

NEWSLETTER

JANUARY 2013

**Colwall
Village
Society**

Revealing Our Heritage

NATIONAL HUNT RACING AT COLWALL PARK RACECOURSE [Part One] **1900 to 1939** by Nicholas Neve

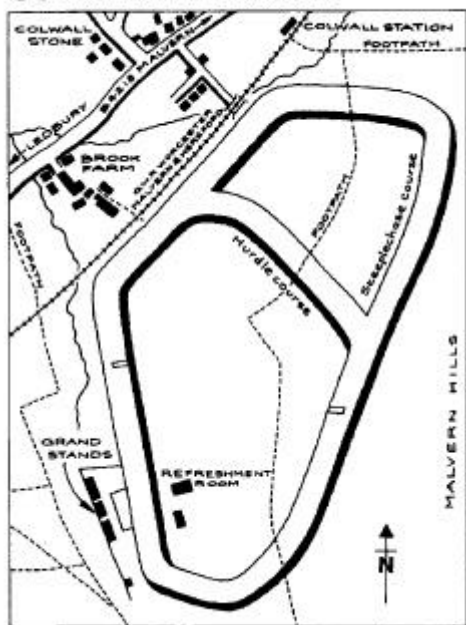
This was originally published in a booklet produced on behalf of Colwall Village Society. The author is grateful for the help of many members of the society and the village, and for having had access to many documents, photographs and other information as stated in the references and acknowledgments at the end of the article.



This aerial photograph (overleaf) was taken above the Evendine Lane looking northwest towards the village on 7th June 1933. The tree lined parade ring can be seen in the left foreground. The winning post and judges box are beside the running rails in front of the members enclosure. Tattersalls and the public enclosures run back round the course towards the final steeplechase jump.

If you walk down to Colwall railway station, cross over the lines by the footbridge, follow the path down to the fields beyond and pause to gaze over the grassland towards the ancient earthworks of British Camp, you are looking at the site of Colwall Park Racecourse. No trace remains today of this once famous National Hunt racecourse which was the venue for regular meetings for 39 years from 1900 onwards. Yet, had you stood there just before a race day in the first four decades of the twentieth century the scene would have been very different. You would have seen white wooden posts and rails marking the one and a half mile circuit, jumps across the track, stands for spectators, a platform for the judges, changing rooms for the jockeys, bars in marquees for the race goers and all the other paraphernalia that goes with National Hunt horse racing in this country.

COLWALL PARK L. H.



Each race meeting would last one day, normally a Monday. There would be six races; three steeplechases over large birch and gorse fences and three hurdle races over smaller jumps. The distances the horses ran would vary between two and three miles. Racing was a very popular sport and even the smaller courses often attracted large crowds. People would travel up from the Welsh valleys or down from the Black Country by train, for the motor car was only just starting to appear. They packed the racecourse public enclosures to enjoy a day in the fresh air, and perhaps, if luck was on their side, they would enjoy the proceeds of a lucky win after a bet with the many on-course bookmakers. They would drink a few pints of beer or Herefordshire cider to wash down the jellied eels or Gloucestershire elvers which were sold from stalls in the enclosures. Meanwhile the owners, trainers and jockeys would be in the paddock which lay beside the grandstand close to where the Elms School swimming pool used to be. The regular and more wealthy race goers, the "toffs" as they were called by the rest, would become members of Colwall Park Club (membership £3. 13s. 0d. a year). This would allow them to bring two ladies and partake of tea during the meeting. They were also entitled to exclusive access

to the members enclosure, which had its own grandstand and stood beside the ring where the racehorses were paraded before being ridden down to the start.

The racecourse was the idea of a young gentleman who had the unusual name of Mr Roland Cave-Browne-Cave. In 1895, he had married Honora (Bright) Fowler, the recently widowed daughter of one of the larger landowners in the district, a Mr Benjamin Bright, who lived at Barton Court on the road to Ledbury just outside the village and owned the very extensive Barton Estate. Mr Cave-Browne-Cave was very dashing, with enthusiastic ideas. He was very keen on horses in general and racehorses in particular. He and Honora spent their honeymoon touring the Midland cities in a vehicle drawn by a pair of horses accompanied by a local groom. In 1897, and again in 1899, his point-to-pointer "Triton" won the Lady Dudley cup at Crowle and soon after his vision to bring National Hunt racing to Colwall began to bear fruit. The Barton Court estate was managed by a Mr Sturge, a Quaker, who lived at Bristol and used to visit Colwall twice a year. Mr Cave-Browne-Cave persuaded his mother-in-law to let him manage the estate, and soon he began to make changes.



Mr Rowland
Cave-Browne-Cave.

He decided that a first class hotel was needed in Colwall near to the railway station, and as the existing Stone Farm was part of the Barton Estate, the hotel could be built at the side of the farmhouse where the farm buildings stood. Agriculture was in a depressed state anyway. And so the Park Hotel came into being.

Then his attentions were directed to implementing his plans for horse racing. He started building stables for a racing stud at the entrance to Netherpaths Farm. This scheme was later abandoned and the buildings became known, as they are still to this day, as "Cave's Folly".



Next, in 1899, he began building the Colwall Park Racecourse on farm land adjoining the Worcester to Hereford railway line in the meadows which lay between Brook Farm and the Malvern Hills. To help him he sought assistance from a Mr. Frederick Page, who was a Worcester resident and well known in contemporary sporting circles in his capacity as a journalist and National Hunt official. He was widely involved with course design and management throughout the southern half of the country. The course took a running line left-handed on an oval outline with a run-in of 400 yards and a slight hill on the far side. The railway was an

essential part of his plan as it would provide the means whereby the racehorses travelled to and from the course.

The Racecourse was most attractively situated with the Malverns forming the background and Colwall soon became a very popular place on the days when the four race meetings a year were held. The name of the Horse & Groom public house was later changed to the Horse & Jockey in keeping with the racecourse entrance close by. It is now called the Oddfellows.

The first race meeting was held on Thursday May 10th 1900. The Malvern Advertiser recorded that the new steeplechase course was 1½ miles in length with eight fences made of birch, two open ditches and one regulation width water jump, which was fed by the nearby brook. The hurdle course was one mile long with eight flights. The construction of the course had been supervised by Mr H J Connop and consisted of a covered grandstand, a Steward's box, a weighing house, barrier posts and six-fold wire. However, the Totalisator building, situated in the middle of the course was not built until the mid-1930s. A pre-view of the new racecourse had been held a week earlier and was followed by a champagne luncheon in the Horse and Groom given by Mr Cave-Browne-Cave.

The first day's racing attracted 38 runners for the three steeplechases and three hurdle races with the largest field being the nine runners in the Bosbury Selling Hurdle. This was a race where the rules stipulated that the winner had to be put up for sale by auction after the race. The Stewards included Lord Coventry and The Earl of Clonmel; the starter was Mr. Thomas Thomas and Mr Connop took the entries. None other than Mr Roland Cave-Browne-Cave won the Bosbury Selling Hurdle with his horse "Sophos", ridden by Mr E Piggott, winning by a head to loud cheers. Under the rules of the race the horse was sold afterwards for 56 guineas (about £59). A number of undesirable characters gained admittance that day and a Mr Howard, of the Plough Hotel, Ledbury had his cash box stolen when a thief cut the canvas of the marquee in which he was selling beer. However a collection taken in the paddock made good the loss.



Oddfellows Hall

Not everyone in the village was enthusiastic about the new attraction. This is what one resident had to say in print a few days later:

"It is a source of great regret that the once quiet little village of Colwall should have been desecrated by having a racecourse in its midst and sad that anyone should suggest that it would be the making of the village. Of late years Colwall has come to the

front, much enterprise and industry have changed its aspect and it certainly has been much in advance of other villages; but these races have surely lowered it in the eyes of thoughtful people. Characters of the lowest type - the gambler, the pick pocket, and the 'neer-do-well' all assemble on these occasions; public houses, too, are overcrowded and the issues are most repugnant and demoralizing - men and women making themselves little better than brutes. Surely this we hope is not the future making of the place. Quite the reverse. It was a black day for Colwall and one it will have cause to wish had never been instituted. No good whatever resulted from last Thursday, but much evil. Yours - A lover of Colwall.



Despite this perhaps isolated criticism, racing became established on a regular basis and although the value of the races was modest, not exceeding £48, they attracted many of the top jockeys of the day. The popular Tich Mason was to ride four winners and two thirds from six rides here on Whit Monday, 1904.

It was soon afterwards, in 1905, that the activities of Mr Roland Cave-Browne-Cave were to come to an abrupt halt. Mr Cave had spent too much of the fortunes of the Bright family and the financial outlook became very bad. So bad in fact that the whole estate had to be put up for auction, including Barton Court itself. As the estate comprised the greater portion of the parish, this had a major impact on the village. All the farms belonging to the estate, the Racecourse, the two hotels, extensive

woodlands and many cottages were included. This was the first of a series of sales that took place during the period 1905 to 1919. At some time during this period the tenancy of Colwall Racecourse was acquired by a syndicated company. This was to guarantee the future of racing at Colwall Park and in the ensuing years the racecourse was to become very popular with owners, trainers and jockeys alike.

Returning however to the series of auctions, the first was held in London on 2nd August 1905, the auctioneers being Millar and Son of Pall Mall. The Racecourse is listed in the particulars as part of "Brook Farm." The farm is described as having been used for several years past as a racecourse. There was stabling with 35 loose boxes, harness and saddle rooms, a stable boys' bothy, saddling shed, weighing room, sale ring stand, telegraph office, stewards' room, refreshment bars, dining rooms, a club stand and a grandstand. The land was measured at 102 acres, and the particulars also suggest that the land could be used as a 18-hole golf course without interfering with racing. The incomes from the racing and the "Colwall Park Race Club" were estimated to be £500 p.a. Whether the racecourse was one of the lots sold at this time is not recorded, but it seems unlikely as on June 26th 1913 Barton Court Estate was again offered for sale by auction, this time by the direction of Mrs. Cave-Browne-Cave, the sale taking place in the "Horse and Groom Hotel," Colwall. The auctioneers were Young and Gilling of Cheltenham. The Racecourse was again listed in the particulars as part of "Brook Farm." 1914 was the year in which the Great War started and most National Hunt racecourses in the country were closed for the duration. Colwall Park was one of just four courses that still continued to stage race meetings without a break. **To be Continued...**

Future Talks

22nd April 2013:

Dr Janet Cooper: 'The Work of the Victoria County History at Eastnor'

16th September 2013:

Amanda Simons: 'British Camp'

Date for Your Diary

February 16th 2013 - The launch of our new guide book – 'DISCOVER COLWALL'

**11.00am – 1pm at Colwall Park Hotel Ballroom – by kind permission of Mr & Mrs Iain Nesbitt
- Coffee will be available -**

NOTE: Members are advised to arrive between 10.30 – 11.00am to receive their FREE copy (one per household) Please bring your current membership card.

My thanks to our contributor. Articles on any Colwall related subject (however tenuous!) are always welcome. If you are prepared to receive your newsletters by electronic means, please register with the email address below.

Corrections and additions to the information in newsletters are always welcome.

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