

**COLWALL VILLAGE SOCIETY**

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**NATIONAL HUNT RACING  
AT  
COLWALL PARK RACECOURSE  
1900 to 1939.**

by

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**The Racecourse looking northwest towards Colwall Stone.**

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This aerial photograph was taken above the Evendine Lane looking northwest towards the village on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1933. The tree lined parade ring can be seen in the left foreground. The winning post and judges box are beside the running rails in front of the members enclosure. Tattersalls and the public enclosures run back round the course towards the final steeplechase jump.

## NATIONAL HUNT RACING AT COLWALL PARK RACECOURSE, 1900 TO 1939.

If you walk down to Colwall railway station, cross over the lines by the footbridge, follow the path down to the fields beyond and pause to gaze over the grassland towards the ancient earthworks of British Camp, you are looking at the site of Colwall Park Racecourse. No trace remains today of this once famous National Hunt racecourse which was the venue for regular meetings for 39 years from 1900 onwards. Yet, had you stood there just before a race day in the first four decades of the twentieth century the scene would have been very different. You would have seen white wooden posts and rails marking the one and a half mile circuit, jumps across the track, stands for spectators, a platform for the judges, changing rooms for the jockeys, bars in marquees for the race goers and all the other paraphernalia that goes with National Hunt horse racing in this country.



Each race meeting would last one day, normally a Monday. There would be six races; three steeplechases over large birch and gorse fences and three hurdle races over smaller jumps. The distances the horses ran would vary between two and three miles. Racing was a very popular sport and even the smaller courses often attracted large crowds. People would travel up from the Welsh valleys or down from the Black Country by train, for the motor car was only just starting to appear. They packed the racecourse public enclosures to enjoy a day in the fresh air, and perhaps, if luck was on their side, they would enjoy the proceeds of

a lucky win after a bet with the many on-course bookmakers. They would drink a few pints of beer or Herefordshire cider to wash down the jellied eels or Gloucestershire elvers which were sold from stalls in the enclosures. Meanwhile the owners, trainers and jockeys would be in the paddock which lay beside the grandstand close to where the Elms School swimming pool used to be. The regular and more wealthy race goers, the “toffs” as they were called by the rest, would become members of Colwall Park Club (membership £3. 13s. 0d. a

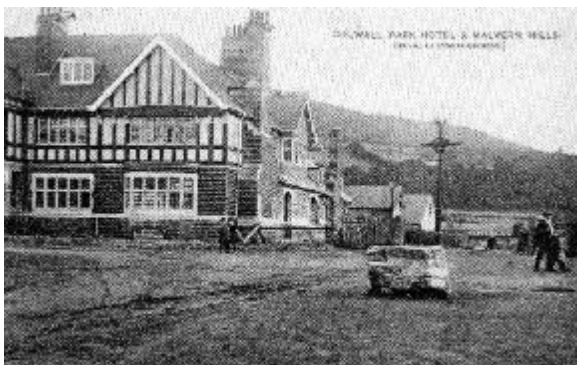
year). This would allow them to bring two ladies and partake of tea during the meeting. They were also entitled to exclusive access to the members enclosure, which had its own grandstand and stood beside the ring where the racehorses were paraded before being ridden down to the start.



Mr Rowland  
Cave-Browne-Cave.

The racecourse was the idea of a young gentleman who had the unusual name of Mr Roland Cave-Browne-Cave. In 1895, he had married Honora (Bright) Fowler, the recently widowed daughter of one of the larger landowners in the district, a Mr Benjamin Bright, who lived at Barton Court on the road to Ledbury just outside the village and owned the very extensive Barton Estate. Mr Cave-Browne-Cave was very dashing, with enthusiastic ideas. He was very keen on horses in general and racehorses in particular. He and Honora spent their honeymoon touring the Midland cities in a vehicle drawn by a pair of horses accompanied by a local groom. In 1897, and again in 1899, his point-to-pointer “Triton” won the Lady Dudley cup at Crowle and soon after his vision to bring National Hunt racing to Colwall began to bear fruit.

The Barton Court estate was managed by a Mr Sturge, a Quaker, who lived at Bristol and used to visit Colwall twice a year. Mr Cave-Browne-Cave persuaded his mother-in-law to let him manage the estate, and soon he began to make changes.



Colwall Park Hotel in 1908

He decided that a first class hotel was needed in Colwall near to the railway station, and as the existing Stone Farm was part of the Barton Estate, the hotel could be built at the side of the farmhouse where the farm buildings stood. Agriculture was in a depressed state anyway. And so the Park Hotel came into being.

Then his attentions were directed to implementing his plans for horse racing. He started building stables for a racing stud at the entrance to Netherpaths Farm. This scheme was later abandoned and the buildings became known, as they are still to this day, as “Cave’s Folly”.

Next, in 1899, he began building the Colwall Park Racecourse on farm land adjoining the Worcester to Hereford railway line in the meadows which lay

between Brook Farm and the Malvern Hills. To help him he sought assistance from a Mr. Frederick Page, who was a Worcester resident and well known in contemporary sporting circles in his capacity as a journalist and National Hunt official. He was widely involved with course design and management throughout the southern half of the country. The course took a running line left-handed on an oval outline with a run-in of 400 yards and a slight hill on the far side. The railway was an essential part of his plan as it would provide the means whereby the racehorses travelled to and from the course. The Racecourse was most attractively situated with the Malverns forming the background and Colwall soon became a very popular place on the days when the four race meetings a year were held. The name of the Horse & Groom public house was later changed to the Horse & Jockey in keeping with the racecourse entrance close by. It is now called the Oddfellows.

The first race meeting was held on Thursday May 10<sup>th</sup> 1900. The Malvern Advertiser recorded that the new steeplechase course was 1½ miles in length with eight fences made of birch, two open ditches and one regulation width water jump, which was fed by the nearby brook. The hurdle course was one mile long with eight flights. The construction of the course had been supervised by Mr H J Connop and consisted of a covered grandstand, a Steward's box, a weighing house, barrier posts and six-fold wire. However, the Totalisator building, situated in the middle of the course was not built until the mid-1930s. A pre-view of the new racecourse had been held a week earlier and was followed by a champagne luncheon in the Horse and Groom given by Mr Cave-Browne-Cave.

The first day's racing attracted 38 runners for the three steeplechases and three hurdle races with the largest field being the nine runners in the Bosbury Selling Hurdle. This was a race where the rules stipulated that the winner had to be put up for sale by auction after the race. The Stewards included Lord Coventry and The Earl of Clonmel; the starter was Mr. Thomas Thomas and Mr Connop took the entries. None other than Mr Roland Cave-Browne-Cave won the Bosbury Selling Hurdle with his horse 'Sophos', ridden by Mr E Piggott, winning by a head to loud cheers. Under the rules of the race the horse was sold afterwards for 56 guineas (about £59). A number of undesirable characters gained admittance that day and a Mr Howard, of the Plough Hotel, Ledbury had his cash box stolen when a thief cut the canvas of the marquee in which he was selling beer. However a collection taken in the paddock made good the loss.



**Colwall Park Racecourse in June 1933.**

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This aerial photograph was also taken on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1933. In the foreground the Worcester to Hereford railway line divides the racecourse from the village. The racecourse runs beside the railway, before turning left handed into the 400 yard finishing straight. The permanent steeplechase jumps are visible spanning halfway across the course. The hurdles were removed between race meetings. The new Totalisator building can be seen in the public enclosure opposite the grandstand, paddock and finishing post. The foothills below British Camp can be seen in the background.

Not everyone in the village was enthusiastic about the new attraction. This is what one resident had to say in print a few days later:

*“It is a source of great regret that the once quiet little village of Colwall should have been desecrated by having a racecourse in its midst and sad that anyone should suggest that it would be the making of the village. Of late years Colwall has come to the front, much enterprise and industry have changed its aspect and it certainly has been much in advance of other villages; but these races have surely lowered it in the eyes of thoughtful people. Characters of the lowest type - the gambler, the pick pocket, and the ‘neer-do-well’ all assemble on these occasions; public houses, too, are overcrowded and the issues are most repugnant and demoralizing - men and women making themselves little better than brutes. Surely this we hope is not the future making of the place. Quite the reverse. It was a black day for Colwall and one it will have cause to wish had never been instituted. No good whatever resulted from last Thursday, but much evil. Yours - A lover of Colwall.*

Despite this perhaps isolated criticism, racing became established on a regular basis and although the value of the races was modest, not exceeding £48, they attracted many of the top jockeys of the day. The popular Tich Mason was to ride four winners and two thirds from six rides here on Whit Monday, 1904.

It was soon afterwards, in 1905, that the activities of Mr Roland Cave-Browne-Cave were to come to an abrupt halt. Mr Cave had spent too much of the fortunes of the Bright family and the financial outlook became very bad. So bad in fact that the whole estate had to be put up for auction, including Barton Court itself. As the estate comprised the greater portion of the parish, this had a major impact on the village. All the farms belonging to the estate, the Racecourse, the two hotels, extensive woodlands and many cottages were included. This was the first of a series of sales that took place during the period 1905 to 1919. At some time during this period the tenancy of Colwall Racecourse was acquired by a syndicated company. This was to guarantee the future of racing at Colwall Park and in the ensuing years the racecourse was to become very popular with owners, trainers and jockeys alike.

Returning however to the series of auctions, the first was held in London on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1905, the auctioneers being Millar and Son of Pall Mall. The Racecourse is listed in the particulars as part of “Brook Farm.” The farm is described as having been used for several years past as a racecourse. There was stabling with 35 loose boxes, harness and saddle rooms, a stable boys’ bothy, saddling shed, weighing room, sale ring stand, telegraph office, stewards’ room, refreshment bars, dining rooms, a club stand and a grandstand. The land was measured at

102 acres, and the particulars also suggest that the land could be used as a 18-hole golf course without interfering with racing. The incomes from the racing and the “Colwall Park Race Club” were estimated to be £500 p.a. Whether the racecourse was one of the lots sold at this time is not recorded, but it seems unlikely as on June 26<sup>th</sup> 1913 Barton Court Estate was again offered for sale by auction, this time by the direction of Mrs. Cave-Browne-Cave, the sale taking place in the “Horse and Groom Hotel,” Colwall. The auctioneers were Young and Gilling of Cheltenham. The Racecourse was again listed in the particulars as part of “Brook Farm.” 1914 was the year in which the Great War started and most National Hunt racecourses in the country were closed for the duration. Colwall Park was one of just four courses that still continued to stage race meetings without a break.

The problems associated with the ownership of the course continued however. It was yet again offered for sale at an auction which took place on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1915, this time at the Park Hotel. It was stated to be let to the Colwall Park Race Company on an annual tenancy for a rental of £363 p.a. Pencilled notes in the document indicate that a bid of £2,100 was made but £3,000 was anticipated. It was again presumably not sold as it was offered again for the fourth time in 1919. At this sale in the Star Hotel in Worcester, the racecourse lot was withdrawn despite a bid of £8,000, the Malvern Gazette recorded. Mr Cave-Browne-Cave was seen attending the sale and despite having been wounded twice in the recent war, was reported as being “in the pink”, but the report goes on to describe him as being a former resident.



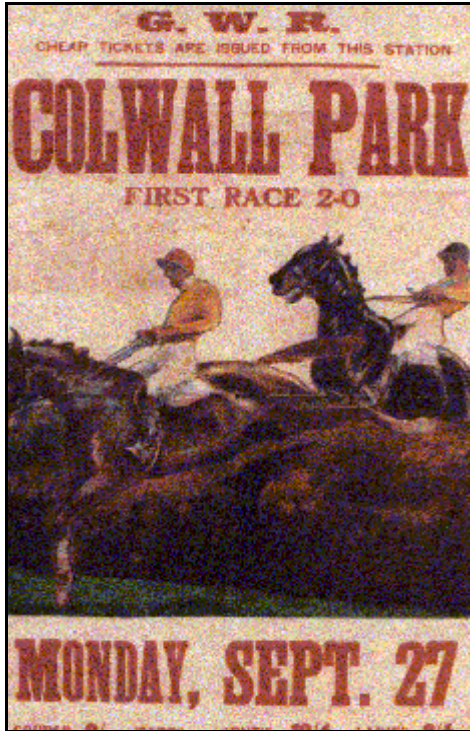
Colonel J Scott-Bowden

Soon after, in 1920, a Colonel Johnathon Scott Bowden OBE. bought both the Park Hotel and Brook Farm and joined the company running the Racecourse, becoming secretary of the club. Later in the 1920's he also bought the Racecourse and racing continued without a break. He was a vet by profession and his wife was a keen horsewoman and was involved with the remount centre in Worcester. They owned “Jimmy” a cream coloured horse which was used by the official starter. Jimmy suffered the indignity of being stolen at one time and painted to avoid recognition.

Between the two wars four meetings were arranged every year, - March, April, May, and either September or October for the autumn meeting, usually on a Monday, and Colwall presented a very lively scene each time. Attendances averaged around 3,000 and on Monday 28<sup>th</sup> May 1934 there were 4,511 paying



customers recorded, of these 3,501 paid half-a-crown (12½p.), 719 in the ring and paddock (Gentlemen 12s. 6d, Ladies 8s. 6d. (62½p., 42½p.) while 291 Members were in the club enclosure.



Great Western Railway Poster advertising the races.

During the 1920s two horses who were to go on to win the Grand National at Aintree became associated with the course. Perhaps the most fortunate winner of the Grand National, until the victory of “Foinavon” in 1967, was “Tipperary Tim”, who in 1928 and starting at odds of 100-1, was one of only two finishers. He was the only horse to complete the race without a fall, most of the rest of the field having contrived to lose their jockeys on the Canal Turn the first time around, giving his jockey Bill Dutton an unexpected win for his owner Harold Kenyon. Tipperary Tim had started his career by winning a novice chase at Colwall Park in October 1923. Then in 1932 “Forbra”, trained locally by the well known Rimell family, and who had exercised frequently, but in some secrecy, on the Colwall Park Racecourse, went on to win the

Grand National, ridden by James (“Tim”) Hamey, at his first attempt starting at odds of 50 to 1.

The 1920's and 30's were a period of peace and the races brought in money and created jobs in the village. Mr Rowland James, the well known local builder of Upper Colwall, was responsible for the maintenance of the course, still under the direction of Mr Connop.

His daughter recalls that concerning the work done at the race course by Rowland James' men, mention should be made of the unique shape of the holes cut in the three lengths of floor board joined together to form a seat to go on top of each temporary lavatory bucket. Ern Staite, the carpenter, would get the three joined boards, put his felt hat in their centre and run his pencil around the outside, and then cut out the holes.



A Members badge

It was not until around 1927 that the roads became sealed with tarmac and the use of the railway declined. Horses started to be transported by road. Private

cars became more commonplace but special trains, “race day specials”, offering cheap tickets still brought bowler-hatted miners from the pits in South Wales, and other race-goers from Hereford, Kidderminster, the Midlands and the Cotswolds. This was indeed the heyday of racing at Colwall.



Mr George Grundy, who for many years kept a family grocers shop at the Wyche Cutting, recalls that as a lad he and some other boys from Colwall used to set up an unofficial car park on Colwall Green, and charged sixpence for its use. Shortly before the race meeting was due to end, they used to move up to the sharp hairpin corners on the road leading up to the Wyche and make some more money helping to push the weaker and more unreliable cars up to the cutting on top of the Malverns on their way back to Worcestershire.

However the storm clouds of war were gathering in Europe as Adolf Hitler rose to power in Nazi Germany. The last meeting at Colwall was held on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1939. The great jockey and trainer Fred Rimell rode a winner that day in the first race on “Grayling”. T McNeill rode the 11/8 favorite, Shandwick Place, to win the “British Camp Handicap Chase over a distance of 2 miles and 50 yards and to become the last jockey to ride a winner at Colwall Park under National Hunt rules. War broke out in September that year and the meeting scheduled for later that month was cancelled., marking the end of National Hunt racing at Colwall Park.

On July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1942 the racecourse was sold by Lt.-Col. Scott-Bowden at an auction in the Town Hall, Ledbury to a company called Dowsett Mackay (Properties) Ltd., who had offices in Colwall. At the time of the sale, the course was described as having a great portion fenced with concrete posts and running boards. Double turnstile boxes existed at each entrance. The particulars tell us that the number of buildings had increased, reference was made to a Tattersalls Ring with a stand, bank, and a new covered stand to accommodate 800. Also, a newly erected tea room, ambulance room and a modern two-storey number board. The two Totalisator buildings, erected in the early 1930s by Boulton and Paul, were situated one in the paddock with 27 pay windows and one on the course with 32.

The Scott-Bowdens did not want to sell, but the firm said they would apply for power from the Government to requisition it - they were contractors to the Government for assembling machinery and essential wartime equipment - so Mr Scott Bowden perforce had to submit. Bidding started at £7,000 and the hammer fell at £10,500. Sadly the new owners had other uses for the land and it

became a military vehicle park. As a consequence the land, never very well drained in the first place, became very churned up.

Some time after peace came in 1945, attempts were made to revive racing on the course and in May 1949 the first pony race meeting, one of only five held up to 20<sup>th</sup> August that year, was held. However this never caught on with the general public and the idea was abandoned. Later, in 1960, the North Ledbury Hunt held their point-to-point on what was described as “The Old Racecourse” and on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1963 Mr. Joe Jackson Jnr, himself the son of a well known pre-war Cradley jockey, rode ‘Hollybush Wonder’ to win the Adjacent Hunts’ Maiden race, the last race run at Colwall Park under Jockey Club rules.

Very little remained of the course by 2000. A few concrete slabs marked where the grandstands once stood but little else. The only building to survive was one of the Totalisator buildings which was bought by an estate between Welland and Upton-upon-Severn where it was re-erected, complete with its little windows with steel grills, and is used as a lunch room by the local shoot. Chris Pitt in his book “A Long Time Gone” speculates that perhaps as dusk descends over Colwall, your mind’s eye will conjure up a vision of dim figures galloping in the distance....Tipperary Tim perhaps, or others. You might think you hear the thunder of hooves... you might. But the horses, like the racecourse they haunt, are long since gone.

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2. "A History of Colwall" by Mrs Winifred C Stringer, privately published in 1954.
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Eynhallow,  
The Purlieu,  
Upper Colwall.

March 2002.