

Huggins, Mike (2016) Book review: The heath and the horse: a history of racing and art on Newmarket Heath. *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 33 (6-7). pp. 772-773.

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The Heath and the Horse: A History of Racing and Art on Newmarket Heath by David Oldrey, Timothy Cox and Richard Nash London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2016 pp ix + 342, 198 illustrations, £35, 978-1781300237

A book on Newmarket Heath and its racing might seem at first sight merely another example of the local history of sport, but this is far more than a local history. Newmarket's various racecourses across the Heath and associated buildings have been key sites in terms of the history of British horseracing since the 1660s, albeit slightly less popular around 1740 and again in a brief collapse in its fortunes from the 1830s up to the 1850s. So this coffee-table-size book is particularly welcome in providing an outstandingly well-researched and written account of its history. There is much to praise about its comprehensive and thoughtfully analytical coverage. As a cultural historian of racing myself, I still found much to interest me and material that offered new and original insights.

Of the three authors Richard Nash is an American scholar with expertise on the early modern world of the race-horse, Tim Cox has the best racing library in Britain and David Oldrey is a former Deputy Senior Steward of the Jockey Club and racing historian. They make a strong team, and their work is highly scholarly, even if it lacks the footnotes which would make it more useful. Together they have quarried a range of often newly-available archives to present a fascinating picture of Newmarket's elite racing world. The book has many, often coloured illustrations, including some of paintings in private hands and hard to access, and the detailed captions are a further delight.

Overall it is outstanding value for money, especially when compared with some publishers' products. Racing aficionados will enjoy the references to the greatest racehorses of the past, and Newmarket's larger-than-life characters, but there is also much of interest to sports historians. The first ten chapters develop an account of Newmarket's place in racing history more broadly from its pre-1605 beginnings until the present. Five cover the period up to 1791 and five the last two centuries, so there is far more emphasis on Newmarket's formative period than in earlier books on racing. The chapters are interspersed with ten what are called 'picture puzzles', which use paintings as empirical sources, to help identify races, courses, colours of riders, horses, occasions, horse action, course alterations, buildings, recycling of images and people, and demonstrates great detective work. The ways in which paintings and prints are used to explore how racing was conducted and to recreate what things looked is a model of this type of historical analysis, though very restricted in terms of more complex visual analysis and interpretation. Part Two focuses on Newmarket Heath, its early buildings and courses, its races and topography, together with material on wartime Newmarket and the National Stud. Part Three focuses on the eighteenth century. Until recently the Jockey Club was believed to have been founded around 1750. Some years ago I noted that the move to on-line searchable newspapers had shown that the Club had an earlier history, and this is explored in much greater depth here by Richard Nash. The middle-class role in racing and its organization noted in more recent research on later periods is brought out here too, with an active role being played here by coffee-house owners, publishers, engravers, clerks of courses, shop owners and others of a merchant class. Nash also provides detailed analysis of the Newmarket Bank and the beginnings of bookmaking around 1730. This was new to me, and was

an impressive piece of research. Part Four details the chronology of the acquisition of the Heath by the Jockey Club. The book concludes with some useful appendices and there is some limited statistical analysis scattered through the book.

Having written two books on the history of racing in the period from c. 1780 to 1939, I decided last year to begin work on a cultural history of English racing in the period from 1660 to c.1815. So I found this a very useful secondary source. Oldrey et al. focus pretty tightly on Newmarket racing, rather than making substantial links to wider social or racing history, but its detailed and accurate empirical analysis deserves to be widely read, especially by those journalists and popular writers who have been content to recycle the same often repeated stories or inaccurate material. Newmarket racing has been exceptional in being the home of the Jockey Club, having far more meetings than elsewhere, more high-stakes matches, more artists recording it, more rich owners with stables there, and more prize money. It is far better documented than any other racecourse in the country, yet its histories have often been full of myth, error and ahistorical material, some of which the writers have been able to challenge. There are a very few inaccuracies, but it would be churlish to identify them. The publishers describe the book as a 'definitive' work and by and large it certainly is. Good racing books often increase in value once the print run is finished. I'll be hanging on to this one.

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