

THE AYLESBURY STEEPLECHASE

ELLIOTT VINEY

The Aylesbury Steeplechase of 1836 was not the first such race in England or even in Buckinghamshire. It was important, however, because it was recorded in lively accounts and depicted in a number of well known prints. This article draws upon both sources and seeks further understanding of the technical aspects of Steeple Chasing in the 1830's and of those people involved in it. The racing and its social background are placed in the context of the landscape and farming practices of the area around Aylesbury.

The four prints of the Aylesbury Steeplechase are quite well-known as reproductions in various sizes that can be seen on the walls of many inns and hotels. They have often been described as depicting the first Steeplechase, which it was not, nor even the first in the Vale. A look at the contemporary accounts may be of interest, particularly because in the future, half of the course will be covered by a new housing estate.

Steeplechases are first heard of in eighteenth-century Ireland but only consisted of two men racing towards some landmark like a church, usually for a wager. By 1790 such individual matches had become common in England but the idea of organised racing for a number of riders was still in the future.

Other forces were at work. Hunting was changing. The fifty years from 1770 saw the transition from hare and deer hunting to the fox; hare hunting in particular had been a slow and stately business on heavy horses and over the open-fields; no jumping was involved. Deer hunting was mainly in woodland. Over the same fifty years, half of midland England saw the conversion of the historic open-fields to compact individual farms divided by hedges. This in turn led to the breeding of a lighter, faster horse, trained to jump these new obstacles whether hedge, stone wall, ditch or brook, after a fox who moved faster and for longer distances than hares.

It was not until 1830 that the idea of an organised cross-country race, over open country and for a number of riders, bore fruit. It did not have to be run to a church steeple and the distance was usually about four miles; riders chose their own line, the only markers being the two flags at the finish.

The 1830 race was at St Albans, running from Lord Verulam's park at Gorhambury to an obelisk

two miles away and back to the starting point. The idea became immediately popular and within a few years many such races were being advertised. There is a very fine print by Pollard of the 'Northampton Grand Steeplechase of 1833'.

In 1834 Aylesbury saw its first race. Fowler¹ tells us that it arose from a discussion at Crockford's Club in London. A famous rider, Henry Peyton, proposed:

that he would undertake to give a fair four-mile course over a hunting country which he himself had often ridden, and which he stated that men hunting in that district were compelled to face if they rode fairly to hounds like sportsmen.

He consulted his friend Captain Lamb who put up a silver cup of fifty guineas as a prize; each horse to carry 12st. 7lbs, twenty guineas entrance, the second horse to save his stake.

This was a genuine steeplechase for the four and a half miles course from Waddesdon Windmill finished in 'a field in front of St. Mary's church in Aylesbury, the steeple of which forms a distinctive feature in the district and for some miles round.' Riders had to keep south of the turnpike, now the A41 Bicester road. The young Fowler – he had just left school – stationed himself at Stone Bridge by the River Thames and describes the course:

.... The whole line, excepting about three acres of allotment and garden near the town, was under grass. The fences were left in their natural state, untrimmed, and were not only formidable in aspect, but really difficult to negotiate. The course was most severe, and comprised several doubles and tall bullfinchers, ox fences with post and rails, big singles, one cross road, one deeply rutted lane,



Upper: 'This plate represents a correct view near Blackgrove Farm where the horses met having at an early part of the Chase taken different directions. Yellow Dwarf and Vivian taking the lead followed by Rochelle, The Pony, Red Deer, Amazon, Cannon Ball, Butterfly, Sailor etc. At this leap Grimaldi floundered, Laurestina and Gnat clearing the hedge in gallant style.'

The view is to the north-west with the Quainton Hills in the background, the tree-topped Grange Hill to the left. Blackgrove was just short of halfway.

Lower: 'Fleet Marston Brook with the Chapel in the distance. Here the chase became very interesting, horses and riders doing their best, Vivian keeping the lead, The Pony, Laurestina and Grimaldi being at this point well placed. Cannon Ball struggling at the brook, Rochelle clearing in good style followed by Yellow Dwarf, Red Deer, Butterfly etc.'

The four-foot rail on the far side of the brook is clearly shown. The Chapel with its low chancel and higher nave is on top of the hill; although now redundant an occasional service is held. The boys on the tree have chosen an ideal viewpoint.

one fairly-sized Brook, one thick spinney and the river Thame, about twenty-eight feet wide!

In an inaccurate recent history of steeplechasing this is recorded as being the river Thames!

Waddesdon parish had been enclosed in 1774 so the fences must have been fully mature and caused some grief but it was the jump over the Thame that caused real havoc. Most of the twenty runners were in the water and only a few struggled out and finished the course. Fowler relates how:

the Marquess of Waterford², who rode his nearly-thoroughbred horse Lancet, put him at the river at a splitting pace, but as soon as his fore-feet touched the bank he fell backwards. The poor horse was got out with great difficulty after being in the water a long time, and a fortnight after died in the White Hart stable at Aylesbury from the injuries received while being pulled out of the river.

Captain Becher³ on Vivian a well-known rat-tailed horse owned by Captain Lamb ...

had ridden his horse gently down the bank into the water, and once on the other side flung himself off on to the land, and pulled his horse out, remounted, and set himself off in hot pursuit....'

He overtook Laurestina and won, so Captain Lamb won the cup he had presented!

This race had been a success and a more ambitious programme was evolved for 1836. It was to be the Royal Staghounds week;

Tuesday 9th September	Heavyweight steeplechase followed by the Royal Buck Hounds
Wednesday 10th	Mr de Burgh's Staghounds
Thursday 11th	Lightweight Steeplechase followed by the Royal Buck Hounds
Friday 12th	Mr de Burgh's Staghounds

It was the Lightweight race which became the subject of Turner's four prints. The *Bucks Herald* of 13th February 1836 sets the scene:

These 'coming events cast their shadow before' by the arrival in Aylesbury for several days previously, of persons of all ranks and denominations, in every style of equipage from the carriage and four down to the humble dog cart. The inns were all crowded, the beds all bespoke, and the stabling all secured.

Lord Erroll⁴ and Sir Seymour Blanc were the umpires. On the Tuesday morning thirteen riders for the Heavyweight chase carrying 12st. 7 lbs rode out to Aston Abbotts Hill and raced four miles back towards Aylesbury.

The line was over a beautiful descent of even grass land, with a tolerable sprinkling of hedge and occasional ploughed fields for about a mile, then two miles of well swarded valley the fences in the Vale, many of which were thick blackthorn, not yet cut, and some double, presented no very inviting aspect to the silken jackets of the jockeys.



Upper: 'Mr Simmond's Berry Field Farm, Ivy Ground. Vivian keeping the lead, Grimaldi second followed by Laurestina and Red Deer, who had been running strong and fresh, in attempting to take this severe double fence fell. Rochelle and the Pony shared the same fate.'

Lower: 'Mr Joseph Terry's Long Furlong Field, the red flags forming the Winning Post. Vivian coming in most brilliantly followed by Grimaldi, The Pony, Laurestina, Amazon etc. This fence proving a teaser, Yellow Dwarf fell much distressed; close by his side Jerry also fell.'

Becher on Vivian started favourite but after a close race was just beaten by Powell on Saladin. The race finished on Joseph Read's land. Fowler recalls:

This race was marked by many mishaps, one of which was the crippling for life of Billy Bean, who after scuttling through a deep brook came to a stiff bullfincher, and, in steering his horse through a gap near a tree, caught his leg against the trunk, and broke his knee-cap.

They probably finished near Weedon because Lord Nugent,⁵ who lived at Lilies, then entertained 'a large party of the *elite* of the sportsmen to a *déjeuner à la fourchette*.' After this, at twelve, the stag Heythrop was turned out of the cart, and made a beautiful run down the Vale round the hill by Aston Abbots to Cublington, to Creslow and on to Winslow where he was eventually taken. The *Herald* added that an immense crowd of spectators 'gave an animation and a pleasure to the scene so unusual to the staid dullness that generally besets Aylesbury.' Wednesday saw another stag hunted from North Marston to Drayton Beauchamp.

For the Lightweight race on the Thursday morning the organisers, perhaps influenced by the chaos at the River Thame the previous year, chose a different course: from the sixth milestone from Aylesbury (which still exists just west of Waddesdon church) to the second near the bridge over the Thame and in Mr Terry's Long Furlong Field, now the paddock of Quarrendon House. The riders had to keep the turnpike on their right and not encroach on it, which would have been difficult as it was crowded with mounted spectators, as can be seen in the prints. And they had to round Fleet Marston church, referred to as the Chapel, on its north side. *The Times* report described the course as:

..... nearly flat throughout with only a slight rise and fall in the first mile, and again at Fleet Marston Chapel, near the brook, about three

fields from home. The country was composed partly of heavy ploughed land, and partly of ridge and furrow grass field, all amazingly deep, with very severe double fences and ditches; the brook, with railing at the side from which it was charged, being 14 or 15 feet across.

The Chase was for horses carrying not more than 11 stone: £15 entry with £100 added, forfeit £10. There were many distinguished spectators including two Fitzclarence brothers who were illegitimate sons of King William IV, and the famous Count d'Orsay.

The fifteen horses were:

	Owners	Riders
Yellow Dwarf	Lord Waterford	Owner
Vivian	Captain Lamb	Captain Becher
Laurestina	Mr Firth	Mr Powell
Butterfly	Mr Crommelin	Owner
Rochelle	Mr J Anderson	Mr J Mason
The Pony	Mr D Baring	Mr Cooper
Amazon	Mr Geary	Owner
Mantrap	Mr Harris	Mr Westley
Gnat	Mr Smith	Mr Chandler
Sailor	Mr Haythorne	Owner
Red Deer	Mr Bryan	Mr G Rice
Grimaldi	Mr Elmore	Mr Seffert
Cannon Ball	Mr Solloway	Owner
Glasgow	Mr J Sadler	John Day, jnr
Jerry	Mr Phillips	Mr G Patrick

Betting at the start:

3 to 1	against Rochelle
6 to 1	" Vivian
7 to 1	" The Pony
8 to 1	" Yellow Dwarf
10 to 1	" Laurestina

After starting (at 11 o'clock) just beyond Waddesdon church, the direction was straightforward for the first two miles; the houses now lining the by-road to Quanton had not been built at the time.

However, accounts differ. The *Bucks Herald* says the runners 'kept together' but *The Times* report, which is confirmed by the caption of Plate 1, says that from the start :

they immediately divided, six or seven going to the right and the others to the left. On getting into the fourth field the two divisions joined Rochelle, The Pony, Grimaldi in advance. Grimaldi fell at the fence at the end of this field, Laurestina lying so close behind him that Mr Powell, unable to stop her, jumped clean over man, horse, and fence. Vivian was still leading followed by The Pony, Rochelle, Laurestina, Yellow Dwarf and Grimaldi, who had recovered his ground in double quick time. At this point Jerry took a line a little to the left, several gateways being nicely prepared for him: the ruck of horses at this time were on the other side of a double fence which ran parallel with the line. Becher and Powell, with great presence of mind, followed Jerry's line, not a little to the annoyance of the parties who had laid it out; they went through the gate, and the others about the same time taking the edge at the bottom of the field on the other side, and they all met together in the next.

At this point Fowler's version of this piece of skull-duggery can be noted:

Jem Mason was first favourite. He rode a splendid horse, of great power and much speed [this was Rochelle]. In the middle of the race was a very stiff fence, and in it was an old gateway, railed up with very strong rails, which it was supposed no horse would attempt to jump. The night before the race the two upper rails were sawn nearly in two, so as just to hang together. This had been done privately, and Jem was told to ride full swing at it, and once safely over, he would have a great advantage over the rest of the field; but the "little game" was discovered, and early in the morning an extra rail, doubly strong, was inserted, and the unsuspecting Jem rode confidently at this obstacle. The horse struck the rail, came over a tremendous cropper, and lost all chance of the race.

If Fowler is right and it was Mason riding Rochelle who came the cropper, then he must have remounted for he certainly finished sixth. *The*

Times implies that it was Jerry who was involved; she too fell at the last fence and did not finish. All this took place at around the halfway mark between Blackgrove Farm and the turnpike (Plate 1).

They were now approaching the Chapel on its hill and, below it the Fleet Marston brook shown in Plate 2.

Vivian now made strong running, followed by Grimaldi, Laurestina and The Pony; behind, or nearly alongside them, being Jerry, Yellow Dwarf, Rochelle, Glasgow and the Butterfly, until about two fields from North [Fleet is meant] Marston Chapel, where Yellow Dwarf met with a tremendous fall in the second ditch. Vivian now took a line of his own to the brook, which has a four-foot railing, and coming as it did after three miles of hard running and fencing – it was no contemptible jump – he cleared in superb style, and was followed in a masterly manner by Grimaldi and Laurestina, The Pony, Rochelle, Jerry and Glasgow; but Cannon Ball, the Yellow Dwarf and Jerry's 'pilot' met with a ducking. Vivian now had a strong lead, which he maintained to the end, and won easily by five or six lengths, Grimaldi being second, The Pony third and Laurestina fourth; the others were so mixed with the crowd, reaching the winning field, that we cannot assign places to them. At the last fence (double) but one The Pony, Rochelle and the Amazon, and Red Deer fell and Yellow Dwarf met with a similar mischance at the next. The distance was done in 12 minutes. [*The Times*]

The *Bucks Herald's* account of the race adds something to the longer account:

.... at Chapel Ground where Vivian took a decided lead, taking a leap into the last field but one with wonderful celerity and power. Here Becher had the race in hand, although to get into the last field he had to smash through a formidable blackthorn hedge, into the midst of which the Yellow Dwarf pitched the Marquess of Waterford and then rolled after him with as little compunction as if he 'had been a ploughboy instead of a peer, but fortunately no damage was done except to his lordship's 'leathers' which were somewhat sullied by the soil ... There was not so large an assemblage of horsemen on this day as on Tuesday, but 'all the

sporting world' were there that is 'everybody who is anybody'.

As the race had started at 11 there remained ample time for many followers – but presumably none of the riders – to join a hunt which the *Bucks Herald* noted:

At 12 o'clock the stag Guildford was turned out by Chapel Ground, and there was an excellent run with the King's Hounds (although the northeasterly wind which blew keenly was not the most favourable for scent as can be imagined) which was eventually taken at Wing.

On the Friday Mr de Burgh's hounds met at Aston Abbots and had an excellent hunt.

The Times summed up the week:

The extraordinary success which has attended these Steeple Chases must be attributed as much to the high character of the stewards, the Earl of Errol and Sir Seymour Blane, as to the celebrity of the horses engaged, and the peculiarly favourable nature of the country over which they had to run. Too much cannot be said in praise of the farmers in the neighbourhood. Their conduct was in the highest degree liberal and obliging throughout, notwithstanding the injury which must have been done to their lands by the immense crowds present each day.

THE PRINTS

The four prints must have been commissioned and produced quite quickly as they were on sale later in 1836. The artist was F. C. Turner (1782–1846), one of a trio of artists who produced prints of the Aylesbury Steeplechase; the others were James Pollard (1792–1867) and Henry Alken (1784–1851).

The prints illustrated here were engraved by Charles and George Hunt and "Dedicated to the Patrons of Field Sports by their obedient servant J. Moore and published at his Picture Frame Manufactory, West Street, Upper St. Martins Lane" They would have subsequently been hand coloured by various artists. To help them get the colours right, a list was given.

Because in most surviving sets the colours have faded over the years the above list is not of much help in identifying riders.

Colours worn

Horse	Jacket	Cap
Yellow Dwarf	Light blue	Black
Vivian	Dark Blue	Orange
Rochelle	Blue	Black
The Pony	White	Black
Red Deer	Crimson	Black
Amazon	Crimson	Black
Cannon Ball	Green	Black
Grimaldi	Saffron Green and white sleeves	Green
Laurestina	Green	Black
Gnat	Black, white sleeves	White
Butterfly	Mazzarine Blue and orange striped	Black
Sailor	Scarlet	Black
Glasgow	White	—
Mantrap	Buff	Black
Jerry	Pink	Black

In these years when the rage for Steeplechasing was at its height, its popularity did not extend to the traditional supporters of hunting; indeed they were bitterly against it for several reasons, partly snobbish, partly distrust of the somewhat raffish following, the amount of gambling it generated and the undue strain it could impose on horses. Surtees who loathed it wrote:

Some men say that foxhunting does not possess sufficient excitement; meaning thereby that there is no money to be made at it ... and it is the conversion of the generous hunter into a money-making machine and the unfairly heavy taxation of the animal's powers that we regard as the chief reason for which steeplechasing should be condemned

(Quoted in *The England of Nimrod and Surtees* by EW Bovill. Oxford 1959)

The craze did eventually die down but the steeplechase survived in a more modest regulated form.

George Lamb has contributed the following note:

The prints described above by Elliott Viney are those from Francis Turner's paintings, by far the most popular and commonly met depictions of the 1836 race. However, the success of the Aylesbury steeplechase is attested by the fact that at least fifteen prints were based on its horses and riders. Henry Alken painted a set of four episodes in the race (engraved by C.

Bentley 1836, with later reprints). James Pollard produced four aquatints (engraved by J.Harris 1836, with later reprints) and in 1837 the same artist painted six "Chances of the Steeplechase" (variously engraved by C. Rosenberg and Charles Hunt, and several times reprinted) which included some of the riders and events from the Aylesbury race. He added two more in 1839. These prints are much more difficult to find than Turner's and even the County Museum does not possess a single example.

REFERENCES

1. Fowler, JK **Echoes of Old County Life**. (Edward Arnold, London 1892). Fowler (1892) says the date was 1835 but he was writing 58 years later and his memory of the exact date is mistaken. The first Aylesbury Steeplechase was held on November 12th 1834 and is fully reported in that week's edition of *The Bucks Herald*. *Editor's Note*: It is worth noting that organised races near Aylesbury are recorded at a much earlier date. In Daniel Defoe's **A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain** (1724-6), ed GDH Cole and GC Browning, London, Dent 1962, vol 2, p14, he observes: 'It was my hap formerly, to be at Aylesbury when there was a mighty confluence of noblemen and gentlemen, at a famous horse race at Quainton Meadow, not far off, where was then the late Duke of Monmouth, and a great many persons of the first rank, and a prodigious concourse of people. I had the occasion to be there again in the late queen's reign; when the same horse race which is continu'd yearly, happen'd again'
2. Henry de la Poer Beresford 3rd Marquess of Waterford (1811-1859). 'Eccentricities' as a young man, for which he was notorious, are thus described by Ralph Nevill (*Sporting Days and Sporting Ways*, pp. 7-8, 1909) - 'he painted the Melton toll-bar a bright red, put anised on the hoofs of a parson's horse, and hunted the terrified divine with bloodhounds. On another occasion he put a donkey into the bed of a stranger at an inn. He took a hunting box in the shires, and amused himself with shooting out the eyes of the family portraits with a pistol. he smashed a very valuable French clock on the staircase at Crockford's with a blow of his fist, and solemnly proposed to one of the two railway companies in Ireland to start two engines in opposite directions on the same line in order that he might witness the smash, for which he proposed to pay. He died as a result of an accident while hunting in Ireland. (*The Complete Peerage* by GEC [George Edward Cokayne] xii/2fp 422-3)
3. Captain Becher was one of the most famous riders of the period. He had his title as an officer of the volunteer Yeomanry but, although steeplechases were supposed to be confined to gentlemen riders, he was virtually a professional jockey. His name is known to all through the brook at Aintree where he fell in the first Grand National.
4. William George Hay 18th Earl of Erroll, 1801-1846. Master of Horse to Queen Adelaide 1830-34. Master of the Buckhounds 1835-39. Lord Steward of the Household 1839-41. married Elizabeth Fitzclarence, illegitimate daughter of the future William IV, described by Lady Harriet Granville as a 'domestic, lazy, fat woman'. (G.E.C V, p.102)
5. George Nugent Grenville, 3rd Baron Nugent of Carlanstown (I), MP for Aylesbury 1812-22, 1847-50. A Lord of the Treasury 1830-2. High Commissioner for the Ionian Islands 1832-35. Married (1813) Anne, daughter of Hon. Vere Poulett. Nugent was an extreme High Whig or rather Whig/Radical in politics. In 1832 he published his sympathetic *Some Memorials of John Hampden*. Nugent's mother-in-law was a member of the Becher family. (GEC ix pp. 793-4)

Editors' Note

This article was prepared for publication after the death of Elliott Viney. The main text had been completed but a number of intended footnotes were missing (some have been provided by the editors) and also some illustrations of the course as it is today. It is known that Elliott wished to include illustrations of points identifiable on the ground today but time has precluded arranging this. Elliott would certainly have wished to thank his daughter Mrs D. Scrimgeour for photographs of the prints, the County Museum for other assistance with the illustrations, Julian Hunt of the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies for providing relevant information, and no doubt many others.