

# When racegoers flocked to Cowbridge – PART ONE

By *BRIAN LEE*

**DURING** the 19th century an annual week-long carnival of hunting and racing was held at Cowbridge and was known as ‘**Hunt Week**’.

Special trains were laid on from many parts of the country and bunting was displayed on the shops and houses of Cowbridge town.

The flat racing took place at Stalling Down and the steeplechasing at Penllyn and it was Ralph Thurston Bassett, master of the Glamorgan Hunt, who was said to have initiated the Glamorgan Hunt Steeplechases.

The Penllyn racetrack has been described thus: “The course is right handed, and the pretty slopes under Penllyn Castle enabled the races to be viewed without the assistance of a grandstand. The country is a very good one, and easy to negotiate, over old grass land naturally drained, therefore, the going is never hard or heavy. The fences are of birch and gorse, and most of them form part of a natural country. There is no ridge or furrow on any part, and no fence is jumped twice, which speaks for its extent.”

For natural beauty, few of the old courses surpass Cowbridge, and I am speaking as one who attended the local point-to-points, held there in the 1950s and 1960s.

Sadly in 1901 W Mason, a young groom aged about 20, employed by Colonel Humphries, was killed when his mount, Unsymmetrical, fell in a selling hurdle race. A newspaper report for 1907 tells us that: “Cowbridge is one of the few remaining old fashioned meetings. Unlike Cardiff and Monmouth it has made no pretensions to the dignity of a club, and perhaps, it is the old fashioned flavour it retains that causes it to enjoy such a popularity.”

The famed Anthony and Rees brothers learned their trade at racecourses like Cowbridge, Cardiff, and Cacricon and Sir Harry Llewellyn, of Foxhunter fame, rode his first winner Under Rules at Cowbridge on Theorem in the Bassett Hunters Steeplechase in 1931.

Another local racecourse was the one at Bridgend and in Ruffs Guide to the Turf for 1867 it is described: “Bridgend is situated on Ogmores Down and is somewhat in the form of a figure six. The soil is sandy.”

If you have any memories of the old Penllyn Steeplechase or point-to-points staged there in the 1950s and 1960s I would be delighted to hear from you. More on Cowbridge races next time.

# *When racegoers flocked to Cowbridge*

by BRIAN LEE

**WHEN** the final race meeting took place over the old Penllyn steeplechase race course on Thursday, May 4, 1939, runners were few and far between.

This was so different from 30 years earlier in 1909 when it was reported that: "cabs, traps, taxi cars and motors filled the course."

Hard to believe now that the Great Western and Taff Railway laid on special trains of 18 carriages.

The annual Glamorgan Hunt Steeplechases, known as the 'Derby Day' of south Wales, attracted many of the county families. The fair sex, in their summer costumes, chatting among the bright carpeting of primroses on the slopes of the natural grandstand must have made a pretty picture in those days long gone.

However, there were rogues-as well as gentry present at Cowbridge and these included some of the bookmakers who 'did a runner' when they faced a big payout.

Conmen were certainly in abundance in April 1890 and a local newspaper reported: "Outside the ring were the usual appliances for plucking pigeons, such as the three card trick and a sort of monkey lottery, new to Cowbridge.

"Superintendent Thomas and a detachment of police, however, kept these gentlemen moving before they had time to do much. One visitor was relieved of his watch, and caught the thief red handed."

I recall at one of the point-to-points that were held over the course in the 1960s, a horse called The Burglar being stuck in the open ditch and officials making frantic efforts to free the poor animal, before the runners came round on the second circuit.

However, the most remarkable race at Cowbridge was surely the one back in 1888 which was won by rag and bone man Tim Donovan and his mare, Maid of Killarney.

Maid of Killarney, who had won many prizes at show-jumping in Cardiff, raced everything on the roads to Cowbridge on the way to the races and when she got there took the Farmers Plate, after all the other runners had refused at the dry ditch.

It was on Sir Briggs, his charger in the ill-fated Charge of the Light Brigade, that Lord Tredegar won the principal race at Cowbridge before the war.

Bruce Hobbs, Davy Jones, Gerry Wilson, Willie Rooney, the famed Anthony and Rees brothers, are just a few of the great National Hunt jockeys to have graced the old Cowbridge racecourse.

Not forgetting Wales's most famous point-to-point rider, Cowbridge farmer John Llewellyn, who had his early successes over the course where he was born in a cottage just a stone's throw from the track.

# THE OLD RACECARD THAT BROUGHT BACK HAPPY COWBRIDGE MEMORIES

**M**Y thanks go to a Glamorgan GEM reader, Mr Michael Clay, who kindly left a number of old point-to-point racecards for me at the Eastgate office, and they certainly brought back some happy memories.

Memories of more than 50 years ago when I used to catch the bus from Cardiff to Cowbridge with my uncle Philip and walk over the fields to the slopes of Penllyn Castle, where the Llangeinor, Glamorgan and Pentyrch hunts held their annual races over the old Cowbridge National Hunt racecourse.

I have before me now the racecard for the Llangeinor meeting held on April 19, 1952, and some of the horses' names are music – in this case – to my eyes.

Mr RB Williams's *Sylvester II*, Mr J Thomas's *Cottage Call*, Mrs BE Jones's *Spurn Head*, Mr R Thomas's *Drake II*, Mr J H Clay's *Steal Away* and Mr CR Harris's *Sally-On*.

These were the days when a brand new Austin A40 Somerset – according to the racecard – would have set you back £467, plus £260.18.11

purchase tax.

Standing at home at AD Thomas's Grange Stud Farm, Duffryn, Neath – so the racecard informs us – was *The Admiral* (1944) whose sire *Blue Peter* was the winner of £31,964, including the Derby, 2,000 Guineas and Eclipse.

The dam *Rose In The Valley*, we learn, was: "A good winner and dam of winners."

This was the first year the old Penllyn racecourse was used for point-to-points and the change of venue met with the instant approval of owners, riders, trainers and the public alike.

In the men's open race, Pembrokeshire's Fred Mathias, riding his father Ivor's eight-year-old chesnut gelding, *Gaethaght II*, scored a 10-length win over Castleton's Bill Jones, who was riding his wife's *Spurn Head*. Bill, who was something of a legend in hunt-racing circles, had his revenge over the same course a fortnight later, when contesting the Welsh Hunters' Cup at the Glamorgan, he and *Spurn Head* came home two lengths clear of Fred's mount *Lydstep Haven*.

There were seven entries for the members' race and these were TM Leyshon's *Gwyn's Pal*, TJ Butler's *Merry Lass*,

## ON AND OFF THE TURF with Brian Lee



*Cowbridge race track in 1922.*

Lewis Jones's *Sunrise*, R Fairfax's *Compact*, Glan Jones's *Squirrel* and Dil Thomas's *Ray Star* and *Kim*. I wonder what won it?

The Totalisator operated by RBC Board was in operation with units of 20s, 10s and 10p units win only. No doubt there were plenty of bookmakers at the meeting too!

The stewards were CC Llewellyn Williams, RGM Street MFH, Capt HCL Homfray MFH and G Lewis Harris MFH.

Dan Thomas was the secretary and RA David the Clerk of the Course.

My race reporting career began at Penllyn in 1967 and I only wish I had kept all those reports of mine that had appeared in the *Horse and Hound* and *The Sporting Life* and other local papers.

More racecard memories soon, and if you have any photographs that would help to illustrate them I would love to hear from you.

1952 MEMORIES

# Cowbridge jockey in hall of fame

by BRIAN LEE

**EVAN WILLIAMS, son of Fred Williams, who kept the Bear Hotel in Cowbridge before the last war, has made it into the jump jockeys' Hall of Fame.**

The former Cowbridge rider has been placed 41st out of the top 50 riders in the millennium list featured in a smashing new book called *A Century of Champions – Horse Racing's Millennium Book*, written and compiled by racing scribes John Randall and Tony Morris.

The irony is that Evan Williams, who retired to Ireland many years ago now, doesn't even figure in the Welsh Sports Hall of Fame – Roll of Honour at the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans!

Evan was one of the most successful National Hunt jockeys of his time. Born in 1912, he won the Cheltenham Gold Cup on the legendary Golden Miller in 1936 and again in 1940 on Roman Hackle. In 1937 he won the Grand National on Royal Mail and set an unusual record of sorts when at Cardiff on Easter Monday 1933 rode the first winner, Mr Ghandi, as an amateur and the last, Vive L'Amour, as a professional.

At the end of the war, Evan took out a trainer's licence and his most notable winner was Supreme Court

who won, among other races, the King Edward VII Stakes at Royal Ascot and the Festival of Britain King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes.

This book is illustrated throughout with photographs of the people, horses and events that shaped a century of racing. It is a marvellous work of reference and without a doubt the best racing book I have been lucky to obtain since *A Long Time Gone* was published by the same publishers in 1996. It is a book that one can keep dipping into time and time again and coming up with something interesting each time.

However, a memo to Messrs Randall and Morris. Before the book is reprinted, as it surely will be, please add to your fascinating facts about the Grand National that the 1911 winner Glenside was trained in Wales until a couple of weeks before the race and that the 1987 winner Maori Venture was actually bred in Wales – near Swansea.

*A Century of Champions – Horse-Racing's Millennium Book* is published by Portway Press Ltd at £30 and is available from the publishers at Portway Press Limited, Halifax, West Yorkshire, HX1 1XE. Tel 01422 330330.

# TRIBUTE TO SIR HARRY LLEWELLYN

## Legend rode his first winner at Cowbridge

**COLONEL Sir Harry Llewellyn, who died recently after a long illness aged 88, will always be associated with that unique show-jumper Foxhunter, on whom he won Olympic team gold and bronze medals.**

But he was also a leading amateur rider who finished second and fourth on Ego in the Grand Nationals of 1936 and 1937 respectively. Ego started his racing career between-the-flags in the Vale of Glamorgan, but it was on Theorem that Sir Harry rode his first winner under rules in the Bassett Hunters Steeplechase at Cowbridge in 1931.

In 1948 he set a racing record at the Cheltenham Festival meeting that will now never be beaten when he won the Foxhunters steeplechase on State Control and the United Hunts steeplechase on Bay Marble. No other rider had ever achieved the Classic hunter chase double and now that the latter race is held later in the season, his record appears to be safe for all time.

Just like fellow Welshman Fulke Walwyn, he used to school horses for Capt Morgan Lindsay, who used to train for his father Sir David Llewellyn. It shows much for Sir Harry's determination that he reduced his weight from 14st to 10st 13lb to ride Ego in the Grand National.

Ego ran five times at Aintree covering some 17½ miles without falling. Other good horses he rode were Breconian, Silver Grail, Happison

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and China Sea.

I had the pleasure of meeting Sir Harry on several occasions and when he signed a copy of his book, *Passport to Life*, for me in 1980 he wrote in it 'To Brian Lee - We are all so grateful to you for recording point-to-points in South Wales.'

A pleasant and amiable man, I remember a few years later when I was signing copies of my book, *The Races Came Off: The story of point-to-point racing in South and West Wales*, at Chepstow Racecourse he bought a copy and asked me to sign it for him.

When I wrote in it the usual 'Best Wishes' and signed my name, he took one look at it and persuaded, or I should say ordered, me to write a much longer inscription.

In 1993, Sir Harry was delighted when I asked him to write the foreword to my book *Welsh Steeplechase Jockeys*. When the book was published, I sent him a copy and he wrote me a nice letter enclosing a cheque ordering another six copies.

It gave me a great thrill to know that my efforts to record the deeds made by Welshmen in the world of steeplechasing was appreciated by so great a man as Harry Llewellyn.

# Evan Williams – ‘one of the most successful National Hunt jockeys’

**ONE of the most successful National Hunt jockeys of his time was Evan Williams, who hailed from Cowbridge in the Vale.**

The son of Fred Williams, the popular starter at Cardiff's Ely Racecourse and mine host of the Bear Hotel, Cowbridge, Evan was to win two Cheltenham Gold Cups and a Grand National.

He also set an unusual record of sorts when at Ely Racecourse on Easter Monday, 1933, he rode his first winner, *Mr Ghandi*, as an amateur and the last, *Vive L'Amour*, as a professional.

Evan was attached to fellow Welshman Owen Anthony's Letcombe Bassett yard when he was asked to ride the legendary *Golden Miller* in the 1936 Cheltenham Gold Cup.

*Golden Miller*, who had set a record by winning the race for the previous four years, ran out with his usual rider, Gerry Wilson, in the saddle less than three weeks before the race.

It must have caused the little-known Welshman, as he was then, a great deal of stress getting up for the first time in public on the most popular steeplechaser of all time.

But Evan, showing great horsemanship as well as jockeyship, steered the mighty 'Miller' home to a 12-length win

over *Royal Mail*, the horse on whom he was to win the 1937 Grand National.

Evan's second Cheltenham Gold Cup win came in 1940 when he scored an easy 10 lengths win on *Roman Hackle* who, like *Golden Miller*, was owned by Miss Dorothy Paget and trained by Owen Anthony.

The 1937 Grand National was celebrated as the centenary of the great race by the Liverpool Racecourse Executive. The fact that a Welshman – North Walian Henry Potts – had won the first was not picked up by the racing scribes when Evan won on Hugh Lloyd Thomas' *Royal Mail*.

Sadly, Mr Lloyd-Thomas, a former assistant secretary to the Prince of Wales, was later killed in a fall at Derby racecourse the following year.

A keen amateur rider himself, he had planned to ride *Royal Mail* in the 1938 Aintree spectacular.

*Royal Mail*, who was trained by Ivor Anthony, took up the running a long way from home and in the capable hands of his rider, stayed on stoutly to beat *Cooleen* by three lengths.

Twenty-four-year-old Evan had taken the lead much sooner than he wanted in order to keep clear of some loose horses. In fact, on the second circuit, he had nearly been brought down by one of them.

But by racing ahead he left them to trouble his pursuers and this wise move won him the race.

When asked by the press what he thought about his success he replied: "What can I say? I have won the Grand National, and I am naturally delighted. Give the credit to the horse.

"He jumped perfectly and cleverly. He made one or two mistakes, but they were not entirely his fault. When I took up the running in the country the second time, some loose horses interfered with *Royal Mail* and it was not long before we could shake them off. After that everything went smoothly."

At the end of the war, Evan took out a trainer's licence and trained on the flat at Kingsclere.

His most notable success was *Supreme Court* which won, among other races, the King Edward VII Stakes at Royal Ascot and the Festival of Britain King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes at Ascot.

He retired to Ireland and died in 2001, aged 89.

*Next time we take a look at the legendary Fulke Walwyn who, contrary to most racing biographies, was born in Wrexham and not Monmouthshire.*

**BRIAN LEE**