrying their shoes, providing a profit opportunity for the roadside vendors of flip-flops at inflated prices. By the time the straggling line of race-goers reached the railway station we looked like the retreat from Mons. This will deter some from using the train to go to Royal Ascot, which is a pity as it must be in the interest of the racecourse and the residents of Ascot, as well as the environment, for more people to go there by train rather than by car.

Epsom Downs - 4th June 2010

The two day Investec Derby Festival is one of the most important meetings of the flat race season, with the Oaks and Coronation Cup on Friday and The Derby on Saturday. I decided to go to Oaks Day as it had overall a better card including two Group 1s, one Group2 and a Listed Race, whereas, apart from the great race itself, the rest of the card on Derby Day is modest.

Another reason for choosing Oaks Day is that on Derby Day it is mandatory to wear morning dress in the Queen's Stand, which is Epsom's name for the Premier Enclosure. As I am committed to travelling by public transport, I did not fancy going on the train and racecourse bus in a tailcoat and top hat. I think that the requirement to wear morning dress for The Derby is now an anachronism. It is not the same as at Royal Ascot, where dressing up is an essential part of the character of the event. Derby Day is traditionally a popular occasion for Londoners. Its essential character is in the infield, with the funfair, gipsy fortune tellers and open topped buses. The people in penguin suits are the anomaly, preserving an outdated class distinction.

Epsom Downs Racecourse is served by no less than three railway stations: Epsom Downs, Tattenham Corner and Epsom, which is in the centre of the town. I went to Epsom Station and then used the efficient shuttle bus to and from the racecourse.

If someone was to set out to design a racecourse to stage the premier Classic races for 3 year old colts and fillies I doubt that it would resemble Epsom Downs. The track starts with a steep uphill, followed by a sharp left handed bend at the highest point, then a steep downhill to Tattenham Corner, which is another sharp left handed bend into the straight, which itself has a marked camber towards the inside running rail. The Oaks and Derby are always rough races and produce a host of hard luck stories.

Many racing people justify the peculiarities of the track by claiming that it is the ultimate test of a racehorse. That may be true if the objective is to identify the future stallion or broodmare which will impart the most toughness to its progeny. If, however, the objective is to identify the best staying colt and filly of their generation, a less idiosyncratic and fairer track might be more suitable. It is the old question of whether the purpose of horseracing is to generate future stallions and mares from which to breed or whether the bloodstock business exists to produce horses to race.

The Queen's Stand is a fine looking modern building with a lawn in front which slopes steeply down to the track and gives a fine view across the Downs. Private boxes and dining rooms occupy a large part of the stand, which leaves relatively little space for steppings from which to view the racing. This proved a particular problem on Friday as Oaks Day has been renamed Ladies Day. Large areas of the lawn and steppings were occupied by groups of young women lying or sitting with their food and drink, making it almost impossible to circulate. As far as I could see few of them got to their feet to watch the races, let alone to look at the horses in the parade ring.

The racing itself lived up to the quality of the card. The Oaks was won by Snow Fairy, who was nearly last into the straight and was threaded miraculously through the field by Ryan Moore. She is yet another example of her trainer Ed Dunlop's skill with fillies. In The Coronation Cup Fame and Glory showed how unlucky he was to be a contemporary of Sea The Stars. Without that horse Fame and Glory would last year have been hailed as an outstanding 3 year old. Sariska was beaten less than 2 lengths, losing nothing in defeat. Indeed her trainer agreed after the race that it was probably the best performance of her career. Kieren Fallon demonstrated that he is still the master of the Epsom track with two excellent rides to win on Tartan Gigha and Fiery Lad.

This was the 17th racecourse visit in my Tour of the Tracks and the first that I did not enjoy. The weather was glorious, the racing was magnificent and the view across the Downs was delightful, but the whole experience was ruined by the groups of drinkers obstructing movement by lying on the grass and blocking access to the stand by sitting on the lower steps, surrounded by their detritus of glasses, empty champagne bottles, Pimms jugs, beer cans and pizza boxes. From now on I will try to avoid going racing on Ladies Days and hope that they do not become the template for racing in future.

Ffos Las - 26th May 2010

Ffos Las Racecourse is deep into South West Wales and a long way from London. The train journey from Paddington to Llanelli takes 3.5 hours and the racecourse provides a courtesy bus service for the 15 minute journey between the railway station and the track.

It is even further by horsebox from the training yards at Newmarket or Middleham. No less than 16 of the 36 horses running had travelled more than 200 miles to get there. It must be an easier journey for some horses trained in Ireland, although there were none on this day.

The most impressive performance was produced by Kingsgate Choice in the 5 furlong handicap, who had come all the way from John Best's yard in Kent. He might be a successor to Kingsgate Native, whom John used to train. Mark Johnston had 4 runners, all ridden by Joe Fanning. Their day started badly as the first was tailed off and the second refused to enter the stalls, but the other two won, so the Johnston team will have returned to Middleham reasonably content.

Ffos Las is Britain's newest racecourse and was built in a remarkably short time on the site of a former open cast coal mine. It represents a fine achievement by its developer and moving spirit, Dai Walters, particularly compared with the saga of Great Leighs. As I walked about the racecourse I could not help thinking about the late Mel Davies, a former ROA Council Member and a fervent Welshman, who had ardently promoted the creation of a new racecourse in West Wales. Although he did not develop it himself, Ffos Las is a tribute to his ambition.

It still has some signs of a work in progress, but the essential elements are in place. The track itself was praised by the trainers and jockeys to whom I spoke and the parade ring is particularly impressive. The racecourse has one enclosure, with no distinction between Members and others.

It is managed by Northern Racing and it, therefore, came as no surprise that there was no big screen. That is less of a problem here than at their other racecourses as the whole track is level and readily visible from the grandstand, with an attractive background of the Pembrey Hills

It was nice to meet up again with Mark Kershaw, who had been so successful as Chief Executive of Newbury Racecourse and has been a consultant to Ffos Las from the start of the project. It was shrewd of Dai Walters to appoint him.

The caterers are Lindley Catering. The Bridles Restaurant is in the grandstand with a balcony overlooking the track. It offers a decent 3 course meal for £65, which includes admission to the racecourse. The Owners and Trainers Bar has its own restaurant with a simpler a la carte menu. As at too many racecourses there is nothing available between those restaurants and fast food from a van or a bar. It was not possible to buy a sandwich anywhere on the racecourse. The Owners and Trainers Restaurant, however, willingly served me a plate of "Welsh" cheese and biscuits, which was an acceptable alternative.

Brighton - 18th May 2010

Brighton Racecourse had a reputation between the Wars and immediately after the Second World War of being a centre of gang warfare and criminal activity, immortalised in Graham Greene's novel, Brighton Rock. The racecourse still has a seductive atmosphere of dodgy practices.

It is located on the downs high above the town with views over part of the town and out to sea. The best place from which to watch the racing and to admire the view is a terrace at the top of the grandstand next to the Premier Enclosure Bar. On a cold or windy day it would be bleak, but on a nice day, which this was, the view is magnificent. Indeed enjoyment of a day's racing at Brighton depends on the weather as it is very exposed and sometimes is covered by sea fret.

At ground level the view across the track is completely obscured by a 10 feet high tier of hideous advertising hoardings in a variety of clashing colours along the inside running rail either side of the winning post. Presumably they generate some revenue for the racecourse, but I would be surprised if it is enough to compensate for the bad impression given to race-goers and likely effect on future gate receipts.

The track itself is very like Epsom, with a steep downhill run at the far end of the course into a sharp left handed bend, like Tattenham Corner. The uphill finish is steeper than at Epsom, but does not have the same camber towards the inside running rail. Brighton Racecourse is operated by Northern Racing and unusually for a racecourse run by that company there was a lorry mounted big screen. Unfortunately it gave such a poor and distorted picture that it was almost useless.

The caterers are Hardings Bar and Catering. There is a Silks Restaurant, which is a franchise owned by Northern Racing and offers a 3 course meal for £40, which is expensive for the quality of food and location. Brighton Racecourse used to be famous for its freshly cooked fish and chips. Fish and chips were offered by the menu in the Owners and Trainers Bar, but they were a travesty of the traditional dish. They had obviously been battered before freezing and supply to the racecourse. The batter had the texture of shoe leather enclosing a thin mush of some indeterminate fish.

The racing was low grade with total prize money for 6 races of only £23400. The Highclere and Thurloe Thoroughbred syndicates each had a runner in different races. Both were trained by Ed Dunlop and ridden by George Baker, so the two groups of connections joined up with competitive bantering between them. Unfortunately Thurloe did better on this occasion, as their horse Frequency was second in his race, whereas Decency, a Highclere filly in which I have a share, was unplaced. My disappointment was reduced by the win in the 6 furlong maiden by Imperial Delight, owned by my good friend Tony Solomons.

Brighton has excellent access from London with frequent fast trains from London Victoria. There is a well patronised courtesy bus service between the railway station and the racecourse, making the total public transport journey remarkably easy. I travelled back to London on the bus and train with James Reppard, who runs the syndicate which owns Dutiful, who was a close second in the same race as Decency. We found that we have a shared enthusiasm for theatre and opera as well as for horse racing, so our conversation on the journey to Clapham Junction was wide ranging.

Bath - 17th May 2010

Bath Racecourse is on the Downs North of the City. It is the highest racecourse in Britain with attractive distant views and the feel of a genuine country course. A consequence of its height is that the water pressure is insufficient to allow a track watering system. As a result the going in summer is almost always firm. There were 7 horses withdrawn on the day I was there. The viewing for spectators is poor. There is no big screen, which is particularly missed as at the far end of the track the horses disappear from view from the stands. The winning post is beyond the grandstand and without a screen it is impossible to judge a close finish. The lack of a big screen came as no surprise as Bath Racecourse is owned by Northern Racing, who appear to have a policy of not having them.

Catering is provided by Lindley Caterers and they have two restaurants franchised as Silks and Greens, which both offer an ordinary 3 course meal for £40, which is steep for the quality. The racing itself was low grade with all 7 races Class 5 or 6. The location of the course close to Lambourn and Marlborough evidently makes it attractive to trainers from those areas, many of whose leading representatives were present. It is less of a draw to race-goers, other than those living locally. To adapt the language of the Michelin travel guides, Bath Racecourse may justify a detour but is not worth a journey.

Bath Spa railway station has a direct fast service from London Paddington and there is an efficient special bus service, provided by the First Bus Company between the railway station and the racecourse. It was a pleasure to sit on the top deck and admire the Georgian architecture of this beautiful city as the bus wound its way up the hill to the racecourse.

On the way back to the railway station I sat in the bus next to Stephen Little, the well known former bookmaker. He has visited all the racecourses by bicycle, which puts into perspective my efforts by public transport. Last year Stephen cycled to Ffos Las in order to maintain his complete set.

Newbury - 15th May 2010

Newbury racecourse consistently provides high class racing. Most of its meetings are on a Friday and the following Saturday, which must make them the envy of other racecourses. They stage the more popular and high profile races on Saturdays and a high proportion of maiden races on Fridays, appealing to the specialist race-goer. The course has an upmarket atmosphere, a little like Goodwood, catering for the comfortable residents of the Home Counties.

The feature race this Saturday was the Lockinge Stakes, a Group One race over a mile, which was won comfortably by Paco Boy and generated an endearing display of emotion from his trainer, Richard Hannon. Paco Boy is certainly a great tribute to his training skills. For me, almost as impressive was the win by Green Moon, trained by Harry Dunlop, in The London Gold Cup, in which he beat Monterosso, whom I had seen win at Ripon. The youngest Mr Dunlop looks to have a very promising horse in his yard.

Catering at Newbury is done by one of the two giant firms and, as elsewhere in the South of England, the prices are high relative to the standard of food and drink provided. An attempt has been made to provide variety, with a Greens Brasserie in the main Berkshire Stand and a seafood bar in the older Hampshire Stand. This bar is where many of the trainers and their regular owners congregate, as they seem to prefer it to the Owners and Trainers Bar next to the racecourse entrance.

As a member of Highclere Thoroughbred Racing syndicates I am lucky to be able to use the Highclere box, which overlooks the finish line and is available to members of all the Highclere syndicates for flat racing days at Newbury. Sandwiches and wine are provided without charge, so I did not have to suffer the poor value of the racecourse bars and restaurants.

Newbury is, as far as I am aware, the only racecourse in Britain, which has a railway station that exists solely to provide access to the racecourse. Trains only stop there on days when racing takes place. Because of the station travelling by train from London Paddington is extremely easy, with the usual camaraderie of race-going travellers. I travelled to Newbury with Henry, whom I first met on a train to a race meeting, and with whom I have enjoyed many subsequent journeys. Henry is only interested in Group races, but about those he is very knowledgeable and a fearless punter.

York - 13th May 2010

York is undoubtedly the premier flat racecourse in the North of England and can lay claim to being the premier flat racecourse in the whole country. Indeed some Yorkshire racing people describe Ascot as “the York of the South”.

The racecourse has a progressive policy of investing in its facilities to improve the experience of owners and race-goers. Unlike Ascot, it achieves this without changing the character and slightly traditional atmosphere. Every time I go to York Racecourse it seems the same, only better. One place that does not change is the area under the oak tree between the pre-paddock and the parade ring, which is the gathering place for the old monied Yorkshire gentry and is known by some York race-goers as “nobs corner”.

Over the last few years York Racecourse has built the new Ebor Stand greatly increasing the number of race-goers they can comfortably accommodate. They have installed new drainage and re-laid the track, which used to have serious problems if there was too much or too little rain. One August Meeting had to be abandoned because of flooding: hopefully that will not happen again. There are proposals to move the racecourse stables to the site of a car park behind the stands with a tunnel under the racecourse access road for the horses to go to the saddling area. This would eliminate the need for the horses to cross The Knavesmire from the present racecourse stables, when some become worked up.

The most recent new development has been the transformation of the Melrose Stand, from which the first and second floor steepings have been removed to create space to expand the Owners and Trainers

Bar on the first floor and to create the new Melrose Club on the second floor. The old Owners and Trainers Bar was a cramped and gloomy tunnel and must now be one of the best in the country. It has a wide lounge bar with a full length window overlooking the track and behind an owners and trainers restaurant offering a three course meal for £25.

The Melrose Club has the same layout and furniture as the Owners and Trainers Bar on the floor below. A £50 fee buys access to a comfortable bar with a dramatic, although head-on, view over the track and also of the parade ring. The price includes a generous supply of canapés on arrival, an excellent selection of hot and cold dishes, oddly described as Yorkshire Tapas, at lunch time and sandwiches and cakes for tea. I thought that the Yorkshire Tapas were quite substantial but, perhaps they were only snacks for someone with a Yorkshire appetite. As in the other bars at York the prices of drinks are very reasonable with champagne available by the glass for £5. The entry price is good value for a facility of this quality and it is not surprising that it is already sold out for one day of the August Meeting and the other days will probably sell out soon.

The biggest meeting is the Ebor Meeting in August, which attracts a large and diverse crowd. The May Meeting is more select and appeals mainly to racing regulars. The racing programme is of high quality and features the Musidora Stakes and the Dante Stakes, which have become the most reliable trials for, respectively, The Oaks and The Derby at Epsom. I was there to see The Dante, which was won decisively by Capo Blanco, trained by Aidan O'Brien, and would be a worthy favourite for The Derby if St Nicholas Abbey turns out not to be as good as his trainer thinks he is. The Middleton Stakes featured a rematch with the two finest staying mares in Europe, Sariska and Middy, and was won by Sariska, who was receiving 5 lbs from Middy. The 5 furlong Conditions Stakes was won impressively by Rose Blossom, owned by Highclere Thoroughbred Racing and trained by Richard Fahey, currently the most successful trainer at York.

York Racecourse is an easy journey from London. The train from Kings Cross takes less than two hours, followed by a special bus service from York railway station to the racecourse.

Lingfield Park - 8th May 2010

Lingfield Park used to be known as Leafy Lingfield, but since most of the trees were cut down to accommodate the all-weather track can no longer justify that description. There is still, however, a short avenue of fine horse chestnuts leading to the pre-parade ring and the racecourse has retained much of its charm. The pre-parade ring is where the true animal lovers and condition observers gather. Opinions expressed there are usually better informed than elsewhere at the course.

Most of the flat racing at Lingfield is on the artificial surface and low grade. Saturday's card was the exception. It was Lingfield Park's marquee day, with all the races run on turf. The first four races consisted of two Group races and two other races, which could almost have been Group races and included the Lingfield Derby and Oaks Trials.

It appeared that the team of Prince Khaled Abdullah, Henry Cecil and Tom Queally might have a field day as they had fancied runners in three of the best races, including Timepiece who was favourite for the Oaks. Timepiece, however, disappointed and was beaten by Dyna Waltz, who had finished 9th in the Nell Gwynn Stakes and seemed to be fully exposed. Bullet Train was visually impressive in winning the Derby Trial, but it is questionable whether he beat much. The Winter Derby winner, Tranquil Tiger, was well beaten in the 10 furlong Conditions Stakes, but he had to give a stone to the two horses who beat him and he is probably better on an artificial surface.

There was a good crowd, despite the miserable drizzly weather and that the meeting had to compete for attendance with Victoria Cup day at Ascot. It shows that good horses like good actors will attract good audiences. The racecourse had, also, made an extra effort to attract race-goers. We were greeted on arrival by the East Grinstead Concert Band playing hits from the sixties which, to judge from appearances, were contemporaneous with the heyday of the musicians. There was a wandering jazz trio and clowns on stilts to keep the children amused.

Catering at racecourses is a frequent cause of complaint. Often there is nothing available between a full silver service three course lunch, which is too expensive and takes too long, and a burger van or an industrial sandwich in a cellophane packet handed across the bar with nowhere to sit to eat it. The Brasserie at Lingfield is a shining exception: a served buffet with a selection of hot dishes, including a roast individually carved by the chef, as well as a selection of salads or sandwiches filled to order, all at reasonable prices. There are plenty of chairs and tables and staff to clear them. Other racecourses should offer the same.

Lingfield is an easy train journey from London Victoria, followed by a pleasant walk along a footpath, long enough to whet the appetite for the day. On racedays the train is always full of racing regulars, all armed with a Racing Post and sharing their opinions of the likely winners. I travelled back by train with Steve Devaney, a charming Irishman old enough to have seen Nijinsky win The Derby. He was spending a few days in England and was impressed by his first visit to Lingfield Park. He had left his spectacles behind and was unable to read the names of the horses or their form in the newspaper. He had to ask those standing beside him by the parade ring to identify the horses for him and base his bets on their appearance. He made a good profit on the day, whereas I lost money, having studied the form diligently. We agreed that it might pay both of us to leave our spectacles behind when going racing in future.

Newcastle - 4th May 2010

Newcastle Racecourse is in Gosforth Park, which was once the centre of the 2000 acre Gosforth Estate, owned from 1509 by the Brandling family. The main grandstand is built round the stately Gosforth House, now renamed Brandling House, which was built by Charles Brandling between 1755 and 1764. It is a handsome Georgian Portland stone building, which I hope is protected by Listing from further accretions and deletions. It is also in serious need of cleaning.

A portrait of Charles Brandling hangs in a restaurant at the top of a central double staircase, which, when it was a private house, must have been the main drawing room. The Brandling family made its money from the coal deposits which lay under its land. In 1880 the house with 807 acres of land was sold to High Gosforth Park Ltd, a company formed to establish a racecourse on the estate. It is now owned by Northern Racing.

The racecourse stages some popular races, notably The Northumberland Plate, better known as The Pitman's Derby. It was surprising, therefore, that it did not have a large screen. This is now a basic requirement. If Redcar and Folkestone can afford one, why not Newcastle? It is noteworthy that, of the racecourses I have visited so far, the only two racecourses without a big screen are both owned by Northern Racing. Are they unwilling to spend money on facilities which improve the racegoing experience of their customers?

One unusual facility that they do offer is a special room for betting exchange punters in The Pavilion Restaurant near the entrance from the car park. Inside there were benches, with Tote screens above,

occupied by punters hunched over laptops. The on-course bookmakers resent these as they regard them as unfair competition. I was told that the reason that betting exchange punters come to the racecourse is the slight delay in transmitting pictures on television or online gives the in-running punter an advantage over those betting from home. This seems unfair on their counterparties and I wonder how many of them are aware of the discrepancy.

I had an extra interest in that day's racing as my part owned 3 year old filly, Cat o'Nine Tails, trained by Mark Johnston, was running for the first time in the 3 year old maiden. She travelled well, but her inexperience showed when the field quickened and she ran green to finish fourth. I hope that she will learn from the experience.

Newcastle may seem a long way from London, but it is less than three hours by train from Kings Cross to Newcastle Central Railway Station and from there a 15 minute taxi ride to Gosforth Park.

Newmarket Rowley Mile - 1st & 2nd May 2010

Newmarket is the Headquarters of horse racing in Britain and the Rowley Mile is the centre of excellence of the sport. Attending racing there is like watching cricket at Lords or tennis at Wimbledon. There is a special atmosphere which can be matched by no other venue of that sport. Whereas the Craven Meeting, three weeks before on the Rowley Mile, is the Overture to the turf flat racing season, the Guineas Meeting is the first movement of that great Symphony which runs through the summer. The area of grass between the pre-paddock and the horse-walk that leads from the parade ring to the track is the gathering place for the movers and shakers of horse racing and where the most useful information and gossip is exchanged.

The viewing of races on both courses at Newmarket is not ideal as, uniquely, there is no circuit and in every race the horses run towards the stands from a distant starting position. The Rowley Mile has a 10 furlong straight and races longer than that start out of sight of the stands. The 18 furlong Cesarewitch is famous for starting in Cambridgeshire and finishing in Suffolk.

The weather made the two day meeting into a game of two halves. On Saturday, when the 2000 Guineas was run, it was warm and drinkers were enjoying the sunshine at the tables outside the Paddock Bar. On Sunday for the 1000 Guineas the wind had moved to the North, the temperature dropped by 10 degrees and overnight rain had changed the going from good to firm to good to soft.

The 2000 Guineas produced a shock win by Makfi, a colt trained in France, who started at 33/1. The 1000 Guineas produced more drama, when Jacqueline Quest, trained by Henry Cecil, finished in front but was demoted to second for interference to Special Duty, who had finished second. Special Duty is trained in France by Criquette Head-Maarek whereas Henry Cecil is Newmarket's favourite son. The Stewards' decision was greeted with stony silence by the crowd, despite the fact that Special Duty was the favourite and Jacqueline Quest started at 66/1.

The French, therefore, trained the winners of both 2000 and 1000 Guineas, apparently for the first time ever. Perhaps it was more surprising that the Irish did not train a single winner at a meeting, which has been dominated in recent years by Aidan O'Brien, Jim Bolger and John Oxx. I wonder if this was a one-off, or an indication that the potency of the Irish racing industry has declined with the Irish economy.

I am surprised at the number of people who live in or near London and travel frequently to Newmarket Races who are unaware of how easy it is to go by train. The journey from Kings Cross to Newmarket

Railway Station takes only 80 minutes, including a change at Cambridge. There is a courtesy bus from the railway station to the racecourse.

Doncaster - 30th April 2010

This was one of the "Get in Free" days promoted by Racing For Change. To take advantage of the offer people had to apply in advance, which detracts a little from the purpose of the promotion to attract first time race-goers. The free entry, also, did not apply to the Premier Enclosure. Nevertheless there was a huge crowd; I am sure many times the number that would have been there on a normal day. They appeared to be enjoying themselves and some will probably return on a day when they have to pay to get in. It seems to be a sensible way to market the racecourse and the sport itself to prospective new customers.

The regular staff in smart uniform blazers were well informed and welcoming, but they were supplemented by a large number of threatening looking security staff, who detracted from the friendly atmosphere. They were presumably there because of the large crowd expected, but it might be better on future occasions to dress them like the racecourse staff instead of in anoraks with "Security" written across the back.

The crowd included several groups of the young ladies of South Yorkshire, who like to display their assets. After one race I asked two middle aged men standing next to me what they thought of the day. They said that it was nice to get in without having to pay and one of them added, pointing at a group of scantily clad girls nearby, "and that is a bonus"!

The racecourse announcer gave detailed information for new race-goers on the difference between the different types of races. This included an explanation of the handicapping system and the meaning of maiden races. The tipping session before the start of racing was particularly well done, with the speakers avoiding racing jargon and using layman's language.

Doncaster Racecourse was effectively rebuilt three years ago with an enormous new grandstand. It has adopted the method used at Ascot and tried, but later rejected, at Kempton of separating the different enclosures by putting them on different floors. I hope that it is more successful this time. The viewing arrangement is unusual in that the lower levels are all seated with the steppings above. I missed the brass band, which used to play under the old stand and provided a link with South Yorkshire's mining past.

The weighing room now forms part of the grandstand and the old weighing room has been converted into a champagne and seafood bar. There I enjoyed the best racecourse meal of my tour so far: a plate of excellent finger sandwiches and a glass of champagne for £9.00. A glass of champagne on its own costs £5.00. Eat your heart out Sandown Park and Ascot!

Redcar - 29th April 2010

Redcar is a small northern racecourse popular with trainers because the track is considered fair with a consistent surface. It seems less popular with race-goers as there was a very small crowd present. This was not surprising as the quality of horses running was poor with total prize money for 7 races of only £26,900.

For many years the future of Redcar racecourse has been under threat. Lord Zetland, a large local landowner and shareholder in the racecourse company, has proposed that the land occupied by the

racecourse be used for development and that a replacement racecourse be built on other land nearby which he owns. The existing racecourse has obvious redevelopment potential. It is surrounded by large supermarkets and the shortest route to walk to the course from Redcar Central railway station is through the Tesco car park. The Local Planning Authority would find it difficult to refuse consent for retail development, which might be very valuable. So far Lord Zetland has not succeeded in persuading enough of the other shareholders to support his proposals.

In spite of the uncertainty about its future, money has recently been invested in the racecourse facilities. There is a new stand which accommodates boxes and the Annual Members Bar, to which owners and trainers have access. There is also an Owners and Trainers Lounge and Conservatory at the top of the old stand which provides a fine view of the graveyard behind. This was deserted when I was there, with all the owners and trainers preferring to use the bar shared with the Annual Members, where there was quite a buzz. There has been an attempt to brighten the somewhat bleak area behind the stand by building a rockery containing a few bedding plants.

The best performance on the track was put up by Caldercruix who won the mile handicap cosily under Jamie Spencer, despite his odds drifting on course from 7/4 to 11/4. I had a successful punting day as I backed Tangerine Trees, trained by my old friend Brian Smart, who won at 7/1. In the following race I backed Whispered Times who won at 12/1, trained by Tracey Waggott, her first winner for 6 months. The going at Redcar was good to firm and I noticed that Whispered Times only previous win had been on good to firm ground, while all his subsequent unsuccessful runs had been on soft turf or on the deep sand surface at Southwell.

I travelled to Redcar by train from London to Darlington and then by a small connecting train to Redcar Central, which is less than ten minutes walk from the racecourse. The train from Darlington goes along the South bank of the Tees Estuary and when I last travelled on it 13 years ago I remember a depressing view of disused and derelict steel mills and chemical works. Since then much has changed. Most of the dereliction has been cleared and replaced by modern light industrial buildings, offices, some of striking design, and new housing developments. Seen from the train, Thornaby, in particular, seems to have benefited from an active and imaginative regeneration programme. Redcar racecourse no longer seems to be at the centre of a depressed area.

Sandown Park - 23rd April 2010

This visit was on the first day of the Bet365 meeting, with the mixed Flat and National Hunt day, including the Bet365 Chase, which I still think of as the Whitbread, taking place the following day. That day is a highlight of Sandown's season and always attracts a large crowd. It was not surprising, therefore, that there was a small crowd of regular race-goers and connoisseurs for the Friday all flat race programme. The few of us who attended were able to see some potentially high class horses on a card of 6 races, which unusually were all confined to 3 year olds.

It was a beautiful day and the horses' coats gleamed in the sunshine as they went round the parade ring. For my first time this year they paraded without rugs, which made paddock assessment more worthwhile. The viewing at Sandown is excellent as the land slopes naturally down from the stands and the whole course is in view. It also benefits from the fact that the main grandstand was built before a need was seen for rows of seats and corporate boxes. As a result the steppings rise higher than in more recently built grandstands at other racecourses.

I travelled by train from Clapham Junction with Bob and Richard. We had never met before, but in the tradition of race train travellers immediately started talking about that day's card and swapping opinions of the likely winners. Bob strongly fancied Wasseet for the Classic Trial and was interested in Karaka Jack in the first. I also fancied Karaka Jack, but preferred Bikini Babe in the Classic Trial. I also mentioned No Hubris, whom I had seen win impressively first time out at York last year.

The nearest station to Sandown Park is Esher, which is a brisk 10 or leisurely 15 minute walk from the racecourse. The course provides a courtesy minibus shuttle to and from the station. It is small and it is necessary to break quickly from the train to get first run after the train arrives.

I had my usual sandwich and glass of wine, the price of which broke the previous record. Although the sandwich was accompanied by a few potato crisps and lettuce leaves, the price of £13.50 was exorbitant. Jockey Club Racecourses should have a hard look at the prices charged by their caterers and possibly at the contracts which encourage them to charge so much. Something to eat and drink is an essential part of a day's racing. If the customers feel that they have been ripped off they may not come back.

The racing was high class and informative for the future. The outstanding performance was put up by Chabal, owned by Godolphin and ridden by Frankie Dettori, who was an impressive winner of the Classic Trial and showed himself to be a genuine Derby prospect. Unfortunately, in that race Bikini Babe made little impression and Wasseet finished tailed off, with presumably something amiss. Bob and I did better with Karaka Jack, who ran well to finish second to Normandie Stud's impressive Fallen Idol at the rewarding each way odds of 14/1. No Hubris won in a close finish, but Jutland, in whose horsebox I had travelled to Ripon 7 days before, ran in the last and led for most of the race, but faded up the Sandown hill. He gave trouble entering the stalls, which may have been a sign that the race had come too soon.

I travelled back to Clapham Junction by train with four old and newly met racing friends, including Bob from the journey out, who had backed No Hubris and was grateful for my advice, which I had not followed myself! We had a good discussion about that day's racing and prospects for the future. It was a pleasant end to a most enjoyable day on which I had seen some lovely horses and, I believe, several future winners.

Folkestone - 20th April 2010

Folkestone is the only member of Ryan Price's much quoted "F Circuit", which stages flat racing. Like Great Yarmouth, it is a racecourse catering for holidaymakers, which I was visiting out of season. That may explain why there was a tiny crowd, despite a glorious, warm Spring day. Another explanation may have been the poor quality of the racing, with no horse rated higher than 75. That was not surprising with total prize money for the 7 races of only £30,500.

The only runners which appeared to have high quality potential were Submariner, trained by Mark Johnston, and All We Know, trained by Henry Cecil, both previously unraced and running in the 12 furlong maiden. Submariner, ridden by Frankie Dettori, won the race easily and might turn out to be useful, despite starting his racing career as a 4 year old. All We Know was wearing blinkers first time out and clearly had no enthusiasm for racing.

Folkestone Racecourse is owned by Arena Leisure, who do their own catering. The Seafood Restaurant is under the same management as the Brasserie at Lingfield Park and has a similar offer of

seafood salads and freshly made sandwiches, which I regard as the ideal racecourse lunch facility. My smoked salmon sandwich was made in front of me from excellent bread and well filled. It was far superior to a sandwich made offsite and served in a cellophane box, which is all that is available at most other courses.

My day at Folkestone coincided with that of Bob Champion, who is doing the far more demanding tour of visiting all 60 flat and National Hunt racecourses in 60 days. He is doing his tour in aid of his Cancer Trust and the Injured Jockeys Fund. It is a tough project and Bob deserves great credit and support for it. Both he and the Lotus car, which he has been lent for the trip, will be exhausted when they finish it.

Westenhanger railway station is beside the racecourse and provides easy access for travellers from London. It is now possible to use the new line from London St Pancras to Ashford, which was built for the Eurostar and on which the trains travel at 140 mph. The whole journey from St Pancras to Westenhanger, including the change at Ashford took less than one hour, which is much quicker than by car.

Thirsk - 16th April 2010

Thirsk is only 13 miles from Ripon, but the nature of the two racecourses is completely different. Ripon is at the gateway to the Yorkshire Dales and reflects that area's gentle beauty and tourist appeal. Thirsk is at the gateway to the Yorkshire Moors and reflects their harsher and grittier nature. If Ripon is typified by James Bethell, Thirsk is typified by Mick Easterby.

Thirsk is run in a traditional and formal manner. Gentlemen are required to wear a tie in the Club Enclosure and there are notices everywhere making that clear. The Raceday Office holds a supply of ties in order to equip any race-goers who do not comply with the racecourse's sartorial standards. The man in charge is still called the Clerk of the Course and not Chief Executive or General Manager, which seems to have become standard practice. He wears an immaculate 3-piece suit and not an anorak with the name of the racecourse written across the back.

The catering offer at Thirsk is outstanding and an example to most other racecourses. There are several outlets offering a range of meat and seafood platters as well as hot meals and sandwiches. A particularly attractive spot is the Seafood Bar at the top of the Club Stand with a view over the racecourse. A full range seafood platter there costs £8.95, which is great value compared to Southern courses, at all of which the catering seems to be under the duopoly control of two major firms.

Beside the entrance to the parade ring there is an archaic, manually operated current odds indicator beneath which a concealed man pushes up markers to line up with numbers painted on the board, purporting to show the price at which each horse is trading. I had not seen one of those for at least 20 years and it cannot be of much practical use, particularly as race-goers can now see up to date prices on television screens or on their mobile phones. The viewing of the racing was impaired because the lorry mounted big screen was wrongly aligned parallel to the track instead of being angled towards the stands. This also caused the sun to shine directly on it blurring the image.

I spent the previous night at Middleham in order to watch my part owned filly on Mark Johnston's gallops in the morning. Middleham is not well served by public transport, so I had to extend my definition of public transport by travelling to Thirsk in Mark Johnston's horsebox, which was carrying Jutland to run in the mile handicap. This was a new experience for me.

In the race Jutland fought a ding-dong battle the whole way up the straight with Dolphin Rock, trained by David Barron, to lose by a short head. Dolphin Rock was backed down on course from 9/2 to 5/2 and was clearly "expected". I followed the money and coupled the two horses in an exacta, so it was a good race for me.

Ripon - 15th April 2010

Ripon describes itself as Yorkshire's Garden Racecourse and its location at the entrance to the Yorkshire Dales reflects the natural beauty and attraction to tourists of that part of the county. It was too early in the season to see the full benefit, as the pansies in the flower beds had only just been planted and there was no sign of the hanging baskets, which I remember from previous visits. The tree shaded parade ring is most attractive and the compact nature of the area comprising the pre-paddock, weighing room, parade ring and Owners and Trainers bar creates an intimate and welcoming holiday atmosphere.

There is a wide range of catering outlets, with hot or cold food served from a counter with plenty of tables to eat it from. There is also a separate fish and chip shop. I did not sample its wares, but it was doing a roaring trade. I paid £6.50 for a smoked salmon sandwich and a glass of decent wine poured from a bottle, which was a considerable improvement on the £10.50 I was charged at Kempton Park for a similar sandwich and a very poor quarter bottle of wine.

The course has a big screen set into the old brick Tote prices board opposite the grandstand. This is a clever use of a handsome and possibly listed structure. The track itself is undulating and some trainers are reluctant to race inexperienced horses there. That did not prevent some competitive and exciting racing. For me the highlight was the ride by Royston French in The Cock of the North Handicap on Monterosso, whom he drove through the narrowest of gaps and pushed out to win by a short head. It was a particularly brave effort by both horse and jockey.

Of all the flat racecourses in Britain Ripon is furthest from a railway station. I reached it by train to York, followed by a 90 minute journey in an ancient clattery bus, stopping in a number of small villages, whose names I had only previously seen on signposts at turnings off the main road. I had wondered who would travel by bus from York to Ripon in the middle of the day. The answer was eight of us race-goers, with only a few other passengers picked up at one village to be dropped at the next. We race-goers had hoped to be dropped at the entrance to the racecourse, which is the on the direct route from York, but unfortunately this particular bus approached Ripon from a different road so we had to go into Ripon Bus Station and take another bus to the racecourse. Our bus driver from York was sympathetic to our position and told the driver of the second bus not to charge us.

Yarmouth - 13th April 2010

Great Yarmouth is a seaside resort and its racecourse caters mainly for summer holiday makers. So by visiting it on a bitterly cold day in the middle of April I was not seeing it at its most typical or favourable. Despite the weather there was still some holiday atmosphere with the ice cream van doing good trade, although the wind was strong enough to blow the Mr Whippy cones off the cornets.

Yarmouth is not a beautiful racecourse. The view across the course from the top of the stand is of a sea of caravans and a forest of wind turbines. The race viewing is handicapped by the lack of a big screen, particularly as four of the six races were on the straight course. Nowadays I think that provision of a big screen should be standard.

In spite of the conditions there was a warm atmosphere to the place. Everywhere I went I was greeted with a welcoming smile and I received an impression of purposeful and efficient management.

There used to be a famous seafood restaurant at Yarmouth, capitalising on its proximity to the sea. Sadly it has gone. As at most racecourses there is nothing between a standard three course restaurant, which seemed fine for those race-goers who want that, and a "food court" consisting of a few fast food vans arranged round a lawn with some tables and chairs. There is also a so called Champagne Bar with a meagre food offer. The Trafalgar Restaurant is in the modern Admiral Nelson Stand, which is a handsome addition to the racecourse. They like to emphasize the Norfolk origin of the hero of the Battle of Trafalgar although Great Yarmouth is a long way from his birthplace at Burnham Thorpe.

Yarmouth racecourse has been criticised for poor levels of prize money and last year there was an attempted trainers' boycott of one meeting because of it. This must have had some effect as the total prize money of £49000 for 6 races was not bad for racing at this level. The racing itself was competitive with several close finishes. Many big trainers were represented with horses from Sir Michael Stoute, Henry Cecil, Mark Johnston, Richard Fahey, Michael Bell, John Gosden and Walter Swinburn. The jockeys included Ryan Moore, Kieren Fallon, Frankie Dettori and Hayley Turner. Ryan Moore rode a double and was foiled of a treble by Hayley Turner who outrode him in a tight finish to win on Horseradish for Michael Bell.

I shared a taxi from and back to the railway station with Brian, whom I met as usual through the recognition symbol of both of us holding a copy of the Racing Post. Brian had a share in Knightfire, trained by Walter Swinburn, which was fancied to win the 6 furlong handicap. Unfortunately it ran badly and the jockey gave the unlikely excuse for Yarmouth Racecourse that the horse could not act on the track.

Kempton Park - 3rd April 2010

Kempton Park is a Jekyll and Hyde racecourse. As a National Hunt track it stages high class racing, including The King George VI Chase and The Racing Post Chase, two of the most prestigious races in the jumping calendar. On the other hand, the all-weather flat racing programme is nearly all low grade, designed to meet the needs of the betting shops. When the all-weather track was first installed it was claimed that it would be the first such track in Britain to focus on high grade racing, including several Pattern races. That ambition seems to have faded and Kempton Park has now become the southern equivalent of Wolverhampton.

Saturday's programme was a partial exception, including a Listed Fillies race, two Conditions Stakes and a 0-105 Handicap. The Conditions races used to be named The Masaka Stakes and The Easter Stakes and were serious trials for, respectively, the 1000 and 2000 Guineas, but they can no longer justify that status.

Kempton Park has the benefit of a dedicated racecourse station with direct trains from London Waterloo providing easy access. Race trains are sociable, with possession of a Racing Post acting as a recognisable common bond. The passengers talk to each other and exchange opinions on the likely winners. I met Shane, a charming young New Zealander. We agreed that Shamwari Lodge would win the listed Snowdrop Fillies Stakes, but differed over the 7f handicap, in which Shane fancied The Scorching Wind while I preferred Rileyskeepingfaith.

Catering at Kempton is focused on the Panoramic Restaurant, which is aimed at people who want to spend all day at the table from which they can watch the races and place their bets. That does not suit me as I prefer to move around, bump into racing friends and get close to the horses, but that is a personal view as the restaurant is clearly successful, with all 300 seats fully booked. At £49 for a 3 course meal, including entrance to the racecourse it is good value. As I was looking at the restaurant I was greeted by some friends who were lunching there and poured me a glass of champagne, so I got off to a good start. I lunched in the Seafood Bar between the 1st and 2nd races on a sandwich and a tiny glass of basic white wine, which at a cost of £10.50 was not good value.

While I was eating my sandwich I was joined by my new friend Shane with some friends of his, one of whom knew the trainer Marco Botti and who had been told that Aldovrandi, his runner in the next race was fancied to win the Italian 2000 Guineas. That would certainly make him too good for this opposition and as he was 10/1 in a 6 horse field we all rushed off to back him. Aldovrandi duly skated home, so we celebrated with more champagne. Shamwari Lodge duly won, albeit at odds of 13/8 but the 7f handicap was a shambles. One horse was withdrawn having injured himself in the starting stalls and another was withdrawn having burst through the stalls before the start. Both The Scorching Wind and Rileyskeeping faith were so badly hampered immediately after the delayed start to have no chance thereafter.

The train journey home was as sociable. I travelled with the magician, Mike Alan, who had been entertaining guests in the corporate restaurant. He has been an entertainer and magician in variety shows all over the world and had fascinating tales to tell of his life on the stage. The 50 minute train journey from Kempton Park to Putney passed all too quickly.