

The David Allan Column

The Summers of Windsor



Royal Windsor Racecourse with the Castle and Thames behind it.

THE Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead has within its borders a great many treasures.

Windsor Castle is the sort of place you could visit for a month, marvelling at the scale and construct, checking out the Chapel, gazing at the Van Dycks or leaning on a high wall and smiling at the leafy beauty of the Great Park below.

Eton College and Ascot Racecourse are on the list. So is Legoland, especially if you are ten.

Bray, on the Thames has the remarkable distinction of having two of the four Michelin 3-starred restaurants in the UK. *The Fat Duck* has been ranked best restaurant in the world more than once while *The Waterside Inn* is the only restaurant outside France to have held 3 Michelin Stars for twenty years or more.

All this would lead naturally to an article about As-

cot wouldn't it? But no. This piece is all about another Borough Jewel. Royal Windsor Racecourse: The Home of Monday Night Racing.

Every summer Monday evening, Windsor Racecourse is rammed on bright-until-10pm nights. Tonight, still five weeks before the Summer Solstice on Ascot's second day, Windsor's first race will be at 5.20 and the last at 8.20 – seven races bang on the half hour, all going well.

"Get there early" if you are in an early race is the general maxim. The car parks fill quickly from the M4 or the back routes with queues to get into them.

For me, there are worse places to kill an hour catching up on calls or checking the form while parked beside the river surrounded by ancient trees. At the same time, I can watch a sizeable percentage of the racecourse's evening population arriving by less usual means.



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Riverboats run on the Thames from Windsor & Eton Riverside Station, itself a leisurely 54 minutes from London Waterloo and not to be confused with Windsor & Eton Central, dear me no. Leaving every half hour, the service takes 55 min. later in the afternoon for which there must be an interesting reason. Cooling rails perhaps? Heavier rush-hour loads?

Racegoers embark and chug along the river to the landing stage right next to where I park. Chattering happily while walking along the bank to the entrance, they blend with the human streams from all points in the car park plus the many who walk to the course from surrounding areas. Pints and Pimm's drinkers not driving.

On the racecourse it is true that there is a Members Enclosure and a pleasant Owners & Trainers facility, plus a smart(ish) restaurant if you want to lock yourself away from the summer and the horses. No thanks. But the whole precinct is open plan with everyone together at pre-parade and disproportionately large Parade Ring or near the Weighing Room and Winner's Enclosure, mixed in with food outlets and randomly casual seating. Call it well dressed egalitarianism. The cat can look at the King. And have a laugh.

The racetrack is extremely idiosyncratic. Weird, in fact. After breaking from the stalls at the Mile Start, the field gallops across the straight, entering a tight right handed circle. Being drawn on the early rail is 100% wrong for the next rail. You need to know.

The runners complete the circle, running across their own tracks then head up the straight for home. The

Yellow Ribbon pictured below you the idea. Start on the short bit on the right. Five and six furlong races are straight (ish). Like Bath's slight kink to the left, Windsor has a slight kink to the right favouring low draws. Unless there has been rain. Windsor's riverbank sod holds the water. If the going is Soft, the far side of the straight becomes favoured. The effect of the draw is reversed as they all pile over, racing up an otherwise unused line. Tonight it is Good, Good to Firm in places after some limited but much needed rain.



Windsor track configuration. Sort of.

In later races, the crowd, packed on the grandstand terraces at Windsor having been funnelled in through a narrow approach, must stare straight into the setting sun. Of course that is better than the horses and riders staring into it, and the patrons have a big screen opposite to help. Regular professionals - be they owners, trainers or lads and lasses - often pull rank and pop across the course to watch from a less blinding angle.

At Windsor, when the runners come off the tack, all but four of them go into the big Parade Ring to be untacked while the jockeys debrief with owners and trainers before weighing in. The jockeys walk a long way through the crowd as if picking their way through picnickers.



The sun sets after the last race at Windsor.

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Riverboats to Windsor races.

The first four actually have quite a long mounted walk through the pre-parade area when they are in close contact with racegoers before turning into the small Winners' Enclosure. There, die-hard fans get as close as they can to hear, perhaps, the conversations when the jockey jumps off the 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th.

The "Rhododendron Walk" at Sandown is another example where racegoers are able to see the horses closely after a race, by then in the care of the handler at their heads.

Until "Horses Away" is called, runners stay in the Winners' Enclosure being photographed with connections, kept on the move, watered and cooled. There are no "lead-ins" in the UK. Owners wait for their pride and joy at the appropriate place in the Enclosure, eager to slap a sweaty neck in appreciation and to hear from the jockey.

Sure, some owners will walk in with their horse after a very big race. But none will replace the person at the horse's head. Big race or small, not only is that person in charge of the horse - professionally conscious of the horse's mood and demeanour, with the jockey having abandoned control - but also it is that happy person's Day in the Sun.- tt.

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