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Book Review - Aintree: the history of the racecourse

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John Pinfold, a scholar who worked at the LSE and Rhodes House in Oxford until his retirement, has long been recognised as the leading expert on the famous Grand National Steeplechase at Aintree, a course once in the country near Liverpool, and now surrounded by Liverpool's urban sprawl. Each of his books and articles has provided new insights, but *Aintree* is the best yet, an outstandingly erudite and scholarly, well-referenced but also very readable work, using statistics when appropriate, which draws on such a wide range of sources, from private family archives to government records, that it is likely to remain definitive for many years.

Aintree's Grand National Steeplechase, held annually in April, is a central part of racing's history. It dominated steeplechasing in Britain until challenged by the growing prestige of the Cheltenham Gold Cup, but remains the most popular national and international steeplechase event in terms of its TV coverage, reaching an estimated global audience of 600 million and a gambling market of perhaps £500 million. There have been many popular books on the history of courses such as Ascot, Epsom or Newmarket, nearly all limited in terms of primary research, lacking critical approach and perpetuating long-held myths. But this is the second quality book in six months, following on from David Oldrey, Timothy Cox and Richard Nash's *The Heath and the Horse: A History of Racing and Art on Newmarket Heath* (London: PWP, 2016). Both debunk many of the myths and challenge long-held thinking.

Pinfold's book takes the reader through the history of the Aintree course and its use: its founding in 1829 by William Lynn, the landlord of the Waterloo Hotel in Liverpool; early flat races; the first Liverpool Grand National Steeplechase in 1836; the steeplechase, Grand National and Mildmay courses; each and every permanent stand, the fences and stables; the history of its management; its spectators and their pleasures; the impact of the First and Second World Wars; its decline and near demise in the 1950s when attendances at British race-meetings dropped dramatically; the attempt to sell the course by the notorious Mirabel Topham, the chair of the board, in 1964; the vicissitudes of the period up to the 1980s as the course struggled to survive; the raising of money, the acquisition of the course by the Jockey Club and the rebuilding and transformations of the course in recent years. Many books by racing aficionados fail to recognise that because of the large fields (more than 40 horses in the past, and now limited to 40) and large fences it is a very challenging course for horses and jockeys, an 'extreme sport', with frequent jockey injuries and regular horse fatalities, so it has attracted controversy and debate. Pinfold is too good a historian to ignore this and devotes a full chapter to discussing the history of issues of animal welfare surrounding the Grand National. He also reminds us that three jockeys have died from falls over the Aintree fences, and that in 1894 Lord Sefton's fall there during the Altcar Steeplechase left him so physically and mentally disabled that when he became the Earl his estate had to be run for him by the High Court.

Unlike American racecourses, which have many race days during the racing season, British racecourses, with the exception of Newmarket, have a long history of limited racing use. Between the wars, for example, in its

heyday, Aintree had just ten days of racing a year. However much less noticed by historians has been the ways in which courses have long been used for other activities and sports, and two chapters in the book bring the other uses of Aintree out well. Aintree today has concerts by performers like Deacon Blue and Tom Jones, as well as show jumping. But in the past, Aintree had a vast range of sporting events, as well as agricultural meetings, fetes, volunteer reviews, and shows. Up to 1914 Pinfold shows that sporting events included cock-fighting, harness racing, pedestrianism, archery, polo pony racing, cricket and even once in 1863 a race between an elephant and some juvenile runners. In the 1950s a motor race track was built and a British Grand Prix was first run in 1955, attracting large crowds, despite the poor quality of stands and catering. The BARC continued to run motor racing there until 1964 and the Club Circuit is still used. Motor-cycle racing has also featured there since 1954. The course first featured football when the Aintree Munitions Ladies Team practised there in 1917–18, and a local team, Aintree Villa, has played there for over half a century. Aintree was also among the first racecourses to feature aeronautic displays and was briefly in 1924 an early civilian airport, with flights to Belfast.

The book gains further strength from the admirable way that the author has been able to use visual material. He has ranged widely here, using newsreel film, paintings, posters, photographs, diagrams, plans, flyers, race-cards, prints and many maps, including a Second World War German military map showing targets round the course.

Pinfold's book is an accessible, informative and fascinating account of a course that has come to symbolize steeplechase racing in England. It is much more than a work of reference and should appeal to both the academic historians of sport and to those interested in the history of an iconic location.