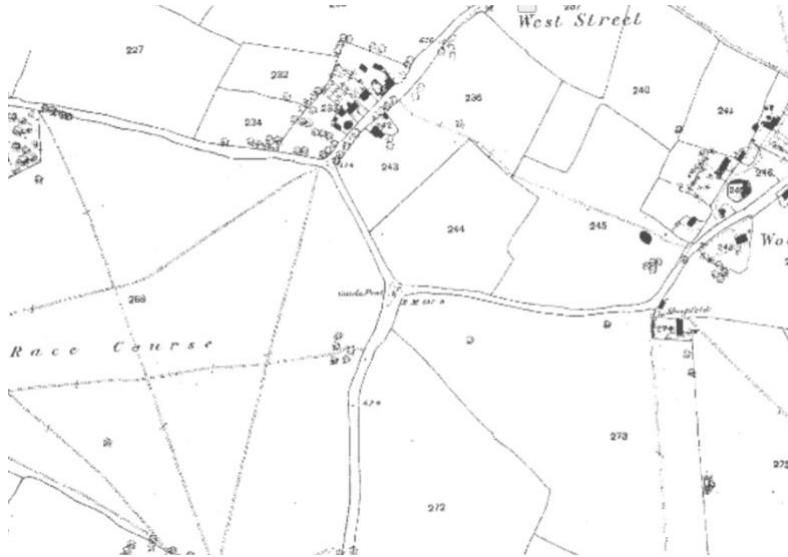


Come to the Races.....8000 spectators flocked to Lenham

by Henny Shotter

Between 1848 and 1860 Lenham had its very own 6-furlong racecourse on the hill above Lenham.



The Ordnance Survey Map of 1871-1890 marks the location clearly on Faversham Road where the road forks to turn east towards Woodside Green and to the left to West Street. The 'Lenham and Mid Kent Races' took place every year in June and were organised by the local gentry. In one year, for example, stewards: Baronet Edward Filmer (MP, Sutton Place, East Sutton) and J.D.S. Douglas (Chilston Park). In another year, one of

the stewards was Lord North and in another the Earl of Winchelsea (Eastwell Park). It is, however, likely that the driving force behind the races was J.D.S. Douglas who was also Lord of the Manor of Lenham. The races were a highlight for the local community and will have brought business to Lenham.

The customary races at Lenham were: The Mid-Kent Handicap, which was run over a distance of a mile by 3-year-old and older horses. Then there was the 'Lenham Plate', a 1.5-mile Handicap Race for horses 3 years and over.

There were also the Maiden Plate and the Chilston Park Stakes, run over one mile.

The Kent Heraldⁱ reported in June of 1849 very positively about the racecourse and its stand, which was 'very fashionable filled'. It says, "The day was exceedingly beautiful, the spectators were about 5,000.' There were side shows and vending booths and, of course, bets were taken.

Carriages from Canterbury, Rochester and Maidstone arrived steadily and one carriage with four horses contained military officers from the Chatham Garrison. These gentlemen brought with them 'stores of abundance' in the form of a picnic consisting of fowl, beef, lamb, wine, bottled ales. This abundance of food attracted the attention of bystanders, which prompted the gentlemen to share some of their food with 'several poor persons'. Unnecessary to mention that the circle of 'poor people' surrounding the officers grew remarkably quickly.

The Kentish Gazette reported in 1850 that the races which took place on a Wednesday, were attended by 8,000 persons! This is very difficult to imagine when you know the rural spot where the racecourse was located. However, there were reports of many cart and horse accidents in the area when the races were on and in one year the road to 'Ospringe' was blocked for hours after a cart overturned.

"Swalcliffe"ⁱⁱ won the 'Lenham Plate' by two lengths in 1856

The Kentish Gazette reported on 1.7.1856 about an accident caused by a thoughtless spectator. A farmer from Borden, a Mr. John Crouch, crossed the course just before the winning post. Unfortunately for him, as well as a horse and its rider, he had

chosen the wrong moment just as the horse, Knighton, and his rider, Searle, who were in the lead position had just come round the corner! We don't know the severity of the injury to Mr. Crouch when horse and rider collided with him, but the rider was hit by other oncoming horses on the left side of his head and sustained a bleeding wound. The horse, fortunately, got up and ran off riderless.

In 1859, ten years after the opening of the racecourse, one journalist was rather indignant about the Lenham Race when he wrote: 'The characteristics of a fair were far more predominant ...than an assimilation to sport'. He complains that side shows such as the 'Alhambra circus' and 'Professor Hablin' received more attention than the racing itself. However, the course was crowded and 'the little town was in the cheeriest bustle as van after van brought pleasure-seekers from the neighbouring villages'.

The journalist, writing for 'Sporting Life', observed that 'the starting was disgracefully mismanaged'. He also agreed with concerns about safety at the turn at the top where considerable 'squabbling' was going on. The horse, Florentian bolted and 'ran through a lot of spectators, who with their children, narrowly escaped serious injury'. One horse owner complained about the conditions at the course and wanted to report the issues to the Jockey Club.

The 'Sporting Life' journalist expressed his hope that something would be done in the next year 'otherwise it will be impossible to avoid serious calamity.'

Perhaps it was the mismanagement in 1859 which brought 'The Lenham and Mid- Kent races' to an end. The regulations for the 1860 race were very strict in regard to both horse and rider. In addition, no gambling was allowed, all side shows and booths required permission of the stewards, and no alcohol could be sold and bought on the course.

The 1860 was the last race in Lenham. In 1861, Charing held a race, after an absence of 50 years. Fortunately, in 2026 the Charing race is still going strongly!



ⁱ All newspaper newspaper articles referred to are published by <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

ⁱⁱ Our thanks go to Richard Maylam for providing the image