

Shirley Racecourse

The land now occupied by Shirley Golf Club had been used for many years as a racecourse and horse racing is known to have taken place at Shirley since the turn of the century.

A lease was granted to Frederick Gowing, a builder of Balsall Heath, for a term of 15 years from 1901, to operate a racecourse, provided that he did not lose his licence. This lease was signed in 1902, and inferred that racing had been taking place before this date. Mr. Gowing leased the whole Elliot's Hall Estate of some 189 acres, for an annual rent of £500.

The lease, besides mentioning existing horse racing, also refers to 'The Grandstand, Pay boxes, and other wooden erections on the course which belong to Frederick Gowing, insured against loss or damage by fire in the sum of One Thousand, Five Hundred and Fifty Pounds. This statement gives a clear impression that fairly substantial buildings could have been in position for a few years, indicating that public racing could well have occurred as early as the 1890s.

It is thought that private racing may have taken place from as early as 1850 and the. Was a report that a viewing platform was specially erected at the back of Elliot's Hall (The present TSB Management College).

Before the first World War, the Headmaster of a school near to the Stratford Road in Shirley, reported that on race days, a number of his pupils were absent from school, whilst also warning his charges and others about the dangers from the greatly increased traffic going to the Racecourse along the main road, the Shirley course being a very popular venue.

OFFICIAL CARD. **PRICE 6d.**



SHIRLEY
March Meeting, 1934
WILL TAKE PLACE ON
MONDAY, MARCH 5th
UNDER NATIONAL HUNT RULES.

STEWARDS:
LORD STALBRIDGE. SIR WILLIAM FEILDEN, BART.
MAJOR HUGH PREL. H. DYKE DENNIS, Esq.

OFFICIALS:
Handicapper—Major G. JOHNSON
Starter—Mr. F. WOOD,
Judge—Mr. MALCOLM HANCOCK,
Clerk of the Scales—Mr. E. S. MORRIS
Auctioneer—Mr. A. E. HANCOCK,
Clerk of the Course and Stakeholder—Mr. W. GREGORY
82, Station Road, King's Heath, Birmingham 14
Secretary—Mr. R. F. MEALINGS, Victoria Chambers, 3, Edmund Street,
Birmingham.
Hon. Surgeon in Attendance—Dr. J. G. HOLLOCK.
Veterinary Surgeon in Attendance—Mr. NORMAN GOLD, M.R.C.V.S.

—o—
Prices of Admission (including Tax):—COURSE 2/-,
TATTERSALLS, 14/-; LADIES, 7/6, which includes Admis-
sion to Enclosure; MOTORS, COACHES, &c., 4-WHEELERS,
6/-; 2-WHEELERS, 4/-.

Telegraph Office open under Grand Stand.

MOODY BROS., LTD., PRINTERS, BIRMINGHAM

Between the wars, racing came under National Hunt rules and appears to have been highly organised, with a full staff of stewards and officials. A Telegraph office was available under the Grandstand, together with Tattersall's Ring and full betting facilities. Racing at Shirley was very popular. A programme dated Monday 7th March 1938, shows that there were 6 races during the afternoon between 2.15 p.m. and 4.45 p.m. The shortest race was 2 miles and the longest 3 miles 45 yards, the first 3 races being over hurdles and the final 3 were steeplechases over the higher fences. Each race was for 100 sovereigns, which was a remarkably high amount for the 1930s at a comparatively minor racecourse. The second and third places received only 10 and 5 sovereigns respectively, but the races were well patronised, the lowest number of runners entered on that day in any race being 21, with the top entry shown as 35 horses, although all of those entered did not run, even though shown on the race programme, the average taking part in a race being 11 horses.

It is interesting to note that the 6.0 p.m. express train from Snow Hill station, Birmingham, to Paddington, made a special stop at Knowle and Dorridge station on race days, to pick up race goers returning to London. No mention is made as to the method of conveying them to the station, some 3 miles away.

Considerable on-course betting took place, with many bookmakers, both local and from further afield, setting up their stands, close to the Grandstand. Totalisator betting was also carried out. Horses were expected to be in the parade ring 15 minutes before each race. It was rumored that when the horses were released onto the track, if the gateman lifted his cap and scratched his head as a particular horse went through, then that was the horse to back!

The other fixtures for 1938 were Wednesday 27th April, Monday 30th May and Monday 5th September, and this appears to have been the pattern for some years.

Racing ceased during the 1939-45 war years, although a number of varied events were held, from a performance by a troupe of Cossack riders to some Midland Counties Cross Country athletic meetings.

Racing at Shirley resumed after the war, in July 1947, but this time under the direction of the Pony Turf Club, who licensed 4 other courses, mainly in the south of England. There were 7 meetings held at Shirley during that year, and by 1949 about 15 meetings were proposed, starting from early April and continuing until the beginning of November. Racing was on the Flat, each meeting being of 6 races with up to 13 runners, covering distances of 6 furlongs up to 11 miles. Buses, direct to the course, travelled from the Bull Ring in Birmingham, with other services from Redditch, Coventry and Wolverhampton.

In May 1949, racing was halted at Shirley when the operating company, the Kirkby Mallory Company from Leicestershire, which controlled a number of Pony racecourses went into liquidation. The course remained closed until the beginning of 1951 when a Birmingham businessman formed a new company to open the course. All went well for a time, but during the preceding two years, all but one of the other Pony racecourses had been forced to close down. When this rival course was also abandoned, at the end of 1951, Shirley became the only Pony racecourse in the country.

The problem arose that a great many ponies were being taken out of training, and with Shirley trying to stage over 15 meetings during the course of a year, the same ponies were appearing time and again. Gradually the public began to lose interest. At the end of 1953, the organisers had applied to the Pony Turf Club for 20 fixtures during the following year, but in January 1954, the Pony Turf Club stewards announced that there would - be no further meetings and racing finally ceased at Shirley.

An official at Shirley said, "With only one course operating, (in the country), the meetings at Shirley were too frequent and with insufficient ponies and support not forthcoming from the public, we had a difficult time at Shirley last year..... It is hoped that National Hunt racing, which was a feature before the war, will be resumed".

In June 1954 auctions were held at Shirley to dispose of racecourse equipment. Over 300 lots were offered including 250 horse-troughs, jockeys weighing scales, six starting gates and 1 1/2 miles of course railings. Amongst the 200 buyers were farmers, scrap merchants and racecourse representatives.

So ended racing at Shirley. When racing had been suspended in the middle of 1949, Solihull Motor Cycle Club supported a suggestion that the racecourse should be converted into a track for motor, motor cycle and cycle racing together with other amusements. It was intended that the track should be just over a mile long and constructed of concrete. The scheme was turned down by Solihull Council, after objectors had mentioned increased traffic and the possibility of 'undesirables' being attracted to the area.

When the racecourse was put up for sale, the buildings on the course comprised of two grandstands, the main one known as the Southern Stand, being about 150 feet long and fitted with wooden benches for the race-goers, and was covered by a corrugated iron roof. Various offices were housed under the structure including the telegraph office. Behind this grandstand stood a series of 85 stables to house the large number of horses which took part in the races, particularly in the 1930s. In the same vicinity was the tea room and the jockeys weighing-in room, a long distinctive timber building with numerous entrances, some with arched canopies.