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THE RISE AND FALL OF WESTMORLAND'S 'COUNTY' RACECOURSE: KENDAL RACES 1820–1834

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Although many towns had race meetings in the past, most survived only a short time. It has been rare that the reasons why so many failed have been explored. Most simply stopped without any local newspaper explanation. This microstudy of a small local northern race meeting is very suggestive about just how complex and precarious the survival of any meeting could be, and aims to encourage further research. Kendal, the largest town in Westmorland, had very occasional low status race meetings in the eighteenth century on its Fell Side. But in 1820 annual races were revived on a new course to the east of the town, and the following year a new improved course was constructed to the west. The new races, the only ones in Westmorland at that time, lasted only fifteen years, from 1820 to 1834. This paper explores their nature, and the complex reasons lying behind the rise and fall of Kendal's so-called 'race week'. It starts by exploring its beginnings and describing the varied attractions that the 'race week' offered: wagering, heavy drinking, gaming and trickster activities, entertainments, a band, balloon ascent, dramas, social meals, dancing, assemblies, Wombwell's menagerie, wrestling and cockfighting. It assesses the numbers and nature of the crowds attending. It then examines the complex reasons lying behind its brief growth and rapid decline. A perfect storm of problems came together: political divisions between the powerful landowning Tory Lowthers who held Westmorland and growing Whig and Reform opposition, which affected finances, patronage and elite attendance; middle-class Kendal attitudes, and dissenter religious opposition; funding problems; decline of gentry interest; inferior racehorse entries; low status jockeys; and bad weather.

Keywords: horseracing; Lowthers; Kendal; leisure activities; raceweek; dissenters

In the first decades of the nineteenth century the most important annual social, cultural and economically important single event by far in many English shire or county towns, secondary county centres, residential leisure towns, boroughs, and 'leisure' towns, along with some leading market towns, was the 'race week', a meeting of two

or three days. Racing was then widely accepted as what the *Morning Chronicle* claimed as Britain's 'ancient, authorized and national sport'.¹ In the 'Sporting' sections of national newspapers, horseracing took most of the space, with details of important meetings across the country. Local weekly newspapers often included similar material. In 1812, in the seven northern counties, eight Yorkshire towns, along with four in Cheshire, two in Cumberland, two in County Durham, two in Northumberland, and five in Lancashire had their race meetings reported in the annual *Racing Calendar*, which each year included full details of all important races in the previous year and listed forthcoming events.² The meetings at York, Carlisle, Lancaster, Richmond, Beverley, Newcastle, Durham, and Chester all attracted very substantial crowds. Indeed, an important race at York as early as 1805 had attracted estimates of well over 100,000 people. The race weeks mixed horse racing with a variety of other ancillary social attractions, which could include cock fights, assemblies, social dining, or theatre performances. Around sixty per cent of northern meetings had three or more days of racing, and apart from York, each town would have only one 'race week' a year, usually in the late spring, summer, or early autumn. This race week brought visitors and revenue into the town. It was a keenly awaited local leisure event.

In 1812, one county, Westmorland, stood out as the exception. Appleby, the county town, was probably too small to sustain a meeting, but Kendal, despite being the largest town in Westmorland, and on the main route between Scotland and London, was not amongst them at that time. It had only occasionally organized race meetings at various times during the previous century. Advertisements for horse races on the then 'new course' on Kendal Fell survive for a period from between 1726 and 1731.³ The race ground was just to the north of that area of Kendal Fell later enclosed by an Act of Parliament in 1767 and subsequently administered by the Kendal Fell Trust.⁴ There may have been occasional less important, low status races thereafter. A surviving handbill advertised races associated with Kendal's Oratorio music festival in April 1792.⁵ Certainly Kendal's races were not reported in the later eighteenth-century annual racing calendars published by William Pick in York or the Weatherby family in London. Nor were they reported in surviving newspapers in the British Newspaper Library.

When recognized racing finally began again in 1820 in Kendal the *Westmorland Gazette* reported that 'after being laid aside for nearly thirty years, those diversions have again been revived in this town'. The *Westmorland Advertiser* likewise claimed, 'it is the first year of there being racing here for thirty years'.⁶

Unlike other northern meetings, the races at Kendal lasted a mere fifteen years from 1820 to 1834. Why was this? The social, economic, and cultural history of

¹ *Morning Chronicle*, 24 July 1809.

² Edward and James Weatherby, *The Racing Calendar* (London: Reynell, 1813), pp. iii–v.

³ *Newcastle Courant*, 30 April 1726, 20 May 1727, 15 June 1728, 1 May 1731. All following newspaper sources can be found in <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>>.

⁴ Oxford Archaeology North, *Kendal Fell Quarry, Kendal, Cumbria* [data-set]. (York: Archaeology Data Service [distributor], 2007). <https://doi.org/10.5284/1000286>.

⁵ John F. Curwen, *Kirkbie Kendal* (Kendal: Wilson, 1900), p. 87.

⁶ *Westmorland Gazette*, 16 September 1820.

British horse racing has received significant detailed academic attention in recent decades, and such work has provided an informed context for this study of a hitherto academically overlooked racecourse.⁷ Previous local studies have largely concentrated on the longer-lasting higher status courses, most often in southern England. Yet horse racing, racehorse breeding and training was also flourishing in the north of England in the early nineteenth century.⁸ Currently historians know far less about those courses that were unsuccessful, and this detailed case study sheds light on the complex issues surrounding a course's success or failure.

This paper explores the rise and fall of Kendal's so-called 'race week'. It starts by exploring its beginnings, describing the varied attractions that the 'race week' offered in Kendal and on the course, and the nature of the crowds attending. It then examines the complex reasons lying behind its brief growth and rapid decline: political divisions, religious opposition, lack of funding, decline of gentry interest, poor quality entries, inferior jockeys, and bad weather.

Kendal Racing in the 1820s

Kendal, Westmorland's largest town, had no direct parliamentary representation, unlike far smaller Appleby. James Lowther, the Tory Earl of Lonsdale, by far the largest landowner in the county, had returned both members of Parliament for Westmorland unchallenged since 1774. Forty-shilling freeholders outnumbered Lowther tenants, and always Lowther worked hard to secure their votes. Generally, Kendal residents were far less supportive of the Lowther dynasty than the rest of the county. Kendal's population and housing were expanding rapidly at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1818 the county's two proposed representatives were his two eldest sons, the aloof and taciturn Viscount William, and Colonel Hon. Henry Lowther. At that election the young Whig lawyer Henry Brougham, of Brougham Hall, near Penrith, unsuccessfully challenged the two Lowther candidates. There were confrontations in the old shire town of Appleby, and in Kendal a riotous mob inflamed by heavy drinking, attacked the Lowthers.⁹ In the following 1820 election party spirit was further fostered, and troops were sent from Penrith to quell Kendal disturbances.

⁷ Wray Vamplew, *The Turf: A Social and Economic History of Horse Racing* (London: Allen Lane, 1976); Mike Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society 1790–1914* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); Mike Huggins, *Horse Racing and British Society in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2018); Roger Munting, *Hedges and Ditches: A Social and Economic History of National Hunt Racing* (London: J. A. Allen, 1987); David Oldrey, Tim Cox and Richard Nash, *The Heath and the Horse: A History of Racing and Art on Newmarket Heath* (London: Philip Wilson, 2016).

⁸ Mike Huggins, 'Thoroughbred Breeding in the North & East Ridings of Yorkshire in the 19th Century', *Agricultural History Review*, 42.2 (1994), pp. 115–125; Mike Huggins, 'Nineteenth Century Racehorse Stables in their Social and Economic Context', *Rural History; Economy, Society and Culture*, 7.2 (1996), pp. 170–190. doi: 10.1017/S0956793300000133.

⁹ D. Stoker, 'Elections and Voting Behaviour in Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland and Westmorland 1760–1832' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Manchester University, 1980); A. N. Connell, 'The Domination of Lowtherism and Toryism in Westmorland Parliamentary Elections, 1818–1895', *Northern History*, 45.2 (2008), 295–321. doi: 10.1179/174587008X322571.

This was the context in which an attempt was made to reintroduce racing at Kendal. As elsewhere, impetus came from interested parties who might help to generate interest and raise money. In May 1820 there was a meeting, at John Jackson's Kings Arms Inn, of 'respectable gentlemen' who formed a race committee to establish races and solicit subscriptions. Unfortunately, for Kendal, as in most other contemporary towns, no records survive of its varied composition over time. Some records do survive for Lancaster and York, where prominent local townsfolk and county gentry were both involved.¹⁰ The national picture suggests that occupations such as brewers, hotel and innkeepers, wine and spirit merchants, lawyers, some merchants, manufacturers, surgeons, or Tory newspaper publishers, were most likely to appear. Kendal was unlikely to have been substantially different.

The first committee resolved to write to members for the county, magistrates, and the local titled and gentry to seek financial support. Books were also opened for subscriptions at various inns in the town and at Richardson's stationers.¹¹ Money was vital to meet set up costs. A race ground had to be laid out, with posts at regular intervals marking out the course, a corded run in towards the finish post, and starters and judges' wooden stands. Each race needed prize money of a legal minimum of £50. The higher the prize money the better the horses attracted. Officials, including a clerk of the course, starter, judge, and handicapper needed to be sought. To attract entries from owners, newspaper advertisements needed to be inserted.

Each meeting also needed stewards, who were normally changed annually. Stewards were always men of significant status and were often titled. In part it was an honorific position, a recognition of growing local recognition. Stewards had a more general oversight of the races, and settled any disputes over entries, results and running. There were also financial implications, as they were expected to encourage subscriptions and gentry support and might have to cover any deficit. Given the earlier election disturbances, it must have been significant that the two stewards chosen by the local Kendal race committee to oversee the races were both Whigs, an expression of Kendal's political allegiances. The first steward, William James, the MP for Carlisle, was opposed to the Lowthers, and had won his seat with Radical support at a personal cost of £17,000. He sent in a 'generous donation' to Kendal's fund, not an altruistic act. Thomas Strickland, of Sizergh Castle, the other steward, was also a Whig. A week after Kendal races his success riding against Tory Sir Tatton Sykes at Lancaster races was seen as politically significant. Tacitly therefore, the two stewards' involvement at Kendal races threatened the Lowthers' control over the town.

A September date was chosen. Because the earlier Kendal Fell race ground was problematical, since now controlled by the Kendal Fell Trust, a new track was laid out on a large piece of ground occupied by innkeeper John Jackson called Lady-field, situated on the east side of the river Kent, about a mile and quarter from the town. Jackson clearly sought financial gain from the meeting. Local innkeepers and others paid subscriptions which allowed them to erect temporary structures such as a wooden grandstand and various food and drink booths, useful income generators.

¹⁰ Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society*, p. 75.

¹¹ *Westmorland Gazette*, 13 May 1820, *Westmorland Advertiser (and Kendal Chronicle)*, 13 May 1820.

These first races were relatively successful. Like other race weeks, a single race was usually run in several heats, and it was the horse that first won two heats that took the prize. Several heats might be needed to get a result. There were half hour gaps between heats and in each heat horses that had failed to reach a distance post before the first horse passed the winning post were eliminated. Each of the three days had only two separate races, but heats still lasted an afternoon. Kendal's first races were of relatively low status compared with those elsewhere in the northern counties. Even so, they proved popular. There was an attendance claimed as several thousand, with a reported 'numerous and respectable' attendance on the Wednesday, when the most important race took place. Thomas Strickland, attended with several of his friends. Other 'gentlemen' of the town and county attended too. Weather was important for good attendances, and the third day was wet, with 'very thin' attendance. Initially, Viscount William Lowther did not enter any of the Lowther horses, even though the Lowthers had racing stables at Newmarket, owned a racing stud and showed a keen interest in racing. None of the horses that ran in 1820 were owned by leading Westmorland titled and gentry. But the success of the first day's racing drew Lowther to appear on the course on Wednesday. What the races had shown was that despite the deep political divisions of the time, shared diversion and enjoyment had brought people together.

The report on the races by the *Westmorland Advertiser* hinted at that change of mind, arguing that 'several of the gentlemen who in the first instance opposed the races, now support them, and were seen on the ground partaking of the amusements of the week'. The newspaper was Whig in politics, and promoted civil, religious, commercial, and political freedom, and was aware of the political dimension. It claimed that 'party spirit was completely forgot on the occasion'.¹² The *Lonsdale Magazine* agreed, reporting 'party spirit had been left at home and all was harmony during the races.'¹³

In many racing towns, patronage of the races secured votes. Racing could thus form part of a broader 'contest for domination'.¹⁴ Viscount Lonsdale could offer better financial support, and straight after the races the next two stewards chosen, including Lonsdale, were Tories. Racing was taken out of the hands of the first race committee, and it was proudly announced by the strongly Tory-supporting *Westmorland Gazette* (a strong supporter of the Church of England, and opponent of religious dissent) that 'a new and excellent course was to be built' to the west of the town at Fishers Green, near Bradley Field, close to Brigsteer Road and below Scout Scar.¹⁵ The other steward selected was Thomas Upton Esq. Lowther's relative by marriage, living at Ingmire Hall near Sedbergh, which he ran as a sporting estate.¹⁶ The next meeting was to be held on the 7, 8, 9 August. In July 'a considerable number of workmen' were still being employed to

¹² *Westmorland Advertiser*, 16 September 1820.

¹³ *Lonsdale Magazine*, volume I (Kirkby Lonsdale, 1820), p. 465.

¹⁴ C. F. O'Neill (1982). The 'Contest for Dominion': Political Conflict and the Decline of the Lowther 'Interest' in Whitehaven, 1820–1900, *Northern History*, 18.1 (1982), pp. 133–152. doi: 10.1179/007817282790176546.

¹⁵ Kendal Race Course, Kendal www.matthewpemmott.co.uk/search?q=kendal+races accessed 15 February 2024.

¹⁶ *Westmorland Gazette*, 24 March 1821.

complete the track.¹⁷ The *Westmorland Gazette* expected that the attendance would be 'numerous' and the sport 'excellent'.¹⁸ By the time of the races Upton had withdrawn. Daniel Wilson of Dallam Tower became the second steward. He had supported the Tory interest at the Westmorland elections of 1818 and 1820. Leading courses elsewhere were beginning to offer a gold cup as the leading attraction, and Kendal Races now introduced one. There were more entries, and some horses were walked over from the main Yorkshire training areas. In 1821 at Carlisle races, the large crowd at Carlisle included 'a variety of equipages', and mention of the Lowthers, The Marquis of Queensbury, five other titled individuals and 'the principal gentry of Carlisle and the neighbourhood'.¹⁹ No regional paper listed attenders at Kendal, though the *Carlisle Paquet* claimed they were 'well attended'.²⁰

Over time improvements were made to the races. The corporation gave £10 to the races in 1823, the year when the Gold Cup prize money first reached £100.²¹ In 1824 the roads leading to the course were repaired to aid coach access and the course was considerably improved.²² The races were advertised in the *York Herald*, which had the best coverage of northern racing, from 1823 to 1833. London newspapers, including the sporting paper *Bell's Life in London*, reported the results. The Kendal auctioneer and racehorse owner Joseph Goulden was clerk of the course from 1822 onwards and was presented with a silver jug for his 'exertions at the races' in 1825.²³ The draper, Thomas Gaskill, next took over. In 1831 he exhibited the Gold Cup, 'a massive, elegant piece of plate, chastely designed and handsomely adorned—a splendid prize', in his shop window.²⁴ When he became a member of the corporation in 1833, Thomas Richardson became clerk. In 1829 a small permanent grandstand was built, an attempt to ensure elite visitors who purchased entry could segregate themselves from lower class attenders. The *York Herald* claimed it was one which for splendour of appearance cannot be equalled in the county.²⁵ In 1832 the course was 'greatly improved covering the defective part with fresh earth, so that it is now level, dry, and as smooth as a bowling green'.²⁶

The Attractions of Race Week

Kendal's second race week mixed commercial and social features, and interest was built up through the year. The programme was being advertised in the York and Kendal press from March 1822. On the 18 June, 1822 there was an auction on the

¹⁷ *Yorkshire Gazette*, 7 July 1821.

¹⁸ *Westmorland Gazette*, 4 August 1821.

¹⁹ *The Sporting Magazine*, October 1821, p. 42.

²⁰ *Carlisle Paquet*, 13 August 1821.

²¹ *Westmorland Advertiser*, 26 July 1823; *Westmorland Advertiser*, 2 August 1823.

²² *Westmorland Gazette*, 24 July 1824.

²³ Jack O'Connor, *Memoirs of Old Kendal* (Kendal: Westmorland Gazette, 1961), p. 106.

²⁴ *Westmorland Gazette*, 25 June 1831.

²⁵ *York Herald*, 4 April 1829.

²⁶ *Westmorland Gazette*, 19 May 1832.

new race ground, for the right to have a booth on the course. Twenty-four booths were let, and £92 raised for the race fund. The Saturday before the races, on the 3 August, grooms brought their entered horses to the clerk of the course, at the Woolpack Inn. Horses were checked to see they met the race conditions and stabled with innkeepers who had subscribed to the races. People came to see the stabled horses and exchange racing gossip. Horses were exercised on the moor twice a day. Horses needed hoof plating by local blacksmiths and farriers who had subscribed. There would be ante-post betting well before the race as the more expert assessed the chances, perhaps even in far-off London. The regional press reported in August 1822 that at London's Tattersall's betting rooms, fifty to one had been accepted for one horse running in the cavalry race.²⁷

A day or two before the races the temporary booths for eating, drinking, shelter from the elements, and viewing, would be put up. They might have been of wood, canvas or even turf. From the first day of the races, normally the Tuesday, the town would be crowded with visitors. There were usually what were called 'ordinaries' each lunch-time. 'Ordinaries', meals bringing people together at a prescribed time in late morning or early afternoon before the races started, were a regular feature at nearly all race meetings. This 'ordinary' meal could include fish, fowl, pastries and perhaps wine depending on the cost. At Kendal where these were mentioned, the ordinaries were at the Commercial Inn on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and at the Kings Arms on Thursdays. Numbers varied. In 1825 ordinaries were very well attended by 'many of first distinction in the county' and 'many strangers' with a 'handsome' subscription. By contrast in 1826 they were 'despised and unattended' and in 1828 they were only 'indifferently' attended.²⁸ This suggests that there were increasingly few people attending wealthy enough and willing to pay for this social dining experience.

People would make their way up to the course in the early afternoon. In a period before courses were enclosed, the race ground was free for all to enter, men, women, and children. Their dogs, in a period before courses were railed, sometimes escaped, and chased the horses. Some people would enjoy the eating and drinking in the booths. Races were socially lubricating destination events with something for everyone, regardless of class, income, political affiliation, location, and even knowledge of or affection for a horse. People met friends from elsewhere that they had not seen for many months. The young found courtship opportunities. At many courses drinking was often central, with race days lubricated by copious quantities of alcohol. Some were more interested in the racing spectacle and the horses.

Others enjoyed the betting. Race cards showing horses and riders were produced by the local printer R. Lough of Finkle Steet to aid pre-race betting.²⁹ In 1822 some enterprising member of the race committee introduced an innovation to help betting and announce the results of each race:

At the late Kendal races telegraphic signals were shown upon a flag-staff, on the grand-stand, as follows. Previous to starting, the colours of the riders of each horse intending to start were exhibited; and on the horses having gone once round, the flags were struck, and

²⁷ *Westmorland Gazette*, 3 August 1822, *Cumberland Paquet*, 5 August 1822.

²⁸ *Westmorland Gazette*, 30 July 1825, July 1828.

²⁹ An 1821 'correct list' is reproduced in Curwen, *Kirkbie Kendal*, p. 89.

immediately on coming in, the colour of the winner was hoisted, and afterwards the colours of the horses in succession, the winner uppermost. The plan was new, we understand, and much approved; it prevents the accidents occasioned by persons running in after the horses, and persons at any part of the course are instantly informed of the victors.³⁰

This innovation was widely reported in the national press, even reaching Bombay by the following February.³¹ Wagering on the races in Kendal (as elsewhere) was a taken for granted part of the occasion. With many of the races being heats, odds could shift rapidly between each heat. For example, in 1826 in the Town Plate after the second heat the 'legs' (professional punters) were 'in consternation' and odds which had strongly supported Corrector before the first heat, which he lost, rapidly shifted to show strong support for the mare Sophy, which she won, leading to a very closely run final heat.³² Bookmaking, taking bets on all horses, was something still found only at leading events. Wagers were interpersonal, on a single horse or jockey, with people the wagerer knew, and were paid after the race. Paying up was expected, a matter of honour. A Lancaster Assize judgement illustrated this. After failing to pay a wager at Kendal races in 1824 a Lancaster shopkeeper was attacked and beaten up afterwards by his creditor. The shopkeeper brought an action against him for assault. The jury gave minimal damages of only a farthing, and that 'appeared to give great satisfaction to a crowded court'.³³

Once the racecourse became nationally recognized the same gamesters and tricksters who operated at fairs began to include it in their summer itineraries. Initially Kendal was relatively free of these. In 1825 the *Westmorland Gazette* noted that 'the ground has been kept free from those low vicious gambling characters whose business is to prey upon an unwary public, but from whose nefarious practices our race-ground has been hitherto pretty well protected'.³⁴

Illegal gambling games soon appeared in ever increasing numbers, run by 'gamesters' or 'sharks', small groups of men who played different roles to better exploit naïve punters: pretending to bet, encouraging mug punters, and dealing with complaining losers. Reports at Kendal mention 'card games' (like Find the Lady), prick the garter, and thimble rigging, and the occasional 'gaping gawky' being tricked out of his half-crown or crown.³⁵ Thimble rigging involved collapsable tables, thimbles, peas, and a horny thumb nail and relied on sleight of hand.

Other entertainments mentioned included the Kendal Band, shows from mock dramas to organ grinders, and even, in 1825, a balloon ascent.³⁶ Broadside sellers, such as Matt Doole, would play fiddles and sell their songs. Race meetings, like fairs, were key to the annual circuit of locations of travelling showmen at this time.³⁷ The

³⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1822; *Morning Advertiser*, 28 August 1822.

³¹ *Bombay Gazette*, 12 February 1823.

³² *Westmorland Gazette*, 5 August 1826.

³³ *Manchester Mercury*, 15 March 1825.

³⁴ *Westmorland Gazette*, 25 June 1825.

³⁵ *Westmorland Gazette*, 27 June 1829.

³⁶ *Cumberland Paquet*, 25 June 1825; *Westmorland Gazette*, 16 July 1825.

³⁷ See Sheffield University Special Collections and Archives, The National Fairground Archive MS 178 for details of fair entertainments.

famous northern entertainer Billy Purvis included Kendal races in his itinerary in 1822.³⁸ In 1826 the famous Wombwell's Menagerie visited as part of its circuit of fairs and race meetings. In 1828 during the races, for the first time, a main of cocks was fought at Far Cross bank over four days, in a 'covered pit'. Cockfighting was another gambling sport, elsewhere usually featuring in the morning before the races. Cocking was under increased attack at this time, and Kendal races' religious opponents circulated handbills denouncing the 'inhuman sport', though the *Westmorland Gazette* suggested that this merely gave it more publicity.³⁹

Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling was growing in importance, and the wrestling at Carlisle races and elsewhere had proved a great attraction.⁴⁰ At the Kendal races in 1824 there was reported 'inferior wrestling' for belts, which afforded 'diversion to a certain class'.⁴¹ In 1834 sums of money were given for prizes to wrestle for at Kendal races, to encourage entries, and this supplied 'a pretty general treat'. Over the two days about forty men competed each day, walking over from places such as Patterdale or Orton as well as the south Lakes.⁴²

After the races had finished for the day, the evenings offered further attractions. Dancing's popularity was universal, especially amongst local women, so a ball, held usually at the Kings Arms, was always an attraction for the middling group in Kendal and the surrounding area. Assemblies were well attended at race weeks at towns like York and may have occurred at Kendal. The Kings Arms had a room for assemblies, normally advertised from early November, and new assembly rooms were opened off Highgate in December 1827. Touring companies of entertainers included Kendal races in their circuits. In 1824 Mr Howards company of comedians performed during race week.⁴³ The Theatre Royal opened specially for the races, certainly in 1820 and 1821, and again in 1826.⁴⁴

The Crowd

Annual race meetings were important customary holidays, especially for those not there to make money. Popularity in part depended on the date, and on whether there were other more attractive events elsewhere. Initially the races were popular, with thousands attending. People came initially in part because the races were a novelty, an opportunity for social mixing, and for pleasure. Much of the crowd at all races was composed of ordinary people, with the races seen as almost a time of carnival, a special annual event free from work. The 1824 races attracted 'the most numerous attendance we ever witnessed at Kendal Races'. The course was 'completely crowded with people from every part of the country—many from a great distance. The hay harvest being completed, the

³⁸ William Purvis, *The Extraordinary Life of Billy Purvis* (Newcastle: T. Arthur, 1875), p. 79.

³⁹ *Westmorland Gazette*, 5 July 1828.

⁴⁰ Mike Huggins, 'Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling c.1800–2000', *The Sports Historian*, 21 (2001), pp. 35–55. doi:10.1080/17460260109443375.

⁴¹ *Westmorland Gazette*, 7 August 1824.

⁴² *Kendal Mercury*, 24 May 1834 *Westmorland Gazette*, 24 May 1834.

⁴³ *Westmorland Gazette*, 24 July 1824.

⁴⁴ Margaret Eddeshaw, *Grand Fashionable Nights Kendal Theatre 1575–1983* (Kendal: CNWRS, 1988), pp. 22–27.

country folks had pleasant opportunity to enjoy themselves for one day'.⁴⁵ By contrast, in 1826, on the first day 'the attendance was thin, the second middling, and the third better than the first'.⁴⁶ A writer in the 1860s describing his memories of the races, noted that:

Groups came from the south,
 From Cark, Cartmel and Booth
 From Backbarrow, Beetham and Burton
 Groups came from the north,
 From the dales they set forth
 From Tebay and Ashdale and Orton.⁴⁷

At most race meetings elsewhere, the key attenders were the county set, titled, gentry and better off esquires. These were usually listed. At York races in 1826 the *York Herald* provided a list of 'noblemen and other friends of the turf' including over a hundred names.⁴⁸ This was less so at Kendal. At most races, house parties might attend from the surrounding estates, such as Sizergh or Lowther. Transport was a matter of status, coach and four for the elite, carts for others. What was very significant however, was that unlike reports of more high-status races, neither of the Kendal papers provided lists of the county set attending. Usually only two or three people were mentioned by name, most often only the stewards. In 1829 the grandstand was 'not as filled as might have been expected ... We would be glad to see a county meeting of this sort better attended'.⁴⁹ References to attendance in literature of the time are rare, though a minor novel of 1830 which centres on Westmorland life featured Kendal racecourse for an attraction for some characters, such as squire Morton and his two female companions who went to Kendal race course in their carriage.⁵⁰

But for the better-off county-set interest had faded. Crowds were dropping. In 1832 'the attendance of people, ... was much thinner than usual'.⁵¹ The last race meeting was held in 1834. It still attracted the common people: 'there was a numerous concourse of people present on Tuesday, composed chiefly of the useful classes, and the booths were greatly thronged'. Most significantly, the county set did not attend at all. *Kendal Mercury* stated that of 'the gentry and their equipages we are compelled to return—non est inventus'.⁵²

⁴⁵ *Westmorland Gazette*, 7 August 1824.

⁴⁶ *Westmorland Gazette*, 5 August 1826.

⁴⁷ Blezard, *Blezard's Original Westmorland Songs* (Kendal: Wilson, 1868), p. 14. The text is entitled 'Old Kendal Fell Races' but internal evidence to named individuals and horses makes clear it was the 1821 course.

⁴⁸ *York Herald*, 12 August 1826.

⁴⁹ *Westmorland Gazette*, 27 June 1829.

⁵⁰ Anon., *Ravenstonedale: Or the Triumph of Innocence: A Tale* (Edinburgh, 1830), pp. 108–9.

⁵¹ *Westmorland Advertiser*, 21 July 1832.

⁵² *Kendal Mercury*, 24 May 1834.

Reasons for Failure

Religious Opposition

Kendal's historian Andrew White saw Kendal as falling victim to the Victorian religious reaction.⁵³ In fact, there was religious opposition to racing from well before Victoria, stretching back through the eighteenth century and beyond.⁵⁴ Elsewhere during this period racing was already under largely unsuccessful attack by a moral minority of earnest and serious reformers.⁵⁵ As early as 1826 the *Westmorland Gazette* believed that attitudes to Kendal's races were influenced by 'party spirit, either of politics or religion', and in 1829 it complained of the 'cant and whine of the day about vice and demoralization'.⁵⁶ Even in the 1780s the novelist and dramatist Thomas Holcroft had believed that 'the greater part of the inhabitants of Kendal were Quakers', and various branches of dissent flourished in the town.⁵⁷ In 1801 there were 880 Quakers out of 7978 inhabitants of Kendal. Kendal had a parish church, and two chapels, but ten others belonging to dissenters.⁵⁸ One local writer believed that there were a greater number of different denominations of practicing Christians in Kendal than elsewhere.⁵⁹ Quaker, Unitarian and Wesleyan Methodist nonconformist families played key roles in the local economy, especially in manufacturing, with many employees, and could have enough power and influence to provide social and religious leadership.⁶⁰ Across Westmorland, the dissenting churches played a major role in encouraging anti-Lowther sentiment.⁶¹

Nationally both Quakers and Methodists strongly opposed horse races. Evangelical teaching attacked the races for a range of reasons, but most particularly for its gambling, rioting, drunkenness, wantonness, uproar, profligacy and other 'licentiousness'.⁶² Dissenter shop owners, merchants and industrialists could see races as wasting time and money, and encouraging idleness, disorder, and self-indulgence. In 1822 a methodist preacher visited Kendal several times, and held an opposing camp meeting on each of the days of the August races.⁶³ In the 1820s Kendal's Sundry School managers were amongst the first in the country to give their pupils a school treat to take them away from the race day attractions.⁶⁴ Generally these groups did not attend the races, as the *Westmorland Gazette* accepted when the races

⁵³ Andrew White, *Kendal: A History* (Lancaster: Carnegie, 2013), p. 214.

⁵⁴ Huggins, *Horse Racing and British Society*, pp. 118–9.

⁵⁵ Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society*, pp. 204–228.

⁵⁶ *Westmorland Gazette*, 5 August 1826; *Westmorland Gazette*, 27 June 1829.

⁵⁷ Thomas Holcroft, *Alwyn or the Gentleman Comedian I* (London: Fielding and Walker, 1780), p. 32.

⁵⁸ J. Pigot, *National Commercial Directory for 1828–9* (London: James Pigot and Co., 1829), p. 847.

⁵⁹ Cornelius Nicholson, *Annals of Kendal* (London: Whitaker and Co., 1861), p. 133.

⁶⁰ J. D. Marshall, 'Industrialisation in Late Georgian and Victorian Kendal', in *Kendal Civic Society, Four Lectures* (Kendal, 1996), pp. 17–25; J.D. Marshall & Carol A. Dyhouse, 'Social Transition in Kendal and Westmorland, c. 1760–1860', *Northern History*, 12.1 (1976), pp. 127–157. doi: 10.1179/nhi.1976.12.1.127.

⁶¹ W. A. Hay, 'Henry Brougham and the 1818 Westmorland Election: A Study in Provincial Opinion and the Opening of Constituency Politics', *Albion*, 36.1 (2004), pp. 28–51. doi:10.2307/4054435.

⁶² Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society*, pp. 204–228.

⁶³ John Petty, *The History of the Primitive Methodist Connection* (London: Richard Davies, 1860), p. 151.

⁶⁴ Curwen, *Kirkbie Kendal*, p. 356.

ended in 1834: 'Some refuse to support or attend the races on the-plea of religion; others because vice and gambling are encouraged'.⁶⁵

The Social Elite and Parliamentary Politics

What was also clear was that the newly introduced races had a contemporary political dimension. Many attended race meetings for pleasure, diversion, and recreation. But right across England, from Newmarket to York, political agents found ways of exploiting horse racing for their interests. Subscriptions, entries, and attendance by the political classes could all at times function politically. These groups might attend for enjoyment, but their patronage exercised deference, and could attract votes at election times.⁶⁶ Some meetings, such as those of York, were active buzzing hives of political activity. Race meetings could be places of networking functioning as a blend of hustings and focus group helping to assess support for a future election. Contributing to elections by leading figures in the area helped garner later political support.

The Lowthers, from their base at Lowther Castle, owned and controlled substantial lands across the region. Viscount Lowther played a key political role in Westmorland elections,⁶⁷ He was a member of the Jockey Club, sometimes attended Newmarket, and won the 1831 Derby.⁶⁸ Like other powerful magnates he gave some financial support to several race meetings in Cumberland and Westmorland, such as Carlisle and Penrith, where his influence could be exerted politically. He was keen on racing, and his contemporary family archives have much material relating to buying and selling of horses, stakes, and horse racing.⁶⁹

Lowther was interested in exploiting his influence to get Tory stewards chosen by the Kendal committee. In 1824 the stewards were Sir Philip Musgrave (1794–1827) and Major Cuninghame. Musgrave was supported by the Lonsdales and became MP for Carlisle in 1826. He too was a devotee of racing, running a small stud across northern courses, and subscribed to Kendal races until his death. But Kendal's race committee recognized that allowing Tory stewards to dominate alienated Whig gentry. In 1825 with the elections approaching the committee a steward from each of the competing parties. Lord Frederick Bentinck (1781–1728) and Bolton King. Bentinck was a Tory MP for the rotten borough of Queenborough until voted out in the 1826 election and devoted much of his time to hunting and racing, but his wife was a Lowther. Bolton King (1801–1878), raised in Lancashire, was a Whig who had a pack of harriers and had estates in Kirkham. The 1826 Westmorland election saw defeat once more for the Whigs. Bentinck could not attend the races because of ill-health and King was the sole steward. The pro-Lowther *Westmorland Gazette* was

⁶⁵ *Westmorland Gazette*, 24 May 1834.

⁶⁶ For detailed analysis of the impact of politics at race meetings see Huggins, *Horse Racing and British Society*, pp. 122–152. For a Leicester example see Jeremy Crump, 'Horse racing and Liberal Governance in Nineteenth Century Leicester', *Sport in History* 36.2 (2016), pp. 190–213. doi:10.1080/17460263.2016.1152288.

⁶⁷ J. R. McQuiston (1976) 'The Lonsdale Connection and its Defender, William, Viscount Lowther 1818–1830', *Northern History*, 11.1 (1976), pp.143–179. doi: 10.1179/nhi.1976.11.1.143.

⁶⁸ Robert Black, *The Jockey Club and its Founders* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1891), p. 172.

⁶⁹ Carlisle Archives, Lonsdale Archives, DLONS/L9/2, has detailed records of horses and horse racing.

delighted about the result of the election, and defeat in Westmorland once more for the Whigs. But with a single Whig steward, it noted that ‘the noble family of Lowther’ was absent and that ‘the gentry of our neighbourhood did not think fit’ to support King.⁷⁰

In 1827 the committee once again tried to balance political allegiance. Henry Lowther, who entered only one horse, shared duties with the rich nabob Alexander Nowell of Underley Hall, who had horses running at Newmarket, Lancaster, Manchester, and Newton that year, but entered none at Kendal. The Lowthers had blocked Nowell’s candidature for Carlisle at the 1827 by-election. In 1828 Nowell acted as steward again, but the other steward, Mr Thomas Williamson of Penrith, did not attend, though the Lowthers and Nowell had initially entered horses.

In 1830, with an election looming, the *Cumberland Paquet* reported that among the company present at Kendal races was Henry Lowther, who dined with some of the gentlemen of the neighbourhood, and on the day following ‘paid his respects to several of the freeholders of Westmorland, preparatory to the ensuing election’.⁷¹ The *Westmorland Gazette*, a strong supporter of the races, bemoaned that there was only ‘thin company’, blaming changing political attitudes. It felt ‘races are now longer county meetings as they once were ... society is become disjointed, and the good old feeling which once existed between the country gentlemen and the multitudes of tenants and others assembled at such meetings, seems dead or blunted’.⁷² There had been increased political division centred on Kendal. The *Kendal Advertiser*, supported by Kendal radicals, demanded the transfer of borough representation from Appleby to Kendal. Whig county gentry complained that Whigs were underrepresented in the magistracy. Farmers and wool manufacturers wanted protection legislation which the Lowthers did not support.

Henry Lowther and Lord Lowther were again elected for the county, and the following year, 1831, Henry Lowther was elected, along with Nowell. But the Reform Bill was looming, and with it, finally, borough representation for Kendal. With keen Lowther interest in winning the 1832 elections, the July races attracted more subscriptions, including Lord Lowther, Henry Lowther, and others.⁷³ The Tory candidate for Kendal, William Thompson, Esq., Alderman of the city of London but born at Greyrigg, had been MP for London from 1826 to 1832 and Lord Mayor of London in 1828. He was friendly with Lowther, and conservative in his attitudes. He donated £10 to Kendal races and became steward. The other was William Moore of Grimes Hill (1809–62), a JP, Deputy-Lieutenant, and High Sheriff of Westmorland. His political allegiance was unclear. In June 1832 Kendal’s voters rejected Lowther’s candidate. Neither steward attended, and overall attendance at the July races was even ‘thinner than usual’.⁷⁴ In 1833 there were even fewer subscribers and horses entered, and Kendal’s new MP, James Brougham, did not give any financial support to the races. According to the *Westmorland Gazette* the local view was that ‘he durst

⁷⁰ *Westmorland Gazette*, 5 July 1826.

⁷¹ *Cumberland Paquet*, 27 July 1830.

⁷² *Westmorland Gazette*, 24 July 1830.

⁷³ *Westmorland Advertiser*, 23 June 1832.

⁷⁴ *Westmorland Advertiser*, 21 July 1832.

not! ... Why? Because if had his vinegar-faced saints and gloomy drab friends would have called him to account and turned him out soon as they could'.⁷⁵

In the final year, 1834, the races were held at Whitsuntide to take advantage of the holiday season and farm hirings. But subscriptions were poor, horses were inferior, and the Westmorland gentry did not attend. The *Westmorland Gazette* was clear why:

No county races, and these may be considered such, can exist for any length of time, or be conducted with any spirit, unless fostered and encouraged the aristocracy, the wealthy and the Influential. Kendal races, we regret to add, have not had that advantage, and so consequently has been long on the wane.⁷⁶

The paper saw Westmorland's gentry increasingly desiring to keep aloof from the common people. In the past it felt that at race meetings 'society was then more firmly knitted together than it is now. ... the people met, all grades and classes, and glad and happy to see each other. Since that period society has entirely changed and is now broken down into two classes'. This slow withdrawal of aristocratic and gentry support from popular leisure was of course, a pattern not just confined to Kendal, and has been well explored (and debated) by many historians of leisure.⁷⁷

Religious and political infighting had consequences. The races failed to attract sufficient funding from better-off landowners, gentry and townspeople interested in racing. Elsewhere the descriptions of races in Weatherby's *Racing Calendar* often revealed the sources of funding through phrases such as plates 'given by the inhabitants', 'by the innkeepers of the town and neighbourhood', or the 'officers of the artillery'. In 1825, for example, at Carlisle £50 was given by the MPs from Carlisle, £50 by the MPs for Cumberland, and a silver cup was given by the Earl of Lonsdale. At Lancaster, £50 was given by the 'members for the borough'. By contrast descriptions of the races at Kendal did not include any source of funding such as that of county members, so it may well have come only from the subscriptions in smaller amounts collected by the race committee, and from subscriptions paid by the Lowthers and others to enter their horses. There were vain appeals 'to the gentlemen of our town and immediate neighbourhood, to support us more liberally'.⁷⁸ When Tory subscriptions dried up, as in Carlisle too, Whig subscriptions did not rise to cover shortfalls.

Quality of Entries

In turn this relative lack of prize money had an impact on the quality of entries. When prize money was low, very few owners would have their horses walked from more distant stables from the northern counties or from the midlands to enter. Only

⁷⁵ *Westmorland Gazette*, 24 May 1834.

⁷⁶ *Westmorland Gazette*, 24 May 1834.

⁷⁷ Examples include Robert W Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution 1780–1880* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); Emma Griffin, *England's Revelry: A History of Popular Sports and Pastimes 1660–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷⁸ *Westmorland Gazette*, 5 August 1826.

good entries meant more interesting races that attracted crowds from further away, prepared to travel, and bring some upper-class supporters of racing who had the time and money to visit several meetings each year. Failure to do this at Kendal affected attendance. Top horses did not run at Kendal, just local horses, and second-rate horses from north Yorkshire stables at Middleham, Richmond and elsewhere. There was clearly less racing interest locally in Westmorland than in other northern counties. There were usually only two Westmorland subscribers to Weatherby's *Racing Calendar* in the 1820s. Few locals had racehorses to enter. The landlord of the King's Arms, Mr Jackson, was a racing man, and leased out a thoroughbred stallion for stud. Wealthy local 'Squire' Simpson, of Watt's Field, a farmer and coach-builder, successfully entered his horses at Kendal right through the 1820s. He was heavily supported by Kendal's racing supporters. When he won the Gold Cup in 1824 the cheering was so loud it could be heard in Kendal.⁷⁹ Another wealthy owner, John Margetson (1771–1842) of Kirkby Stephen, was a solicitor, who had several racehorses and many winners, at Kendal and elsewhere. In 1833 he had a dispute with Penrith trainer and jockey Jaques, which he lost.⁸⁰

Jockey Quality

Lack of fees impacted on jockey quality. Although leading jockeys like Tommy Lye or Sim Templeman very occasionally came over from Yorkshire, most jockeys at Kendal lacked status. Their national reputation was low. One London writer, C. F. Brown, in 1829 divided jockeys into three classes: the Southern, Northern, and 'Dirty'. He said the worst of the latter were seen riding in Westmorland and Cumberland, at Kendal for example, and they were 'remarkable for their slovenly, dirty and unworkmanlike appearance', often lacking appropriate silks. They were indifferent riders, 'made up of trick and cunning', and could be involved in deception, swindling and fraud.⁸¹

James Jaques (1792–1868), described in 1833 as a 'well-known horse-jockey', was the leading local jockey, as detailed study of his life reveals.⁸² He first moved to Cumberland in about 1818 to ride and train privately for the Liverpool industrialist and Whig MP for Carlisle, William James at Barrock Lodge, Hesketh. Jaques then moved to Penrith to set up as a public trainer and jockey, working as an innkeeper as well. He paid £30 annually for the licenses of the New Inn, and then the Ship Inn, and he leased the White Hart. These provided stables, and he also bought and sold horses. During his time in Cumberland, he rode for several prominent local owners and others from further afield. He concentrated on the northern circuit – the north of England and southern Scotland, which covered over twenty meetings. Race records at this time gave names of horses and owners, but rarely named jockeys. Nevertheless, data from a wide range of newspapers, the columns of the *Sporting*

⁷⁹ *Westmorland Gazette*, 7 August 1824.

⁸⁰ *Carlisle Journal*, 23 February 1833. I have had access to the work of Pamela Robson, of Canberra, Australia, who has made a biographical study of his life, yet unpublished.

⁸¹ C. F. Brown, *The Turf Expositor* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, 1829), pp. 46, 50.

⁸² *Carlisle Journal*, 23 February 1833.

Magazine, the Weatherby's *Racing Calendar*, and racing texts such as John Orton's *Turf Annals of Doncaster and York* (York: 1844) indicate that Jaques won many races and many of them more than once. He was particularly successful between 1825 and 1832, when he was first jockey to Andrew Nowell of Underley Hall. He later trained in Ireland. He won the Kendal Gold Cup and the Kendal Town Plate, each four times. He also won the Carlisle King's Plate five times, and rode the winners of gold cups at Carlisle, Richmond, Northallerton, Lancaster and Ayr.

Poor Weather

While there have been few studies of the effects of the weather on sport, Kendal's weather might also have been a factor.⁸³ All open-air sports like horse races were affected by bad weather, but racing towns on the east of the Pennines were generally drier. Kendal, on the edge of the Lake District, experienced more rain than many of the other courses, with spring the driest time. Summer often brought rain from the west, dropping over the county. Many of the reports of Kendal meetings focus on the importance of the weather for influencing attendance, and note wet days, how heavy it was, and how long it lasted.

Conclusion

Any successful annual 'race week' always brought some pleasure and much profit to a town. In a period when entry to unenclosed racecourses was free, factory owners were often unable to stop workers taking time off, schoolmasters faced large scale pupil absenteeism, and farm workers were often allowed a day to attend. Innkeepers often made more profit during race week than could be made over an entire month elsewhere. Local magnates could garner votes by subscribing and running their horses. But although over the past four centuries at least 774 race meetings have briefly appeared in England north of Hatfield, most failed. The *Racing Calendar* of 1824, for example, listed only 90 English towns with meetings.

While successful courses such as York, Newmarket, Ascot, Chester, or Goodwood have been intensively studied, there has been little analysis for the reasons why so many others failed. Newspapers rarely offered reasons for their sudden non-appearance, and publications covering extinct racecourses usually concentrated on patrons and key races.⁸⁴ This detailed micro-study of a failed meeting over a short period is very suggestive about just how complex and precarious the survival of any meeting could be. Kendal's race ground was unthreatened, though many race grounds were threatened by building development. Leeds' Haigh Park course was opened in 1824

⁸³ See Joyce Kay and Wray Vamplew, *Weatherbeaten* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2002); J. A. Cairns, 'The Effect of Weather on Football Attendances', *Weather*, 39.3 (1984), pp. 87–90; Alastair Hignell, *Rain Stops Play: Cricketing Climates*, (London: Cass, 2002).

⁸⁴ See Jack Fairfax-Blakeborough, *Northern Turf History Volume 2: Extinct Race Meetings* (London: J. A. Allen, 1949); John Slusar, *Racecourses: Here Today and Gone Tomorrow: Volume 1, England North of Hatfield* (Brill: Cardan Publishing, 2016). The following paragraphs draw on their work.

but in 1832 the Aire and Calder Navigation Company rerouted the river through the course. Manchester used four different courses before moving out to Haydock. But in almost all other respects, Kendal racing faced a far wider number of problems than other northern courses. It faced religious and political pressures right from its beginnings in 1820 until the final races in 1834, since both affected the local subscriptions and other revenue streams which needed to be high enough to offer substantial prize money. High prize money attracted leading horses, famous jockeys, wider public interest, and richer visitors.

It can be quite unclear in many racing towns whether politics or religion had a substantial effect on racing's popularity. There were certainly some examples. In Preston, for example, political differences between Lord Derby and the corporation led to two separate Preston races on separate courses in 1786. At Hartlepool in 1862 there were rivalries between Hartlepool and West Hartlepool, and Hartlepool Corporation then withdrew its sponsorship. At Halifax, despite large crowds of over 20,000, the significant opposition from the evangelical churches which generated prosecutions for the illegal gambling (that all racecourses encouraged) cut revenue sufficiently to force its closure. All courses faced bad weather, though Kendal's position made it worse. At Rotherham, where racing at Welgate began in 1823, bad weather on the second day in 1829 created almost impossible racing conditions and generated only a very scanty crowd. The same year, both Earl Fitzwilliam and Lord Milton, who had supported the meeting, withdrew their entries and support. Rotherham's meeting lapsed after 1832.

Finally, there were broader cultural and social factors at work. At this period, Yorkshire was the heartland of northern racing, with many meetings, wide public interest in horsesflesh, many rich racehorse owners, many breeding studs, and great numbers of horses trained at Malton, Middleham, Hambleton, Richmond and elsewhere. There was similar good racing interest across much of Lancashire too. By contrast Kendal could not call on Westmorland training stables for entries, nor on large numbers of racing owners or enthusiasts. It attempted brief revivals in 1848, 1862–5 and from 1879–1882. Unsurprisingly all were similarly unsuccessful.

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