

# This was Stockbridge

by PHILIP CLIFFORD

**F**ROM the summit of Danebury Ring on a clear summer day when the steep hillsides have become a carpet of rock roses, violets, milkwort and thyme, an observant visitor can catch a glimpse of the distant Isle of Wight. Down below this rich canopy of yellow, rose-purple, mauve and green can be seen what remains of the old grandstand. Lonely, abandoned, overgrown with creepers and weeds it still proudly defies neglect and oblivion—a reproachful reminder of great days long passed by.

Nearby, but hidden by a fringe of trees, lies Danebury, first the home of the Days and then the Cannons. As the fortunes of Stockbridge Races waxed and waned with the rise and decline of this famous training establishment I decided to make it the starting point for my pilgrimage.

"Old John" Day, who, according to his contemporaries, "dressed like a dignitary of the church", died in 1860, but the thatched cottage which he built remains snugly nestling in the shade of the big house with its Virginia creeper, white clematis and noble chestnut planted by "Grandma Day". There were 70 or more horses at Danebury during its heyday and countless were its successes at the annual three-day meetings which sadly came to an end in 1898.

So, after obtaining permission from Mr. J. W. Merrick, who now lives there and farms most of the neighbouring land, I set off to explore the surroundings.

In the distance there was the drone of aircraft from the Army Air School at Middle Wallop, but otherwise the deep green countryside was peacefully quiet, the view unspoiled.

Much of the land was ploughed up during the two World Wars; some has developed into scrub woodland where holly, hazel



and beech vie with birch and buckthorn. Here had been a racecourse with an unbroken span of 150 years and here, according to the Racing Calendar, on August 28, 1753, was inaugurated the first three-day Stockbridge Meeting.

It was a right-handed, nearly round course, somewhat hilly, the final six furlongs providing a straight run in. There were two mile courses, one of them straight, and like Newmarket, in a minor key, there was a prominent Bush about five furlongs out with a dip between this landmark and the finish.

It is strange that, apart from point-to-point meetings, the county of Hampshire today is without a single racecourse. Yet at various times there was racing at Winchester, Southampton, Aldershot, Andover, Basingstoke, Odiham, Lyndhurst and Abbotstone Down.

Stockbridge outlasted them all. Nor was this surprising, for the course had an indefinable charm. Charles Richardson in *The English Turf* has given this description: "One of the pleasantest meetings of the racing year and one of the prettiest and best in the Kingdom".

Not to be outdone, Alfred E. Watson, in *The Turf*, was equally enthusiastic and his tribute reads: "One of the most popular of the few 'open courses' as opposed to gate money meetings which still remain".

A study of the records shows that fields were extremely small in those early years and that the races were run in heats.

Then in 1831 came a decision which was

to alter the history of Stockbridge and to ensure future prosperity.

At the instigation of Lord Worcester (later the 7th Duke of Beaufort) the Bibury Club decided to move its headquarters and activities from the Cotswolds and Cheltenham to Stockbridge. Thus the first afternoon of each annual three-day meeting was henceforth under the auspices of The Club with its members supplying a considerable share of the riders and runners.

This successful partnership between club and course continued unbroken until the latter closed down and the members found once more a new home at Salisbury.

Meanwhile, Stockbridge flourished. The number of races more than doubled and in 1859 there was a considerable increase in prize money.

Perhaps the Hurstbourne Stakes deserves pride of place in any history of this racecourse for it often attracted some of the season's best two-year-olds.

### Galtee More

It was in this, for example, that the Irish-bred Triple Crown winner, Galtee More, made a successful debut, while Flying Fox added further distinction by winning the Stockbridge Foal Stakes. Also popular with owners and trainers were the Champagne and Andover Stakes, the Mottisfont and Alington Plates and the Stockbridge Cup.

For a number of years Stockbridge was a strong rival in popularity to Goodwood, where racing only dates back to 1804.

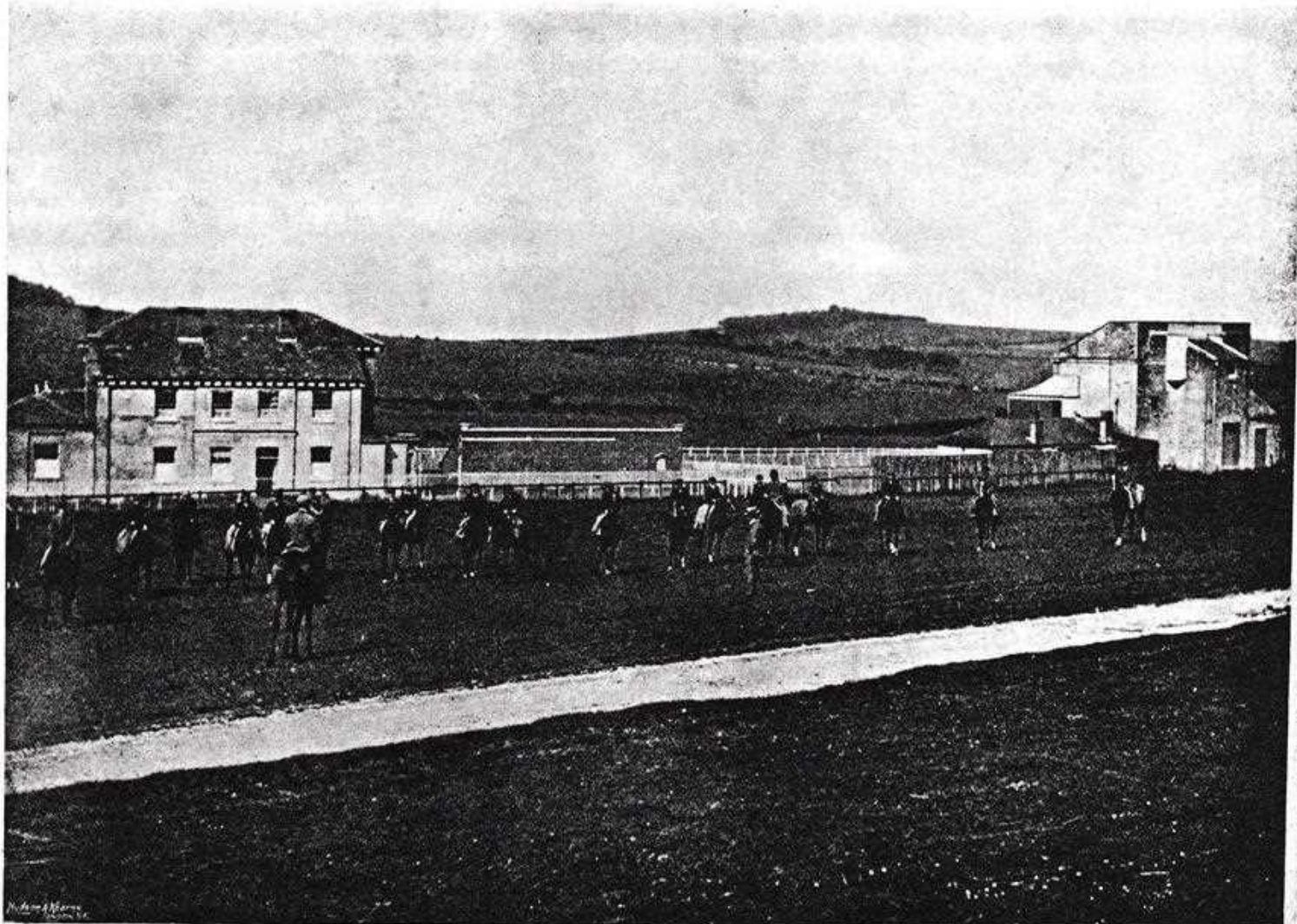
Hermit, the hero of the snowstorm Derby of 1867, won twice there as a two-year-old as did St. Blaise, successful at Epsom 13 years later. Lady Elizabeth, the best filly ever to be trained at Danebury, was another Stockbridge winner.

In 1869 two sisters—both winners of The Oaks—met in the Hurstbourne Cup, run over two and a half miles. Brigantine that summer had won the Fillies Classic for Sir Frederick Johnstone, while Formosa the previous season had been champion of them all with four classic wins to her credit. These exertions, alas, had taken their toll and odds were laid on Brigantine who won by no less than 20 lengths.

Stockbridge did not lack royal patronage. Nimrod, in *The Chase, the Turf and the Road*, refers to the preference shown by George IV for country races, in particular the Bibury, Lewes and Brighton meetings. The records show that he was a frequent visitor to Stockbridge and that Lord Sackville rode some of his horses there.

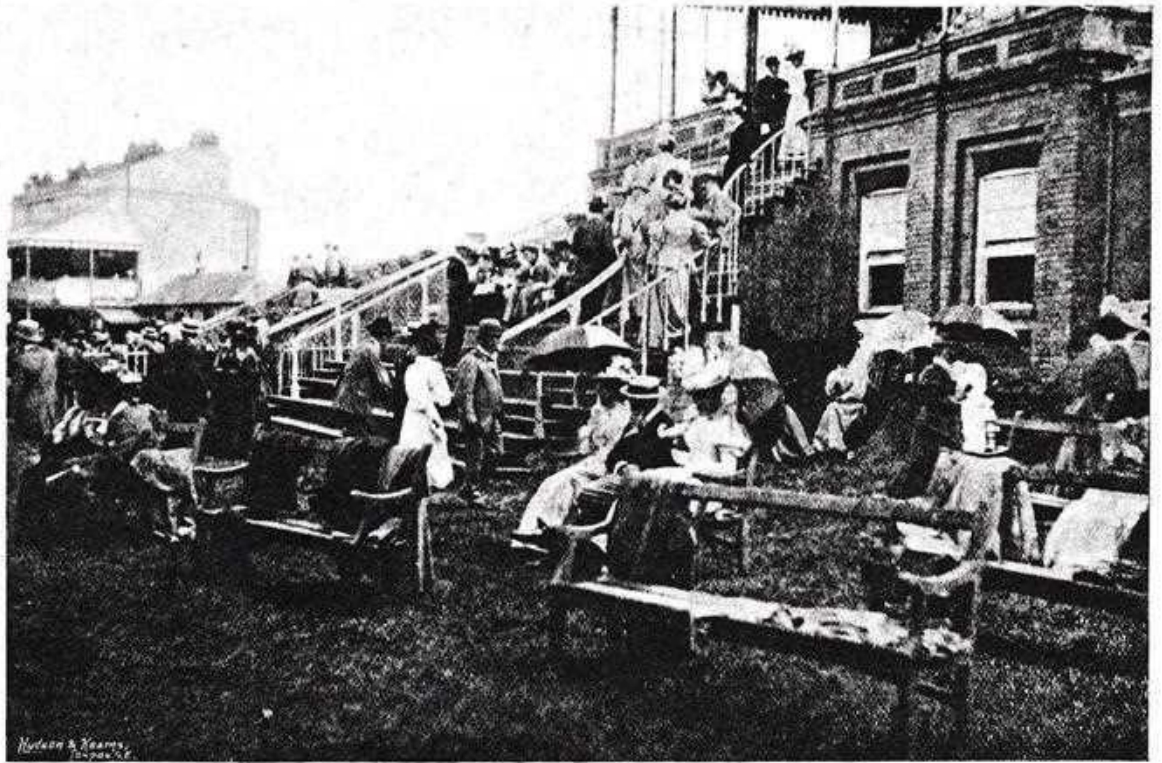
As Prince of Wales he was successful with Pegasus in 1791 and after his accession with the dual Goodwood Cup winner, Fleur-de-Lis.

More than a century later, Edward, Prince of Wales, shortly to become Edward VII, brought off a popular double with Safety Pin and Courtier. Only 10 years earlier, in 1886, there had been a tragedy when his promising two-year-old filly, Counterpane, had dropped dead after running in the Stockbridge Cup.



This picture of horses at exercise in front of Stockbridge grandstand (right) was taken in 1895. The remains of the grandstand can still be seen today. In the background is Danebury Ring.





The lawn on Bibury Club day at Stockbridge, a picture taken in 1896. The Bibury Club moved its headquarters from the Cotswolds and Cheltenham to Stockbridge in 1831.

Among the celebrities who supported Stockbridge was Lord Palmerston, Secretary for War at the age of 25, and twice Prime Minister. His home was at Broadlands, near Andover, and William Day in his *Reminiscences of The Turf*, describes how his patron had the alarming habit of riding over to Danebury at breakneck speed. It is not recorded whether he was present to see his liona win the Southampton Stakes.

While the Dukes of Beaufort and Grafton, the Marquis of Hastings and Lord Angelsey were Danebury's leading patrons, racing at Stockbridge went from strength to strength.

### The "Confederacy"

Then there was the period of "The Danebury Confederacy", which included such owners as the prize fighter member of the House of Commons, John Gully, and his fellow gamblers Harry Hill and Joshua Arnold.

As for the jockeys, George Fordham one afternoon rode six winners, his other mount being beaten in a run off after a dead heat. Fred Archer, Tom Cannon and Sam Loates in their day were usually in the limelight. It was here, too, that Tom's son, Kempton, rode his first winner on Bunting trained by his father.

November 23, 1867, was a sad but memorable occasion in the history of Stockbridge racecourse, for on this wintry day all the horses owned by Lord Hastings came up for sale there. Of the 51 lots offered, 14 were bought in and according to the *Victoria County History of Hampshire*, those in training made an aggregate of 28,100 guineas, the yearlings 9,395 guineas.

The sporting but impecunious Marquis, however, refused to part with his favourite two-year-old Lady Elizabeth, whose record in her first season had been 12 wins in 13 races. She was retained for 6,100 guineas, but by this time the harm had been done.

After an unlucky defeat in the Middle Park Stakes she had been matched at Newmarket against the Cesarewitch winner,

Julius. Although she beat the older horse by a head she never recovered from this unwarranted ordeal.

Tangible reminders of the racecourse are disappointingly meagre, but at The County Record Office in Winchester I discovered an old poster. It was a notice to Innkeepers and Others of an Auction to be held at the Grand Stand at 2 p.m. on Tuesday, June 9, 1863—10 days before race week.

Among the items to be let during the races were: the right to serve refreshments in the Grand Stand and the authority to charge for what is now termed parking space.

"The highest bidder", proclaimed the poster, would have the privilege of charging for all Vehicles entering the ground let to him at a rate not exceeding three shillings for each Coach, Omnibus, Van, Break, Landau, Bitzka, four-wheel Cab or Fly; two shillings for each ordinary four-wheel Phaeton and one shilling each for two-wheel Vehicles. He would also be entitled to underlet the ground for Snuff-boxing Sticks, etc. . . ."

### 100-1 chances

Racing came to an end at Stockbridge with the July meeting of 1898—a year made uncomfortably costly for many backers by a Derby in which two 100/1 chances, Jeddah and Dunlop, finished first and third.

Nevertheless, it was a prosperous year for the Turf. A new record total of 3,571 horses ran that season and the final meeting, which opened on the Hampshire course on Tuesday, July 5, provided a programme of no less than 21 races, not counting a National Hunt flat race and a match.

The trouble which had arisen was due to a change of landowner. Part of the racecourse had become the property of a lady whose unrelenting dislike of horse racing and any form of gambling was as immovable as the Rock of Gibraltar.

The card for those last three days, during which Otto Madden and Mornington Cannon were the most successful jockeys, makes interesting reading.

On the first day, which as usual came under the auspices of the Bibury Club, the Hampshire Stakes, with 500 sovereigns, added and run over the New Mile Course was won by the Duke of Westminster's Orpah.

The Bibury Stakes went to Cliviger, trained and ridden by Mr. George Thursby. A Welter Plate, a Seller, a six-furlong Handicap, the Champagne Stakes, the Bibury Club Junior Home-bred Stakes and a National Hunt flat race completed a busy and entertaining afternoon.

### Flying Fox

Mr. Thursby was not only a familiar figure at Stockbridge but also at Epsom where, in The Derby a few years later, he finished second on John O'Gaunt and Picton to St. Amant and Spearmint.

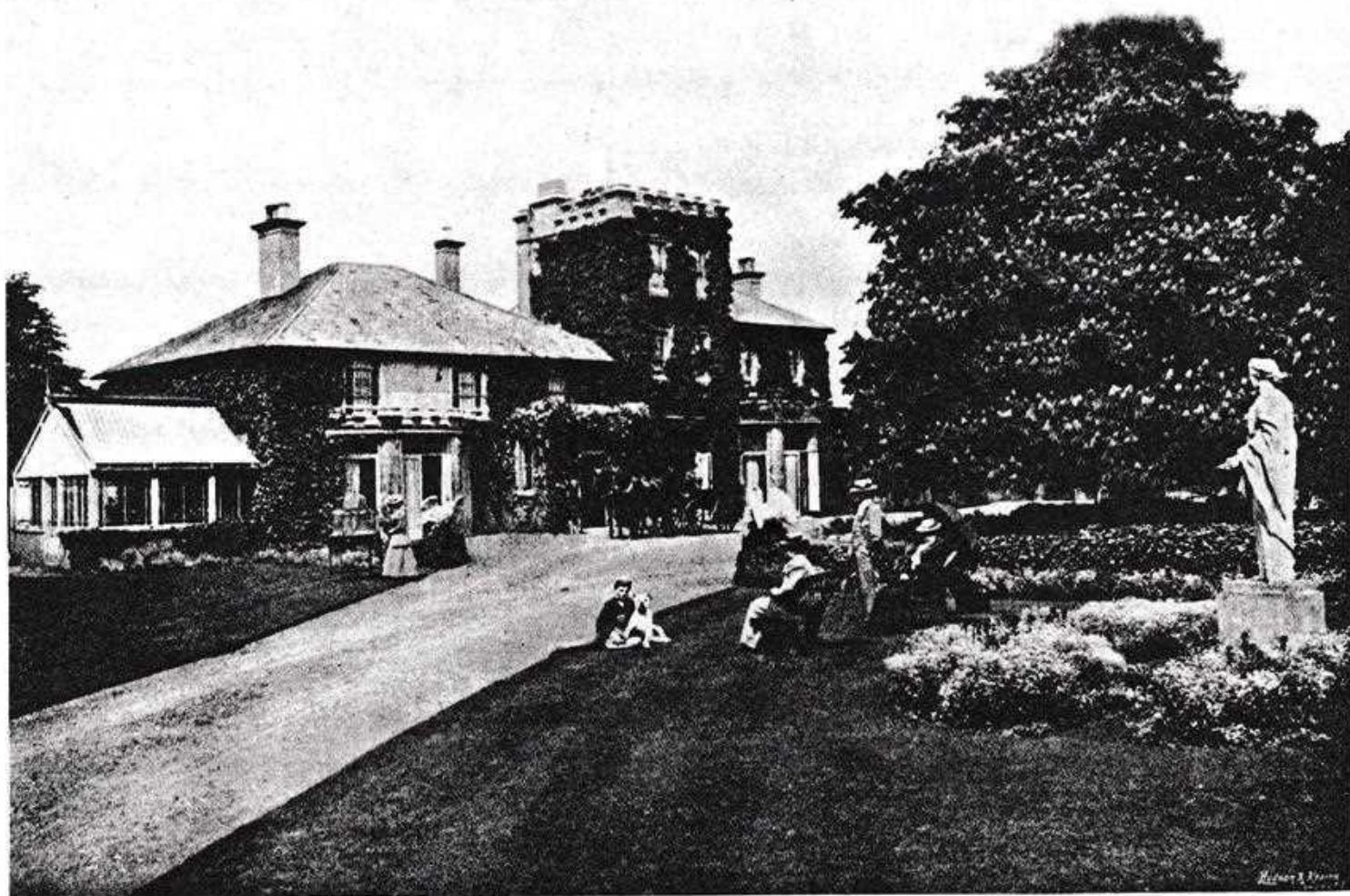
There were another eight races on the following day, the highlight being the victory of the future Triple Crown winner Flying Fox in the Stockbridge Foal Stakes.

Owned by the Duke of Westminster and trained at Kingsclere by John Porter, also a great supporter of Stockbridge, Flying Fox had already won the Ham Stakes at Ascot, his only previous race.

The Andover Stakes went to Morello, owned and ridden by Lord Cowley, while Otto Madden won a mile handicap on Lord Carnarvon's Cyrenian. On the final Thursday there were six races and a match. Sam Loates rode Lady Ogle, the winner of the Hurstbourne Stakes and Mornington Cannon was successful on Wolf's Hope.

And so, to the disappointment of many and the delight of few, ended almost a century and a half of racing at Stockbridge. It was 67 years since the Bibury Stakes had first been won there by Lord Ranelagh's Donegani. During that fateful era, under the watchful eye in turn of "Old John" Day, his sons, William and John, and finally Tom Cannon, The Club had greatly prospered as had the riding ability of its enthusiastic members.





*Danebury, home of the Days and then the Cannons. There were over 70 horses at Danebury in its heyday. Tom Cannon, who was master of Danebury, from 1882, married Kate Day, daughter of John Day.*

The racecourse was situated some two-and-a-half miles north-west of Stockbridge, the parish of which a century ago contained 850 inhabitants and 1,115 acres of land.

Its population is almost the same today; few houses have been built, newcomers are rare and apart from a few road signs, garages and more modern lighting, appearances have hardly changed.

The long, wide, straight high street, through which the traffic ceaselessly flows to and from Salisbury, excites little interest from strangers.

Visitors are mostly anglers. This is a district widely famous for noble trout and its river Test. Indeed, it was said long ago that fishing shared with horse racing the affection of Stockbridge folk.

The passing years have witnessed not only the end of local racing but also the disappearance of the Annual Fair, which was first held in the 13th century.

A retired shopkeeper told me that he could remember the time when it was not unusual for 10,000 or more sheep to be on sale at the market.

Now, even the railway line to Andover, which was at its busiest during race weeks, has been closed down.

Within easy walking distance of Stockbridge is Chattis Hill, the famous training establishment founded by Tom Cannon. Later the home of "Atty" Persse, it is now occupied by Vernon Cross.

In the days before the combustion engine Stockbridge was an important stopping place for Welsh drovers on their way to Southampton.

It was at The Drover's House, near Hermit Lodge, where Edward, Prince of Wales, sometimes stayed during the races, that they were greeted with this cordial notice outside the entrance: "Gwair Tymherus Porfa Flesus Curw Da Gwalan Cysurus" which in plain English means: seasoned hay, tasty pastures, good beer, comfortable beds.

### Danebury links

In Stockbridge itself I discovered a number of interesting links with Danebury and the racecourse. St. Peter's Church, built in 1866 on the site of its predecessor, contains a delightful Lionel Edwards painted roundel of The Tetrarch. There is also a stained glass window in memory of the Day family.

The Grosvenor, once a famous coaching inn and a hive of activity during race weeks, was for long a home from home for Bibury Club members. Now it is the headquarters of the exclusive Houghton Club and in its private members' room I was shown some of the catches and treasured trophies which have warmed the hearts of fishermen from many parts of the world.

Downstairs in the dining room hang many

prints of famous Danebury horses, most of them ridden by members of the Cannon family and at one time or another during their distinguished careers, winners at Stockbridge.

Another reminder of those halcyon days is a plaque in the entrance hall. It is in memory of Tom Cannon and reads: "Born at Eton, April 23rd, 1846. Owner for some years of this Hotel and died here July 13th, 1917. Celebrated owner, breeder, trainer, and jockey of Danebury and Garlogs in the Parish of Nether Wallop and Chattis Hill in the Parish of Broughton. He was for many years proprietor and clerk of the course of Stockbridge races. Married Kate Day, daughter of John Day, of Danebury, and was father of Thomas, Mornington and Kempton Cannon".

A tribute to the pleasures of Stockbridge racecourse written 80 years ago reads: "You can see races as you can nowhere else: stroll on the course and take up your place where you will and such is the conformation of the ground that from fall of flag you shall behold every change and incident of the contest . . .".

No wonder Stockbridge thrived for so long and had the loyal support of so many influential racing men and in particular, one who rode 13 classic winners, became Master of Danebury, clerk of the course, and finally Mine Host in a quiet corner of England that he so dearly loved.