



## LINGFIELD PARK RACECOURSE

Lingfield Park Racecourse is one of, if not, the busiest race course in the UK. This is due principally to its all-weather track which as the name suggests allows racing throughout the year except in extreme conditions, and then such weather usually precludes the movement of horse-transport in any event.

### **Historical Background**

Lingfield Park is in a particularly attractive tract of open country stretching from the south side of Lingfield village almost to the Sussex border which once formed part of Billeshurst and Felcourt manors. The village stands on a sandstone outcrop above the Eden flood plain. It has an ancient heritage. It was first mentioned in a 9<sup>th</sup> Century will and its Saxon church and some 600 acres were gifted to Hyde Abbey in 984AD. Its heyday came four centuries later when the de Chobhams of Starborough Castle rebuilt the church and founded an intercessory college of priests with a guest house for college visitors. With Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries (1554) when the college was closed down and Cromwell's destruction of the castle a hundred years later, Lingfield lapsed into a rural idyll and remained undisturbed until the coming of the railway.

By 1800 Lingfield Park was known as the Mansel or Weir Courtney estate and was an outlying possession of the Mansel Phillips family which had its 'seat' and principal lands in South Wales. In the 1880s the family got into financial difficulties, ironically because of gaming debts, and the decision was taken to dispose of the outlying portions including the Lingfield property. This comprised some 580 acres and included four farms, two small holdings, a water operated flour mill, and some 120 acres of woodland, wasteland and water.

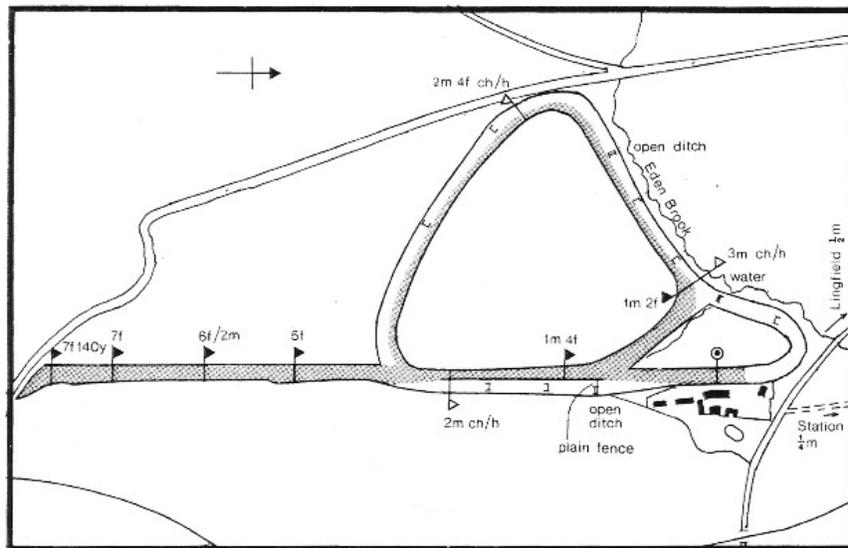
Coincidentally the Brighton and South Coast Railway completed the rail link between East Grinstead and Croydon via Oxted thus affording Lingfield and Dormansland direct access to London and the South Coast. The line was opened in 1884 with new stations at Lingfield and Dormans. With the railway came land development potential especially for up-market properties providing rural retreats for wealthy businessmen and sporting opportunities for rich young bachelors. In 1886 the Mansel Trustees sold the Lingfield property to a Mr J F Boulding who in turn sold 218 acres, excluding most of the farmlands, to the Bellaggio Estate Company. The company records have been lost so it is difficult to say now who the driving force was behind the scheme to build Dormans Park. Mr Arthur Burr, a Kent coal owner, was a principal share holder in the company but apparently he never joined the board. He was a keen sportsman as witness the advertisement in *The Lingfield Directory* for 1897 for a 'New Bungalow Town and

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Club' which was to have exceptional facilities for 'Boating, Fishing, Skating, Tennis, Tobogganing, Polo, etc.' It seems that Burr had hopes the company would include a racecourse amongst its facilities, but the lack of funds ruled this out. The racecourse was laid out by a Mr R C Leigh, who according to the Lingfield historian Arthur Hayward, owned the land.

### The Early Years

Leigh's racecourse comprised a straight mile extending from Blackberry Lane on the southern boundary to a few yards of what became known as Racecourse Road, and circular flat and steeplechase courses in two concentric circles between the winning-post and a point in the straight some four furlongs from the finish.



Elegant wooden stands were erected by the winning post and an entrance to the course built on Racecourse Road. A covered way was provided for race goers and horses from the new railway station, which had a purpose built siding for the unloading of horse boxes.



*Photograph of the stands taken during The Club August Meeting 1896. (Racing Illustrated)*

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The inaugural race meeting took place on 15 November 1890 under National Hunt Rules. The first event bore the title 'Selling Hunters' Flat Race of £98 over two miles on the flat'. The winner was Major Harvey Spillers's Old Tatt, ridden by Mr W E Dury, who started at odds of 4-1 on. The horse was subsequently sold for two hundred guineas. The second race was a three mile steeplechase won by Gamecock, ridden by Dollery and the third also a steeplechase was won by Chancery ridden by William Nightingale whose son became a well known trainer at Epsom.

Lingfield benefitted from the demise of a number of Surrey courses in the previous years – Reigate in 1864, Guildford in 1870, Egham in 1884 and Croydon in the year Lingfield opened, albeit that Croydon's races were transferred to Gatwick. In 1892 Lingfield put on a 'Grand National Chase' over 4 1/2 miles and four years after its unpretentious beginning Lingfield Park was granted permission by the Jockey Club as a flat racing venue. The inaugural meeting took place on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1894. Among the distinguished visitors was HRH Edward, Prince of Wales for whom a red carpet was provided for the walk from the station. The meeting got off to a sensational start with the winner of the first race, the Oxted Selling Handicap over five furlongs for a £100 prize, being disqualified.

HRH subsequently graciously agreed that Lingfield could incorporate the Prince of Wales feathers in its official heading. The prince made a second visit to Lingfield shortly after his accession as Edward VII.

A delightful contemporary description of a day's racing at Lingfield is provided in *Racing Illustrated* for August 26<sup>th</sup> 1896 in its report of *The Club August Meeting*, when despite 'the counter attractions of the moors and the seaside' the attendance was well up on that anticipated. The first race was somewhat of a disappointment 'as the market foreshadowed the race was a foregone conclusion, as indeed it could not well being helped since Wheatfield does not fairly get a mile, and Racton – well, Racton's chance was fairly represented by the odds of 100 to 1 in a field of three!'. However the later races provided better sport. The article comments favourably on the paddock which 'is spacious and complete in every detail; with every requisite for the convenience and comfort of the main performers at the meeting, both equine and human'. The article starts with the comment that 'there are few prettier south-country courses than that in Lingfield Park...' Perhaps this is the origin of 'Lovely Lingfield'?

A number of notable races were inaugurated in the early years of the racecourse including the Lingfield Park Plate for three-year olds first run on the straight mile in 1899 when the winner, Harrow, covered the distance in 1 minute 45 seconds. Mile races are no longer staged because of the need to de-accelerate the runners around the first turn of the circular course. The longest straight race is now just over 7 furlongs.

The first clerk of the course was Mr R Fowler and the course prospered under his stewardship despite local objections to its presence. Arthur Hayward records a number of instances of warnings about the 'deleterious effect of the race meetings on the simplicity and moral well being of the people of Lingfield'. In the event he observed no evidence of undue misbehaviour on race days nor the presence of shady bookmakers in the village.

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Local objections to the necessary footpaths closures on the racecourse were assuaged by the provision of free tickets to race meetings for local residents. Hayward goes on to say that Lingfield owes much of its then modern development to the two-day meetings and the consequent demand for overnight lodgings, much of which he says was well built and tastefully designed. Another, and probably more important, factor in the growth of the village was the early practice of a daily commute into London.

### **The Inter-war Years**

On 16th October 1920 a sixteen year apprentice had his first ride in public on a horse named Clockwork. The race was the first of the meeting and was the October Nursery Handicap over seven furlongs. There were 21 runners. The apprentice had accompanied the horse on the train from Ogbourne, Wiltshire, to Lingfield and had walked him from the station. The horse was unplaced but the young Gordon Richards rode it sufficiently well to convince its trainer, Martin Hartigan, that he had a future. It is said that Richards always had a soft spot for Lingfield Park.



*Gordon Richards (right) with Harry Wragg at Lingfield 7<sup>th</sup> November 1931  
(National Horseracing Museum)*

The original wooden stands were replaced in 1921 by new buildings of brick and concrete designed by Brierly of York (who also designed York race course). The stands were built by Sir Robert McAlpine and Sons after whom the grandstand was named. Presumably he stood the cost of the building as well as actually building the structure.

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*The McAlpine stand, 1921 (National Horseracing Museum)*

In 1932 the then clerk of the course, Mr Fred Wilmot, put Lingfield firmly on the racing map by it being the first racecourse to stage races designated as Derby and Oaks Trials before the Epsom meeting in June. Lingfield's left-handed track closely resembles the Derby course with a sharp downhill turn into the home straight similar to the Epsom run to Tattenham Corner. The winner of the first Derby Trial, April the Fifth, went on to win the Derby. The race was worth £378 in 1932. In 2009 the purse was £65,000 with £36,900 going to the winner.



*April the Fifth, first winner of the Lingfield Derby Trial and the Derby 1932  
Jockey: Frederick Lane, Owner and Trainer: Tom Walls  
(National Horseracing Museum)*

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Since April the Fifth's success seven horses have gone on to win the Derby, the last being High Rise in 1998. There have been two Oaks winners from the Oaks Trials, User Friendly in 1992 and Lady Carla in 1996.

During the inter-war period Lingfield's popularity as a National Hunt venue was high and several notable steeplechasers and hurdlers raced at Lingfield despite the relative ease of the steeplechase course.

### **Second World War**

The race course was requisitioned at the beginning of the war and was designated as a secure camp to hold either enemy aliens or prisoners of war (PoWs). After the Nazis' rise to power in 1933 many German-Jewish families made plans to flee Germany. Refugees who fled to Britain had to register as 'Aliens'. When war broke out their status changed to 'Enemy Alien'. For security reasons they were then detained in secure locations. In the spring of 1940 a thousand aliens were transferred to Lingfield. By the end of the year however they had been transferred elsewhere and Lingfield was adapted from a secure unit to a prison primarily for Italian PoWs. The camp held mainly Italians up to 1943 many of whom were trusted to work on neighbouring farms. After the Normandy Landings the camp was used to hold German PoWs. The camp was closed in April 1945 and the racecourse returned to its owners, the Beckwith-Smith family.

### **The Post War period**

Racing recommenced after the war with a two day flat meeting on 26th and 27th April 1946. The meeting got off with some style with Gordon Richards winning the first race, the Four Elms Maiden Plate over one mile, on HM The King's horse, Golden Coach. There were five races that day.

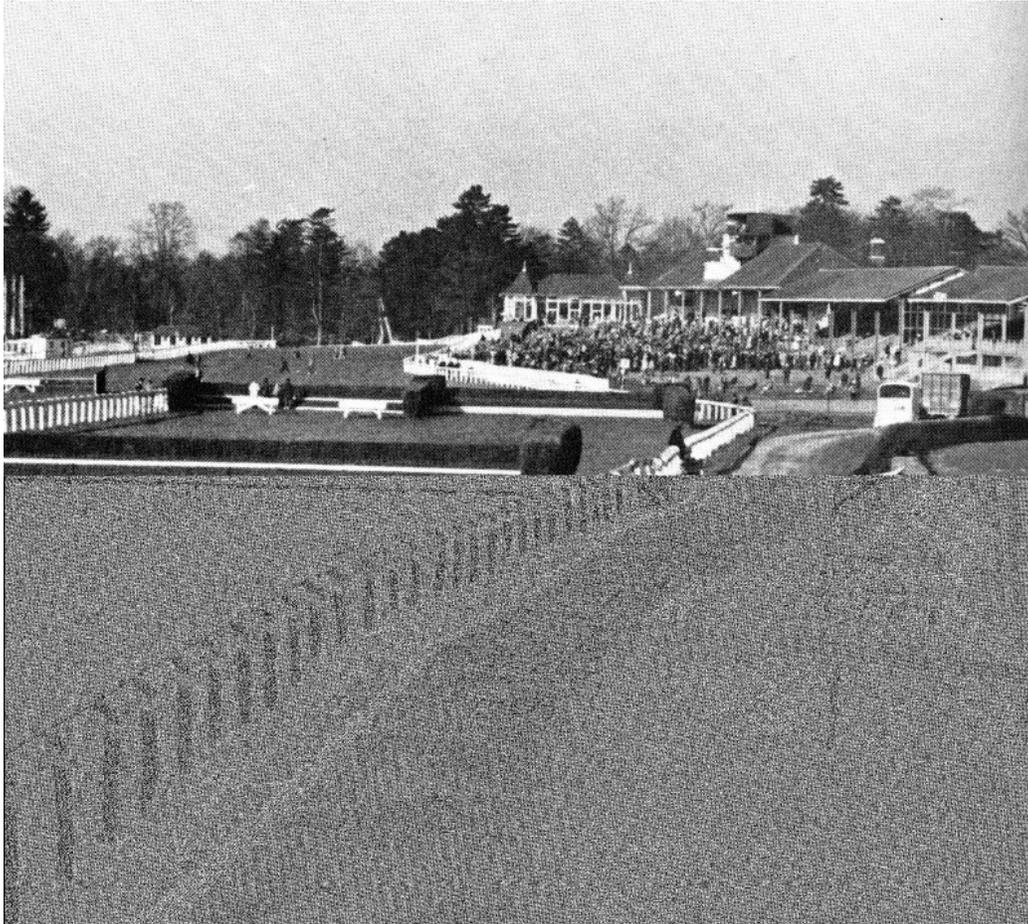
However poor drainage has always been a problem at Lingfield and caused many a cancellation after the war. The course is laid out on the upper section of the Eden River flood plain. Persistent drainage problems are due to the main flow of rain water accumulating from the high ground in Dormansland and to the south, and the tributaries of the Eden Brook in the west frequently overflowing its banks. In the Middle Ages much of the area was water meadow.

### **Ladbroke's**

In November 1974 the Beckwith-Smiths put the course up for sale explaining that it was no longer an economic proposition to run it as a private company. A few weeks later Ladbroke's purchased the estate for £500,000. A new company, a wholly-owned but autonomous subsidiary of Ladbroke's, was formed to run race meetings. John Hughes, clerk of the course at Chepstow was appointed managing director and clerk of the Lingfield racecourse. When the deal was mooted doubts were expressed as to the propriety of a bookmaker owning a racecourse but after the statutes were examined the Home Office raised no objection and the deal went through. Had it not racing would most likely have come to an end at Lingfield.

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The race calendar at that time provided for monthly two-day Flat meetings from May through to November and one day National Hunt meetings in December, January and February with two two-day meetings in March, 21 race days in all. The course was graded by the Levy Board as Group Two for both Flat and National Hunt races.



*Lingfield Park Racecourse from the second furlong post looking north, circa 1975*

### **Rowanglen Company**

In 1982 Ladbroke's sold the business to Ron Muddle of Rowanglens who obtained permission for a drainage scheme to prevent flooding on the racecourse. Some £80,000 was obtained from the Levy Board as a subsidy and further grants from government sources were secured for the purpose. The drainage construction achieved its general objective but it was still obvious that the wet Lingfield turf would still limit the number of race meetings a year and effect the financial profitability of the racecourse. Rowanglen decided in 1987 to obtain planning permission for an all-weather track. Although these had been successful in many places in the world this would be the first all-weather track in the UK. The selected contractor was the British firm Equitrack. Their system used an especially graded sand, treated with oil and polymer. Its design enabled the track to be rolled and harrowed in nine minutes.

Rowanglen also received planning permission for an 18 hole golf course on the farm land lying either side of the long straight. In the 1980s it was difficult to gain entry to existing golf courses. This generated a demand for new courses and farms which were barely viable were put to alternative use. Lingfield Park Golf Course opened in May 1987 with a pro/am tournament and a membership of some three hundred players. With the exception of the 18<sup>th</sup>, which is called The Horseshoe (the greenside bunkers representing the nail holes), the holes were named after famous race horses. The competition programme included a Derby Plate and Oaks Bowl played on the Trials weekend. The season starts with a competition between the captain's team challenging the vice-captain's for the Lingfield Rider Cup using the Ryder Cup format. Golf club members are also members of the racecourse. LPGC is affiliated to the Surrey Golf Union and the Ladies Golf Union. The first club captain was Ronald Granger OBE of Felcourt.

### **Leisure Investments**

In September 1988 Rowanglen sold its interest in Lingfield Park Racecourse and Golf Club to Leisure Investments for £7 million. In a flurry of activity and with a fleet of earth moving equipment the all-weather racecourse was completed, tested and approved. It was constructed within the boundaries of the steeplechase circuit. The first race took place on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1988. The construction cost was £4 million. By this time Leisure Investments were in severe financial difficulties and put the complex up for sale at an initial figure of £25 million. But with bank rates doubling and the country in recession the original offer price had to be reduced. After ten months in receivership the complex was sold to Arena Leisure in 1991.

### **Arena Leisure**

In recent years Arena Leisure have made great improvements to the racecourse infrastructure with the replacement of stands and a new entrance plus the construction of a hotel and leisure facilities. Over the years the racing calendar has been extended with some 90 days' racing programmed for 2010 including four National Hunt meetings over the original course first used in 1890.

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### Sources:

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