

Jockeys, trainers and the micro-world of the stable

The top jockeys and trainers, often working-class in origin, enjoyed a middle-class income often equalling that of lawyers or doctors. To the public, jockeys were the object of either venom or veneration as they lost or won. Within racing's social elite, trainers and jockeys were often looked down upon. As the *Times* racing correspondent in 1933 commented, 'the very word "professional" arouses suspicion'.¹ Significantly, while lists of breeders and owners in *Ruff's Guide* or the *Racing Calendar*, like racing officials, attracted the honorific title 'Mr', trainers and jockeys received only surnames and initials. Yet 'leading trainers' occupied an ambiguous and socially higher position than professional jockeys. In separate lists, like lists of *amateur* jockeys, their names attracted the socially significant honorific, as when they were breeders or owners. Even top jockeys accepted this social seniority. Steve Donoghue, eight times champion jockey, addressed trainer Fred Darling as 'Sir' and spoke humbly to him.² Such hierarchy was reflected in some major event trophies. For example, the 1933 Grand National trophy for the winning owner was worth £300. The trainer received one of £50 value, and the jockey one worth just £25.

Jockeys

The social status of jockeys was ambiguous. Some were paradigmatic examples of one of the key sporting myths, that of the 'self-made man', enjoying upward social and economic mobility, through talent, hard work and self-sacrifice. Yet jockeys could be despised as decidedly inferior: simply servants, hired to do a job, expected to be tactful, respectful and diplomatic. Some owners resented their increasing popularity and public notoriety. As Fairfax-Blakeborough remarked ruefully, it was 'an age of grovelling, almost toadying, and sycophantic jockey admiration', and the 'tendency to place successful jockeys on

pedestals and fall down and worship them is just a little nauseating to some of us'.³

The press and public, by contrast, gave them status and adulation. Most did not see the effort, the wasting and the work, or the conflicts and tensions. They saw heroic and glamorous figures who did little menial work and simply arrived in the parade ring, mounted the horse and rode for a few minutes in brightly-coloured silks before winning. The two most popular, often knowingly referred to as 'Steve' or 'Gordon', provided sharp contrasts. Steve Donoghue, the leading jockey of the 1920s, was a colourful celebrity, lionised by the press, who transformed his great performances into heroic myths. He was 'the world's most famous jockey'.⁴ Popular with crowds and punters, he was an extrovert celebrity, bold, stylish, admired and envied, over-generous, humorous, but naive. Gordon Richards first won the championship in 1925 and dominated the 1930s as champion jockey, but was more insecure socially. Although he acquired a dinner suit, learned to play golf and holidayed in Switzerland, he found the social side and publicity more difficult. When he married in 1928, he kept quiet about it and initially lived in secret.⁵ He was presented as a reliable, steady and modestly-reserved person showing goodness, decency, honour, courage and will power, grit and determination, and the ability to overcome setbacks.

Jockeys acquired name tags, personal nicknames reflecting appearance or character: 'Moppy' or 'The Champ' for Gordon Richards, 'The Little Swell' for Tommy Weston. Success often came very early. 'Boy jockey's brilliant win on Battleship' summarised 17-year-old Bruce Hobbs's achievement in winning the 1938 Grand National.⁶ Fan following was very evident. When Richards created a new record with his two hundred and forty-seventh winner of the season in 1933, journalists from across the world chased him to get a first-hand story and there was a 'stampede' of women to welcome him back to the winner's enclosure. He even received a telegram from the king, expressing 'heartly congratulations'.⁷ Not only girls, but 'women in good society' were susceptible to jockeys' attractions, and jockeys enjoyed 'considerable success with the opposite sex'.⁸ They also received innumerable letters from strangers, some on 'most intimate subjects', written as if they knew the jockey personally, wishing them luck, perhaps asking for tips or loans, or abusing them and accusing them of cheating.⁹ Top jockeys had a top lifestyle, with fast cars, fast women and fashionable clothing. They were expected to supply comments and tell their stories to the racing and popular press. They took part in social and charity events. They presented prizes and gave speeches. Freddy Fox, for example, presented the prize at the Greyhound Grand National at the White City in 1935.¹⁰

The heavier jump jockeys, who took more risks riding over fences, perhaps had more riding skills as a result, while the lighter flat jockeys, who had to starve themselves more, saw themselves as more professional because of their longer season and higher number of rides. But there was a mutual solidarity arising from the shared experience of racing and often shared backgrounds. Jockeys loved racing and horses, and the language of jockey autobiographies is very revealing here. Hislop, for example, talked about his horses as ‘noble’, ‘magnificent’, a ‘beautiful picture’, and found racing had ‘a freshness and interest’, an ‘exhilarating’ ‘new world’ of ‘romance and risk’. Rae Johnson, on his first ever visit to a racecourse, ‘got drunk ... on the atmosphere’, enjoyed its ‘excitement’, ‘thrill’, ‘applause’ and ‘glamour’.¹¹ One division was created by the highly efficient racecourse valet system, which looked after and transported jockeys’ gear from meeting to meeting. Hislop saw his valet as one of the most important people in his life. Valets and clients, he suggested, formed separate individualistic coteries, ‘rather in the manner of houses at a public school’.¹²

How many jockeys were there? Jockeys and apprentices had to be licensed by the Jockey Club, so detailed statistics were listed in publications like *Ruff’s Guide* or the *Racing Calendar*, although figures vary slightly. In 1938, while the *Racing Calendar* quotes 180 flat jockeys and 209 apprentices, *Ruff’s Guide* lists a higher figure of 188 jockeys but only 179 apprentices. Professional jump jockeys were licensed by the NHC, but there were also many ‘gentleman amateurs’ who did not need to be licensed, although after having ridden ten winners in races open to professionals they needed the stewards’ permission to continue. The figure for amateur riders given in Table 6.1 is therefore a serious underestimate. In 1932 the list only gives 56 licensed amateurs but there were 114 who were successful enough to ride winners.

Table 6.1 Numbers of jockeys, 1920–38

	1920	1923	1926	1929	1932	1935	1938
Licensed jockeys:							
flat	305	277	255 (78)	236	212 (77)	162	188 (78)
Jockeys:							
National Hunt	360	359	362 (160)	347	313 (147)	299	329 (167)
Amateurs	106	51	76	77	56	72	51

Source: *Ruff’s Guide to the Turf*

Note: Figures in parentheses show number of jockeys who rode winners

Each year a majority of jockeys never had a winning race yet despite their differences jockeys possessed a significant degree of camaraderie. Most defended each other in public, criticising rarely, although personal rivalries and antagonisms occasionally surfaced. Some changed, rode and travelled from course to course, lodging together, developing a close bond strengthened by shared experience, risks and diet. This extended to jockeys who came from overseas. Ever-increasingly jockeyship was cosmopolitan. The so-called 'Colonials', to distinguish them from the European 'Continental', often rode slightly shorter, with a looser rein.¹³ Australians like Wootton, Frank Bullock, Rae Johnstone and 'Brownie' Carslake, or South Africans like Buckray, were highly successful in Britain and Europe.

All jockeys needed courage and endurance, but this shared bond was particularly strong amongst jump jockeys, who were as a result perhaps more rough and ready. One consequence of this was that the social and cultural differences between amateur and professional riders in National Hunt racing were less strong than in other sports, and many believed 'these rules that one is a professional and another is a gentleman rider mean very little'.¹⁴

While the number of 'gentlemen/amateur' riders in this period was significant, there were regular debates whether all actually paid their own way. They had to prove they could afford to ride without needing expenses or presents, but some were 'shamateurs'. Only a few rode in flat races, presumably because of the difficulties of keeping to a weight of below 8.5 st., and only twelve won a flat race in 1921, with none riding more than ten times. Most first rode hunters and point-to-points before entering National Hunt racing, where weights were higher. Here they had some chance of competing successfully with professionals. Serving and former officers provided a consistent nucleus. Harry Brown, the champion National Hunt rider of 1919, an old Etonian and former soldier, rode as an amateur, and later became a successful trainer. In 1926/7 over 150 different amateurs rode winners, although in 1937/8 this had fallen to 99. Many with middle-class backgrounds, like J. R. Antony or F. B. Rees, used this as a quick route into the professional ranks, and lost nothing socially. Rees, champion jockey four times, was the son of a South Wales veterinary surgeon. Others, who had no such ambitions, still rode as well as the professionals. Captain Bennet, a veterinary surgeon, winner of the 1923 Grand National, was level at the head of the winning jockey list with sixty-two victories when he died of a fall at Wolverhampton in 1924.¹⁵ Bill Dutton, a Chester solicitor, rode the 1927 National winner. Riding in prestigious point-to-points even temporarily attracted the future Edward VIII, though his own

riding was never outstanding. Big races like the Grand National even attracted amateurs from abroad.¹⁶

In the nineteenth century, a career in the racing stables had been an attraction for many lightweight youngsters from surrounding rural areas, or from towns like Manchester with regular race-meetings. By the twentieth century educational legislation, higher weight caused by better living standards, and ever-increasing urbanisation all placed more limits on jockey recruitment. It had a long, badly-paid apprenticeship. The chances of becoming a top jockey were limited. Parents were therefore often reluctant to let their sons enter the stables, a reluctance exacerbated for some by concerns about the respectability of racing. Richards, although keen to be a jockey, left school at 13 to become a warehouse boy, and had to overcome considerable resistance before his parents signed his indentures in 1920.

The number of apprentice jockeys listed fluctuated, as Table 6.2 shows, but was generally less in the 1930s.

Table 6.2 Numbers of apprentices, 1920–38

	1920	1923	1926	1929	1932	1935	1938
Apprentices	195	224	234	192	153	146	179

Source: *Ruff's Guide to the Turf*

Apprentice jockeys learnt to ride taking out horses on 'work' gallops, where racing conditions were simulated. Experienced jockeys were usually helpful with advice, and showed little jealousy. Up to 1914 jockey apprentices had little education but after 1919 they were increasingly well-educated and keen to succeed. Welsh remembered his first ride in public vividly: 'It was intoxicating. I'd never known anything like it'.¹⁷ Most apprentices tried desperately to improve. If they could show the 'guvnor' that they had adapted well they got rides, avoided the rigours of afternoon work, and met famous jockeys, whose styles they would emulate. They would also copy the changing-room technique of depreciating their own chances.

Chances of getting a race were quite reasonable. Some races gave a 5lb. weight allowance to apprentices. All courses had at least one specific 'apprentice' race a year. So good light apprentices could temporarily get large numbers of rides. Success was elusive, but in 1932 a third of all apprentices listed in *Ruff's Guide* achieved a winning ride, and, in 1938, 27 per cent. Successful apprentices had a

reasonable opportunity of initially becoming jockeys, but more limited opportunities of remaining in the job, as there was a vast oversupply of labour.¹⁸ Of listed apprentices in 1920, 46 per cent became jockeys, but only 16 per cent lasted more than three seasons. The picture in 1930 was similar: 44 per cent became jockeys, but only 16 per cent lasted more than three seasons.¹⁹ Riding accidents were relatively common, even in flat racing. Donoghue suffered broken wrists, two broken legs and a smashed arm socket amongst other injuries. Jump jockey Billy Stott had broken almost every bone in his body when he finally retired, in a very poor state of health, to invest his money in an Epsom laundry.²⁰ Steel helmets were starting to be worn by steeplechasers by 1923 but were still scorned by flat-race jockeys in 1939.²¹ The Jockey Club and NHC operated Jockeys' Accident Funds, using part of the licence fee together with 'Fund Money' contributed by jockeys from their riding fees. Contributions from the Racecourse Betting Control Board were also used. Funds paid out benefits of £1,000 on death and £3 weekly for racing accidents.

Although some, like Richards, were natural lightweight, many others rode about 2 st. heavier off-season. They lost weight by 'wasting', achieved through constant physical exercise wearing many clothing layers, using Turkish or electric baths, or dosing with purgative medicine. Without success few were able to maintain this self-discipline and the consequent strain of dehydration, malnutrition or bulimia. To ride into his mid-fifties Carlslake needed a starvation diet, with only one meal a day – often a boiled egg, a piece of dry toast, a cup of tea. Some jockeys moved from the flat to steeplechasing where weights were higher, as did Frank Wootton who topped the steeplechase list in 1921. Wasting could bring on lung diseases, arthritis and other long-term health problems. William Higgs's wasting 'left its mark on his digestive powers'.²² It perhaps caused the early deaths of others like Wootton or Carlslake. It carried a punishing mental toll. But those who could 'do the weight' could have a long career. Many top jockeys rode for thirty years or more. Joe Childs won races from 1900 to 1935 despite never being champion jockey. Freddy Fox, champion jockey in 1930, rode for thirty years. Donoghue rode his first winner in 1905 and his last in 1937. Richards, who could ride at 8 st. without wasting, rode his first winner in 1921, his last in 1954.

Knowledgeable commentators believed that the general standard of riding improved during this period. Acton suggested that there was 'not eight pounds difference' between good apprentices and most first-class jockeys after 1918.²³ Jockeys needed a daunting combination of athletic skills: good 'hands' to communicate through the reins, balance, bravery, competitiveness, racing instinct,

ability to use the whip with either hand while keeping a half-ton of pitching horseflesh straight and doing its best, riding a good start and finish, physical strength, coordination and mental toughness. They had a knife-edge to tread in trying to follow owners' and trainers' instructions while also using their initiative without causing annoyance. This was difficult. Horses varied in character, from those who did better with shouting crowds to those who hated noise; from those who loved to lead to those who hated being in front. Other jockeys' riding instructions might also adversely affect the race.

These specialist talents were rare. In flat racing a small group of around 15 jockeys always had a high proportion of the rides, and the number of rides they could obtain was increasing. In 1929 47 per cent and in 1938 50 per cent of all races were won by the 12 leading jockeys. In 1921 only 4 jockeys had over 400 rides but by 1938 15 jockeys and one apprentice had over 400 rides, while a further 33 jockeys and 5 apprentices had over 100 rides in the season. The top jockeys rode the top horses, so success bred success. In 1921 Donoghue topped the table with 694 rides, but by the 1930s Richards regularly got over 900 mounts a season, rode 1,000 in 1936, and once, in October 1933, rode 12 consecutive winners. Informed commentators later saw the interwar years as 'an age of exceptionally good jockeys'.²⁴ Southern English jockeys benefited most, although Bill Nevitt, who once rode 10 winners in 3 days as a youngster, dominated the northern courses for Peacock's Middleham stables, and was often second in the jockeys' lists in the 1930s. National Hunt jockeys rode far fewer races. Only 13 steeplechase jockeys got over 150 rides in 1938 and the top rider, G. Wilson, got a mere 379 rides.

Elite flat-race jockeys earned the most. Minimum fees were 5 guineas per win, and 3 guineas for losing races (NH races had higher fees of 10 guineas and 5 guineas except for races with prizes of under £85). Where jockeys had to travel, the cost of first-class travelling expenses and £1 a day for living expenses was shared amongst owners, although apprentices travelled third-class, reflecting their lower status. Jockeys would also be paid for riding 'work' and for trials of horses. Top jockeys could be offered an annual four-figure retaining fee for a prioritised 'first claim' on their services from owner or trainer, and could have then have 'second', 'third' or more claims. For Donoghue or Richards a first retainer could be £5,000 a year. In many seasons Richards had five retainers, half of each paid in advance. Owners also regularly offered large financial inducements for success in major races, while some contracts specified a percentage of up to 10 per cent of prize money won.²⁵ Only the best had retainers, and only the very best had several retainers. More than half of all

jockeys were freelance. In 1938 only four jockeys had three retainers or more, and only fifteen jockeys thought it worthwhile to publish a telephone contact number. Presents from generous winning owners or backers varied but could be quite handsome. Amongst jump jockeys presents were rarer, though William Watkinson once got £70 for winning on a chance ride in 1920, and when he rode the 1926 Grand National winner, Jack Horner, he got £1,000 from the owner, while a winning punter sent him a further £600.²⁶ Ordinary jockeys got few such chances. As jockey Snowy Shepherd complained bitterly, one millionaire had ‘no end of winners’, but ‘never said “Thank you” to me, not once ... never mind about a drink ... Sod him’.²⁷

The most successful could ignore traditional expectations of loyalty, continuity and commitment in their quest for winners. Donoghue broke contracts, evaded engagements, ignored retainers of top owners, and picked and chose between top horses, ‘jocking off’ less-skilled jockeys in the process. He won the Derby in 1921 on *Humorist* for J. B. Joel, and received a cheque for £2,000, but broke his £3,000 retainer with Lord Derby to do so. It was not renewed.²⁸ He broke Lord Woolavington’s retainer of *c.* £4,000 in 1923 to ride another Derby winner. Despite this his talents brought plenty of rides as a freelance. In 1925 he won the Derby for the bullion broker Henry Morris, charging him his ‘usual fee – £250 for the ride and £5,000 for the win’.²⁹ As his skills faded his behaviour palled. His income had dropped to *c.* £2,000 per annum by 1926–8, not enough to maintain his lifestyle.

Jockey ebullience, rudeness or vulgarity could all be tolerated for the sake of success. The steeplechase jockey F. B. (Dick) Rees, a former amateur, having once ‘wined and dined too well’, fell off at a water jump, gave a rude sign to the crowd and then urinated facing the stand, but was still champion jockey five times.³⁰ Most top jockeys had sufficient social skills not to offend the owners for whom they worked, and were seen as ‘little gentlemen, brimming over with goodwill and kindness’.³¹

A champion could earn what was estimated in 1934 as ‘up to £15,000 a year’, and not much less than £20,000 in 1935.³² This could be supplemented by earnings abroad in the off-season, or the buying and selling of horses. Top jockeys on the British circuit could be found riding in India, South Africa, Europe, the United States and elsewhere, travelling mainly by boat, although increasingly by aeroplane from London. In Newmarket wealthier jockeys were earning enough to retain the services of bank clerks to manage their financial affairs. While successful their annual income fuelled an upper-middle-class lifestyle. Donoghue had a large house, chauffeur, gardener and cook by the time

he was in his early twenties and also maintained a flat in Park Lane, London, with a valet and housekeeper.³³ Jockeys often socialised together in winter, spending summer's money in high living, holidaying in St Moritz or the Caribbean, or mixing with 'society', the wealthy, famous or notorious international set. They lived hard and sometimes played hard too. Out of season Rae Johnstone was a connoisseur of good wine, good food and attractive women.³⁴ Sometimes, too, personal rivalries led to fights, such as Ingram's assault on Donoghue in August 1923.³⁵

Jockeys were banned from betting by the racing authorities, but many used their privileged information about horses to do so; indeed Ras Prince Monolulu claimed 'jockeys do bet: always have done, always will do'.³⁶ Charlie Elliott bet in large sums to finance his taste for the high life, although his betting, as with Donoghue, eventually became a road to heavy losses. Some bet directly with bookmakers. Donoghue once contacted the betting firm Ladbroke's by phone, apparently over his account, while two members of the Jockey Club were having a drink with its chairman. The operator passed on his message very loudly, but nothing transpired.³⁷ Some, like Johnstone, worked with a confederate; others expected owners and trainers to bet on their behalf.

Since jockeys were competing for rides racing careers could be short and income low. In 1920 twenty professional flat-race jockeys who had won a race that year had less than twenty rides, although some may have been based overseas. Their income was perhaps below the national annual average wage of £170. And some never won! National Hunt opportunities were fewer still. In 1939 sixty-three jockeys had less than twenty rides. Riding was high-risk, with the constant danger of death or serious injury. Steeplechasing was more dangerous than the flat, and point-to-point more dangerous still. But even flat jockeys faced damage and potential earning loss. Injuries were common. Harry Wragg's compound fracture of the leg in 1928 cost three months in a nursing home.³⁸ Then there was loss of form, or bad luck. Donoghue rode forty-nine consecutive losers in 1919, the South African jockey Nichol rode seventy-one in 1933.³⁹ Unsuccessful jockeys got few rides. Beginner 'chalk jockeys', so called because their names were chalked on the runners and riders board because insufficiently famous to be painted, and at a meeting for perhaps only one race, would scout round desperately, listening to conversations, touching their cap to owners and trainers, in hopes of a 'spare' ride. Others might turn up just in the vain hope of one. Savings could soon go, and ordinary jockeys struggled to make a living. One jockey, looking back, bitterly claimed that if he had his life over again and his father had suggested being a jockey, he would 'cut his head off'.⁴⁰

Pressure for success meant jockeys' riding behaviour and honesty varied. Doug Smith described how one jockey deliberately caught hold of his foot and pushed him aside. Owners rarely complained, he suggested. By the interwar period there were fewer complaints about jockey dishonesty, but certainly jockeys were always beset by temptation. Allegations were hard to prove, and were only reluctantly made. As Lord Zetland accepted, 'we may have suspicions of malpractice by jockeys, and others which may amount to almost certainty in our minds, but that is not sufficient'.⁴¹ A jockey remembered 'a few dodgy ones ... there would be a few red faces ... some pulled some strokes', but felt 'it wouldn't do' to say anything.⁴² Acton, while believing that modern jockeys were 'more honest', accepted that some dishonesty continued.⁴³ It was largely trainers and owners who manipulated the horses, and their instructions which revealed whether a horse was to be judiciously reserved for another occasion, or held back if it could not win. Jockey autobiographies suggest occasional approaches by other parties. Rae Johnstone claimed he had only twice been approached to stop a horse (by bookmakers), but suggested that it was not worth it, since 'a jockey's most valuable ally is a reputation for dependability, for doing what he is asked'.⁴⁴ Leach only remembered one instance. Even for the top riders there was the danger of being caught out and warned off. Charlie Smirke, for example, was banned for allegedly pulling a horse called Welcome Gift, although the horse was a rogue one and it may not have been Smirke's fault. He lost five years of his career.

One top racing commentator estimated that by the 1920s many of the better jockeys had '£20,000-£50,000 to their credit in the bank when they gave up riding'.⁴⁵ For top jockeys, collections further eased the pain, and retirement was another ritual, involving grateful owners, trainers and grateful jockeys too. Lord Milton chaired Donoghue's 'dinner committee'. When Charlie Fox retired in 1936 he abandoned plans to train, bought a country estate, rode to hounds and became a JP.⁴⁶ The steeplechaser W. J. Speck, who died in April 1935 after a fall, left £19,000, although this was seen as 'a lot of money for a jumping jockey'.⁴⁷ His Cheltenham funeral procession illustrated the prominent cultural position of jockeys in racing communities. It was supposedly 2 miles long, and, Sutton Hoo-fashion, his saddle, whip and colours were buried with him.⁴⁸ Joe Childs bought a stud farm in Essex in 1926. Of those more successful jockeys who had managed to save money, many rented premises and went into training on retirement, although only a minority were successful. But few jockeys ever achieved a trainer's licence. Only 7 per cent of jockeys licensed to ride in flat racing in 1920 did so.

Retirement from the racetrack was due to lack of success and rides, increasing age, increasing weight or health problems. What was more rarely voiced publicly was when normal apprehension became loss of nerve. Even Dick Rees finally lost it. Frank Bullock never got on a horse again once he retired. Younger former jockeys perhaps turned to work in the stables, or as labourers round the racecourse, or to writing reports on horses' progress to newspapers. Many found the change difficult. When Donoghue first retired it was traumatic: 'I was cutting myself off from those lads, from the weighing room, from the courses on which I had spent my whole life, from the things which had filled every second of my career ... I felt the wrench as I had never expected to feel it ... it was some sort of an end'.⁴⁹

It was a commonplace in racing books that some successful jockeys saved insufficient to retire in ease and comfort, let alone affluence. The early success and quick money that young jockeys enjoyed often made them cocky and impudent and so they spent their money as fast as they earned it.⁵⁰ Bill Rickaby was sacked at the end of 1936 because he was 'a rather wild young man'.⁵¹ Jockeys got over-confident, and it was easy to become surrounded by hangers-on and false friends. The less bright or less streetwise were easy prey to these supposedly admiring adventurers. Some were 'easy-come, easy-go', although this was explained as 'kindly hearts and abounding generosity rather than personal extravagance', since they were expected to support charity demands and contribute to racing retirement or other presents. Some, like 'Tiny' Heppell, turned to drink on retirement, while others, like Johnny McCall, son of a Dunbar trainer, who ended his working life as 'boots' at the George Hotel, took what badly-paid jobs they could find.⁵²

The world of riding and training was often portrayed as a man's world, with women appearing only as wives or girlfriends, washerwomen or landladies. Here again, however, conventional racing literature does women an injustice, since the period saw women's increasing involvement in riding and training. Yards occasionally used women workers during the 1914–18 war, but they were replaced afterwards. Around this time, Snowy Shepherd remembered some very good women riders in Newmarket stables, including Lester Piggott's mother, Iris Rickaby, whom he regarded as being as good as any man. Women were then allowed to ride in point-to-points, but rarely and almost always in separate races. Such races continued after 1918, and it was in the South, and especially in East Anglian point-to-points, that it would appear that women first began to ride against men, something seen as a 'startling innovation'.⁵³ The annual Newmarket Town Plate, a long-standing 'fun' event unrecognised by the Jockey

Club, now allowed lady riders. This was fine so long as they lost, but in 1925 a daughter of Solly Joel, the rich South African owner, won it racing against three men and four women, and was celebrated at the subsequent luncheon. Miss V. Selby Lowndes won a lightweight mixed race at West Street Harriers Meeting in 1929 under NH rules, riding sidesaddle, and other women were also successful riding astride the same month. This initially led to a change in rules in March 1929 in which women were no longer allowed to compete against men. But the reaction to this led a great many more hunts to introduce separate ladies' races into their point-to-points, which by the 1930s were being run increasingly fast. Women may not have been granted training licences, but trainers' wives and daughters were sometimes a behind-the-scenes power. Although Sir Robert Wilmot trained for over twenty years, for example, for much of the time the stable was 'carried on under the management of Miss Norah Wilmot', one of his daughters.⁵⁴

Trainers and training stables

Jockeys may have had highest public status, but it was the specialist training stables who prepared their horses. These were complex businesses, employing jockeys, stablemen and stable lads and giving ancillary employment to vets, saddlers and other trades. Some even had a blacksmith's shop on the premises. The 1921 census showed that in England and Wales training stables provided on-site employment for 3,424 full-time racehorse trainers, jockeys, stable attendants, grooms and horsekeepers, and agricultural labourers. Of these, 3,116 were trainers, jockeys and training stable attendants.⁵⁵ All these were largely male occupations, with only 8 females employed in total.

The 1931 census listed 2,360 men and 2 managerial women working as racehorse trainers, jockeys and stable lads, apparently a significant fall. However, grooms and labourers had been excluded from the aggregative data. Reference to the Industry Tables shows their numbers had increased by about 21 per cent, so there was probably little change.⁵⁶ Certainly, a conservative estimate of over 2,500 stable lads would be needed to deal even with the flat racehorses in training at this time.

In the nineteenth century there were around 200 training stables. By the 1930s there were between 350 and 400. They were a significant source of rural, village and small-town employment, and contributed to rural culture.⁵⁷ Even in mid-winter, for example, Egerton House, Newmarket, had 55 racing staff.⁵⁸ Trainers, like jockeys, had to be licensed and paid an annual fee, without which

they could not practise. Bad character, or being warned off by the Jockey Club or NHC, would be reasons for withholding such a licence. Some trainers specialised in flat racing or National Hunt racing, but many were licensed for both, although appearing separately in *Ruff's Guide* list totals in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3 Numbers of licensed trainers, 1920–39

	1920	1923	1926	1929	1932 ^a	1935	1938
Trainers: flat racing	299	331	333	325	316	335	338
Trainers: National Hunt	251	271	264	257	244	266	281

Source: *Ruff's Guide to the Turf*

Note: ^aIn 1932, according to *Ruff's Guide*, a total of 204 trainers were winners of whom 11 held military office and 2 had titles

They were scattered widely across the British countryside, often near current or former racecourses like Newmarket or Middleham. There were identifiable broader training regions and the largest concentration of trainers (*c.* 24 per cent) was in the Wiltshire/Berkshire Downs area, which had overtaken the two leading nineteenth-century training areas, the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire and Newmarket, which together provided *c.* 25 per cent. There were other concentrations in Sussex, Surrey, the South-east and Lancashire. Scotland's few trainers (*c.* 3 per cent) concentrated particularly at Ayr, Berwick, Dumfries and Dunbar, where they could train on turf and sand. Wales, where training was less popular, had fewer still (1–2 per cent). Trainers, lads and grooms moved stables fairly regularly. Trainers moved to get more or cheaper accommodation. Lads looked for better wages, or better treatment.

The names of top trainers were well known from media reports, racing non-fiction and cigarette cards. The public knew less about trainers' actual work. Trainers were given credit for successful horses, yet excuses were found for unsuccessful ones. Trainers were seldom blamed directly. Objective comparison between trainers was difficult, even for other trainers, because the factors that made a good trainer were unclear, although there was an unofficial trainers' championship, listing trainers in terms of annual prize money won, which was a goal of ambition. Some trainers, like George Lambton, Frank Butters and Fred Darling, headed this on several occasions, but their success was often distorted by two or three classic wins by one horse rather than all-round success. Good

horses made good trainers appear still better. On that basis Joe Lawson, who headed his second championship with a record £93,899 in 1931 without winning a single classic race, was perhaps the best.⁵⁹ In terms of sheer numbers of winners Dobson Peacock, who trained fifty-two ‘moderate’ horses to win one hundred races from his Middleham yard in 1932 (they won ninety-eight races in 1931) was perhaps even better.

Trainers were specialists. They used experience, knowledge and understanding to train and feed horses individually according to their capacities, placed them carefully in races to maximise chances, and had sound socio-economic stable management skills. Some trainers trained privately for a single individual for a salary and a percentage of all stakes, while the owner paid stable bills and fees. Most were public trainers, training for any owners who placed their horses for a fixed fee per horse, but paying all stable bills. Top ones might have ten or more different patrons, on whose behalf they acted, while keeping them informed of progress, entries and their horses’ chances. Trainers with a good eye for a horse might be asked to visit throughbred sales and purchase horses for owners.

Trainers came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Their personal and professional rivalries were coupled with interwoven social lives and family trees. The majority were either the sons of trainers, or were former jockeys who turned to training because they felt they might get former patrons’ custom, although jockey-trainers were often less educated and less literate. There were also increasing numbers of ‘gentlemen’ trainers, although their numbers should not be exaggerated. Of 406 trainers in 1937, only 8 were titled and 31 claimed military rank.⁶⁰ Many training families had been training for generations, a reflection perhaps of the paternalistic and Darwinistic beliefs of some well-bred aristocratic owners. Their trainers, like their horses, should come from good stock. Training was dominated by training dynasties, often with strong jockeyship connections. Inter-marriage with other leading training dynasties was common. As Birley has reminded us, ‘racing family dynasties had grown up as much amongst the prosperous yeoman class as amongst the aristocracy’.⁶¹ Fred Darling (1884–1953), for example, who was leading British trainer in 1926 and 1933, was the son of trainer Sam Darling (1852–1921), whose classic successes helped him leave an estate of £38,603, the brother of Sam Henry Darling (1881–1967), another successful Newmarket trainer, and the great-grandson of the jockey who won the 1833 St Leger. The Jarvis family, amongst the oldest of Newmarket training families, had intermarried with the Ryans, the Butters and the Waughs, also leading Newmarket trainers. In steeplechasing the Antony

family had been farming and training steeplechasers at Tenby in the nineteenth century, and both Ivor and Owen Antony had ridden as Hunt jockeys, with Ivor champion jockey in 1912, before they too turned to training.

Sons of successful trainers were generally well educated, some having been sent to public school. During the holidays they gained experience of key skills: going through entry sheets placing horses to maximise their chances, or mastering stable management and finance. Even a small stable's administration of entries, forfeits, accounts and correspondence was time-consuming, and an average-size or larger stable often employed a secretary, but well-educated trainer's sons often learned this too. They rode out with and helped their fathers. On leaving school if they wished to enter training they often entered pupilage with another trainer. Sometimes they were formally apprenticed but sometimes this was a less formal arrangement.

The entry of 'gentlemen trainers', from more privileged backgrounds, had begun before 1914. By 1920 an older trainer was complaining, 'now that noblemen and gentlemen have in so many instances, taken the place of the old timers, we rarely meet any of them' (in Newmarket's public houses).⁶² In fact they had a different social life, 'dined out' at each other's houses and mixed with the hunting/fishing set.⁶³ They were described as 'gentlemen by birth, with a public school education and a natural love of horses'.⁶⁴ 'Amateurs' who had turned professional, they came predominantly through a background in hunting field, point-to-points, Bona-Fide meetings and National Hunt racing, riding and training first their own horses, then others'. The Hon. George Lambton (1860–1945) trained very successfully for the seventeenth earl of Derby.⁶⁵ Lord George Dundas was the younger son of the first marquess of Zetland, for whom he went on to train. Other gentleman trainers came from Ireland as its political situation deteriorated. Several trainers had held military rank. Captain Sir Cecil Boyd-Rochfort (1887–1983) bought Freemason House as a training centre in 1922, took out a licence for 1923 and went on to achieve thirteen classic wins. They had enthusiasm and 'the right sort of friends'.⁶⁶ The increasing respectability of training can be seen in the way some young men of landed or upper-middle-class backgrounds were prepared to adopt a pupilage approach, parallel to the learned professions. Neville Crump, after studying at Marlborough School and Balliol College, paid trainer Sonny Hull 'a premium' to study with him.⁶⁷ John Hislop did the same thing.⁶⁸ Trainers with more middle-class backgrounds, sons of farmers, veterinary surgeons, even lawyers, sometimes entered steeplechasing. The former solicitor and amateur jockey, William Dutton, set up a small stable at Hednesford in 1932.⁶⁹

Books by racing insiders often glossed over the difficulties of early years in training, before a reputation was gained. Jack Jarvis started with a yearly tenancy and three horses.⁷⁰ Ryan Jarvis, whose father was trainer for George V, still struggled when starting as a young trainer in 1936 even though his father bought him a small Newmarket yard. He only had four horses in his first season, when he trained for a banker and one of the Rothermere family, and had only one winner. By late 1939 he had only won twelve races, although he had expanded his still 'moderate' string.⁷¹ The 'popular ex-jockey', Whalley, had only two horses in training when he got his first winner at Alexandra Park in 1929.⁷² It was at this early stage that training was at its most pressured and arduous. The old maxim, 'tis only a trainer who knows a trainer's cares' was a reminder that nervous strain and desperation for scarce success could lead to much stress. Jack Leach, for example, was 'worried all the time', 'Too much work? Too little? Had I done this', with 'always something going wrong'.⁷³ By contrast 'star' trainers would have forty or fifty horses, with occasional examples of strings of nearly eighty, which created other worries.

Social relationships between owners and trainers were complex. Trainers could be of relatively high social status, and certainly as regards prosperity there was little to choose between the 'gentlemen' and 'trainer' routes. Differences were purely social, since they mixed in separate spheres in their training towns. Successful trainers relied on their track record, but that varied year-on-year, and trust and personal charisma also played a part. The racing world was largely conservative, monarchist and traditional in outlook, proud of serving royal and aristocratic masters. Jack Jarvis had 'always felt it a great honour and privilege' to train Rosebery horses.⁷⁴ Joe Child would toast George V in champagne every time he won him a race, exclaiming 'He's a gentleman', while William Jarvis became quite depressed at his failure to win the Oaks in 1938 for 'his much loved sovereign'.⁷⁵ Their owners often reciprocated, and trainers were well regarded. The Aga Khan, for example, praised his trainer, Frank Butters, as 'my very dear friend', a man who was 'one of the most delightful human beings one could ever hope to meet', and for whom all his family had 'the greatest affection'.⁷⁶ George V and Queen Mary sometimes dined with William Jarvis at Egerton House Lodge after going round the stables, gave him a silver cup when he made a private visit to Buckingham Palace, and made him a member of the Royal Victorian Order in the early 1930s.⁷⁷ Of Harry Cottrell it was said, 'one might almost think he was a member of the Jockey Club, such is his popularity with ... the swells'.⁷⁸ Owners could become personal friends, addressed by their Christian names. Successful trainers were treated with respect and even deference by many of the owners who

employed them, whether formally of higher or equal social status. At the same time trainers usually behaved with courtesy, civility and attentiveness towards owners. Losing a horse meant losing income, so trainers would rarely tell an owner that a horse was useless. A horse could be placed in a race against even worse horses, whilst a variety of excuses could be offered, from a bad draw to poor going, for a horse's lack of success. Most kept owners regularly informed by letter and telephone, and the diplomatic and social side of acquiring and keeping owners was vital to the success of all but the most talented. Owners could be stubborn. When Lord Rosebery's horses were unsuccessful at Ayr on the first two days of a meeting, Jack Jarvis received a telegram sending the horses back to Newmarket. When Jarvis sent a telegram saying that one of Rosebery's runners on the third day had a very good chance and requesting permission to run her he got a frosty response.⁷⁹

Relations sometimes became strained. Some owners regularly changed their trainers. Others sometimes had doubts about particular running, or objected to other owners in the stable. Objections were rarely voiced in print, however. A series of undisclosed 'difficulties' led to the Aga Khan removing his horses from R.C. Dawson in 1931, but neither man would comment publicly. One owner at least actually took his horse away when his horse won, thanks largely to other jockeys' mistakes, because he believed that his trainer had misled him about his chances.⁸⁰ The eccentric owner Dorothy Paget broke with her steeplechase trainers regularly and moved her strings in sudden swoops around the country.⁸¹

Trainers' relationships with their own staff were usually formal, and their outward demeanour often serious and stern. In later life the jockey Gordon Richards recalled Fred Darling as a stern disciplinarian, well organised, with high expectations about smartness, ruthless with both horses and men. Boys had to ride out with polished leggings and boots, and properly-brushed hair. Bedding had to be neatly folded. Darling inspired a combination of fear and an immense affection in the staff who met his exacting standards.⁸² Others would use physical violence, a cosh or stick to instil discipline. Some of the most successful yards gave few opportunities for their apprentices to ride their horses, preferring top jockeys, while by contrast Stanley Wootton was described as the 'fairest, most conscientious and painstaking trainer . . . with regard to apprentices'.⁸³

Trainers had mystique, and kept their 'secrets' largely to themselves. Even many years later Ryan Jarvis was reluctant to tell stories about 'funny' events in racing, claiming 'anything I might say might be actionable, so I think I'll be careful'. The nature of work and stable relationships made trainers careful of

mixing in pubs with the racing crowd, to whom they often appeared reserved. Competition meant inter-trainer rivalry was both obvious and sometimes acknowledged, while constant pestering for tips proved problematical. Some socialised well away from the stables and racing towns. Fred Darling, for example, while unwelcoming even to his owners, loved parties and girlfriends, but found them not in Marlborough but in London, motoring down and visiting nightclubs. However, he would hire the Marlborough Town Hall to give a party for his staff to celebrate his classic successes, to which they could bring partners.⁸⁴ Trainers' hobbies ranged from shooting, hunting or golf, to training greyhounds, playing tennis on Sunday afternoons, or buying, selling and breeding horses for themselves or for owners.

The successful adopted a wealthy and gentlemanly lifestyle, and became smart men of the world, a life that could last many years and was open to all who could develop the skills. Former jockey Harry Wragg, who had started working life in a Sheffield flour mill, and later turned to training, was helped by his wife, who made his home one of the centres of Newmarket hospitality, organising dinner parties and delighting in their social rise. They employed a cook, nanny, scullery-maid and gardeners.

Attitudes to betting amongst trainers varied, even in a single racing family. Colledge Leader (1883–1938), Lord Derby's private trainer at Stanley House, Newmarket from 1933, reputedly never bet. Yet his brother, Harvey (1893–1972), apparently enjoyed considerable success with his betting.⁸⁵ Betting was rarely excessive. Marcus Marsh would bet £5 or £10 for a sporting chance, £25 for a good chance, and £50 if it should win. Betting could influence stable policy, since betting stables were more likely to conceal the form of horses in handicaps, run horses in and out, engineer betting coups, or set out to win a small race somewhere with a horse trained up for the occasion. Small trainers might bet just to try to make ends meet.

The income of a trainer with a larger string was of upper-professional middle-class level, and the annual *Bloodstock Breeders' Review* 'memorative biographies' show many left substantial sums on death. Alec Taylor had trained the winners of 1,003 races worth £839,070 when he retired in 1927, and left nearly £600,000 on his death in 1943. Dobson Peacock left estate of £60,364 in 1935. Even a middle-ranking trainer like Fred Leader, who had never won a major race when he died, aged 52, in a car crash, left property of £22,370 in 1933. As well as profiting from weekly charges, income from fees could be augmented by presents given by grateful owners. Top trainers usually got a percentage of winnings and by the 1930s a bonus payment of 10 per cent of prize money was

increasingly fashionable.⁸⁶ Frank Butters won £518,868 in prize money in ten years, so bonuses were a substantial extra income. Trainers could supplement income in other ways too. Almost all kept two or three pigs. Straw and horse droppings would eventually be sold to farmers. Some perhaps maintained a small farm, or kept breeding mares or stallions. But there were costs too. The trainer had to pay wages, fodder, bills, usually rent for the training stables, and all other entrance charges, vets' fees, etc. Most trainers had to pay a fee for use of local gallops. At Newmarket, for example, in 1934 the Jockey Club charged a heath tax of £10 for every racehorse and 3 guineas for every yearling that used the Heath.

Expensive horses needed good-quality accommodation, and training stables were very costly to set up, modernise, buy or rent. When Captain Boyd-Rochfort bought Freemason Lodge training stables and fairly modest house in Newmarket, it cost him over £12,000.⁸⁷ Bedford Lodge sold for £5,000 in 1930, and Bedford House for £15,000 a year earlier.⁸⁸ Better stables could fetch up to £50,000 in Newmarket, while the owner James White reportedly spent over £100,000 upgrading the Foxhill stables.⁸⁹ In the North trainers got larger premises for their money. The large Highfield House stables in Malton sold for £30,000.

Local status came from success at local meetings and in major races. Newspapers at Malton, Middleham, Newmarket or Epsom would celebrate training successes, as would the village itself, although even here jockeys were now getting the plaudits more than the trainer. As his trainer later remembered, when Grakle's jockey came back to Lincoln after his 1928 Grand National success, six thousand people filled the station yard and carried him shoulder-high to the Albion Hotel.⁹⁰ But trainers with long careers could expect final ritual recognition. When Richard Marsh retired after fifty years of training at Newmarket, he received a cheque for £3,435 as the proceeds of a testimonial, while fellow trainers gave him a silver cup and a cabinet of cigars.⁹¹

Most 'star' trainers, often absent from their stable, relied on a well-respected, experienced, truthful and honest head lad. He could make or break a yard, and was 'the greatest help a trainer can have' according to Richard Marsh.⁹² He kept an eye on feeding, horse behaviour and leg defects, and knew a range of cures for most problems. Although some older trainers fed their own horses, head lads were usually responsible for preparing the specific feed, with Scottish oats being a mainstay, along with hay, bran and beans. Ideally they lived on the premises, but some lived nearby. They earned about £3 a week, if living in an on-site cottage, plus presents of *c.* £3 a winner.⁹³ Most yards also employed a travelling

head lad who went to races with horses and grooms, and ensured that they were looked after on the course and loaded on and off the train safely.

Stable lads and grooms were at the bottom of the ladder. They would come from all over the country. Their parents had a variety of backgrounds, often skilled or semi-skilled like coachman or joiner, some more middle-class. The parents of several were farmers. Stafford Ingham was the son of a Penge chemist. As many came from urban as from rural environments. Tommy Weston, for example, had been selling newspapers and working in a foundry.⁹⁴ Most boys came to the stable on leaving school, with the key criterion being their light-weight build. Many were attracted by the apparent glamour of becoming a jockey, love of horses, and ideas of making money. Some already had brothers in racing, or came from racing families.

Most ambitious lads wanted to be jockeys, but only a few succeeded. Cyril Luckman suggested that 'only one in a thousand', Rickman that 'one in a hundred' became established jockeys.⁹⁵ Some could already ride but this was not vital. Harry Wragg knew nothing about stable work and had never seen a race-horse when he arrived in Newmarket.⁹⁶ Lengths of jockey indentures varied, most usually five years, but ranging from three to eight years. An initial 'trial' period was relatively calm. Lads did odd jobs and looked after ponies and hacks. Once indentures were signed they were often treated more harshly. Doug Smith had a 'spartan and cheerless' apprenticeship near Wantage, which he described as 'very tough', with strict physical discipline.⁹⁷ Stable food could be poor. Lads soon learned to keep quiet and be civil, addressing head lads, jockeys and other senior figures as 'Mr' rather than using first names. New lads were often the butt of practical jokes: water-buckets on top of a door or loosened bed frames. Stable initiation rituals, usually involving greasing and chaffing of genitals, conferred their racing nickname and supposedly qualified them to learn the finer points of horsemanship.

In stables lads lived in dormitories, accommodating from three or four up to thirty. Older 'board wagemen' out of apprenticeship lived in. Married men lived out and came in from their homes. Most earned around £2 a week if married, though less if single. Winning owners sometimes gave presents to the stable lads who 'did' their horses, which for a lucky few increased their earnings. Each trainer negotiated wage settlements separately, and lads' wages were traditionally very low, although most lived in at the stables, so accommodation and meals were free, and any doctors' bills were paid. Doctors' bills were necessary, since injuries were common: horses bit, kicked or threw their riders. One ex-jockey, Tom Aldridge, died at Durdans when his horse shied at some donkeys.⁹⁸

Indentured lads got little money until they had served their time. Jack Morris initially got only £6 a year, paid to his mother, so he survived by scrumping, doing tack or washing jobs for older stablemen, taking beer bottles back – or ‘you had to thieve it’.⁹⁹ Doug Smith was initially paid 2s 6d a week, which slowly went up first to 5s and finally to 10s a week. He shared with two others a room ‘more or less like a coal cellar, decorated up’, jointly using a hard bed in very cold conditions.¹⁰⁰ Shepherd, who even paid for washing, although work clothes were supplied, slept in a open-windowed loft with bare boards, to which his boots froze in winter, and used horse rugs for warmth. He admitted that it was ‘only the horses’ that kept him there.¹⁰¹ Harry Wragg initially received only a shilling a week, eventually rising to three. His trainer, Bob Colling, was renowned for parsimony. All trainers charged owners for apprentices’ riding fees, and often winning percentages or ‘presents’ too. Some kept the lot. Wragg got nothing from Colling, although he won many races for him. In the North wages were similarly low. At Manor House, Middleham, lads reputedly got a shilling a week, slept three to a bed and got only Christmas week off.¹⁰² Lads generally had little free time, except on Sunday, when horses were not exercised, though in some yards churchgoing was compulsory, and evening stables were still expected.¹⁰³

Lads commonly took care of two horses, and occasionally three, once they proved reliable. They were wakened by the head lad somewhere between five and half past six, and began by cleaning out the boxes and stalls. Wooden skips or sacks would be used for ‘mucking out’. The horses were ‘dressed over’, vigorously strapped with wisp and rubber, and got ready for riding out with the rest of ‘the string’ or first ‘lot’ from six to seven o’clock. Then lads might have a slice of bread and a cup of tea. Tack would be put on, and horses sheeted up. Trainers would accompany the string to the gallops to supervise exercise, usually from hacks, thoroughbreds or trap, while wealthier trainers sometimes used cars. Gallops lasted up to an hour and a half on nearby laid-out heath or moorland. Usually two days were ‘fast work’ or galloping days, over the horse’s best distance. Trainers would vary training according to a horse’s characteristics, habits, condition and feeding, drawing on their experience and practice. Too much work would lead to poor eating. On the other days only trotting and cantering were required. Back in by nine, horses would be groomed over, boxes set fair and the horses fed, and lads would get breakfast. A second lot would be turned out by around quarter to eleven, and would be back in and done up by twelve thirty, unless it was wet, when they would have to be dried off. Older grooms would often be given time off in the afternoon, but at many yards apprentices

would clean windows, weed, sweep and tidy the yard and drives, crush corn and cut chaff, and do odd jobs like tack and brass cleaning or washing out saddle rooms. Evening stables were around half past four. At Stanley House stables this was 'rather like a military inspection, with sawdust laid down everywhere ... at the entrance to every box brilliantly polished brasses, and every lad dressed in a white jacket to show off his horse'.¹⁰⁴ Boxes were tidied up, horses groomed, the trainer would inspect them and then they would be fed and finally done up about six-thirty, although the trainer might check later.

In winter National Hunt trainers were still busy, but others went into hibernation. Horses ceased fast work. Some would be sent back to be stabled at their owner's property. New yearlings came in late August or September to be broken in, backed and ridden under the supervision of the head lad. Exercised horses now wore a hood, breast-cloth and a big sheet, with a rug on top, to keep them warm. At Christmas staff might receive a cash bonus based on the stable's success. In early spring 2-year-olds would be tried to assess their merits and potential. Jockeys would sometimes be brought in specially, and special trial gallops hired. Trainers (and owners) kept a trial book to record this. Sometimes lads would wear the owner's silks over their shirts to aid identification.

Most lads were loyal to and really knew the horses they did, although over time the 'grand colt' might become a 'twisting bastard' with consistent failure. They learnt strategies to deal with their 'rogue' horses.¹⁰⁵ A constant image in oral testimony is that a horse was 'like a child', and had to be individually treated. Lads would go to great lengths to 'mother', encourage to feed and bring on 'their' horse. Indeed the letters of Snowy Shepherd's brother, about his horses, not his mildewed clothing, attracted Snowy to the same stable.¹⁰⁶ When they came back from holiday they would grumble about the poor treatment of 'their' horses, swearing and insulting their replacement: 'two rides from you is enough to f... any horse for life, the way you ride'.¹⁰⁷

Although not physically hard, hours were from early morning to late evening if horses returned late from meetings. But stable life was regulated and predictable. Lads were subject to semi-feudal authority exercised by the trainer, the head lad or occasionally the trainer's wife. Trainers did not suffer fools gladly and some had, as Shepherd remembered, 'terrible mouths', and 'messed the men about' when not with owners. Generally lads accepted the discipline as a fact of life. 'Hard but fair', as Phil Welsh summed up his trainer, indicates a common view.¹⁰⁸ Photographs of staffs show them looking neatly presented and almost all wore well-fitting riding breeches, leather leggings or jodhpurs, shirts and short coats. Some wore collar and tie, others wore mufflers. Trainers

expected tidy and clean appearances, and apprentices would often be supplied with breeches. In big stables there was particular emphasis on status. This showed itself not only in lads' appearance, but in horses too, and before a race horses were extra carefully groomed and manes carefully plaited. Trainers' initials were on exercise sheets, a visible symbol of status in the training community, and there were visual reminders of previous famous classic and other stable winners around the yards.

Lads had a flourishing social life, sometimes respectable, sometimes less so. Larger training towns often had institutes or clubs where lads could spend their evenings playing more respectable games. They were expected back at the stables usually well before ten o'clock, otherwise they would be locked out, and punished with extra duties, although lads would sometimes sneak out late for dances and to meet girls. Newmarket Racing Lads Recreation Rooms had an hour's Bible class on Sundays. It had a library, provided writing paper and envelopes, three billiard tables, a snooker table, and sold tea or cakes for a penny. Some stables had a mess room and a games room. Virtually every stable lad bet at least occasionally. Outside the stables, the chief sporting recreations were billiards, boxing, football and cricket. At Newmarket there was a Stable Lads' Football League, and there were other stable teams elsewhere. In bigger training regions there were boxing competitions for stable lads at weights from 4.5 st. to 8 st. Morris was a skilled boxer, and had several fights at Newmarket, including one against a boxer from the Chantilly stables in France, for a purse of £100.¹⁰⁹

Strong rivalries coexisted with a keen sense of identity. Both operated at several levels. There were powerful interyard rivalries within Newmarket, Lambourn or Malton. Newmarket's superiority complex meant sometimes strong competition with 'country' stables, while there was further separation between northern and southern stables. Racing towns were also divided by the equivalent of 'town-versus-gown' rivalries. As Welsh admitted, at Newmarket 'our enemies were the townies'. Welsh also provided a more detailed account of the zest and energy of play, fighting and sexual experience, claiming that lads had 'glib tongues through living away from home, so [were] able to charm most of the local girls', and that some lads had to change stables two or three times to avoid having to marry pregnant girls, and learnt not to 'give their real names' when 'playing away'.¹¹⁰

The conservative nature of the industry ensured that lads were largely unionised. Racing was individualistic and conservative. Trainers were strongly opposed to unionisation, because of the need for flexibility when dealing with

horses, and the belief that a union would ‘develop into a clearing house for stable information’.¹¹¹ Despite this, there was significant industrial unrest, passed over almost entirely in conventional racing literature. Some trainers looked after and paid their lads badly. Social and cultural relationships could be problematical. There are suggestions that there was a trainers’ blacklist of men dismissed for misconduct of one kind or another, which meant that ‘a man’s chance of gaining a living in a stable is gone’.¹¹² Lads’ grievances at Epsom led to a strike there in 1919, and assaults on non-strikers.¹¹³

The depressions of the 1920s and early 1930s led to a fairly quiescent workforce but there was increased discontent from the mid-1930s, as wages remained held down. An unsuccessful strike at Lambourn over wages and conditions in 1936 resulted in some lads there secretly joining the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU).¹¹⁴ There was renewed disaffection at Epsom, Lambourn and Newmarket, where some interim increases were given which raised experienced lads’ pay from between 40 and 42*s* to 45*s*. The Newmarket Trainers’ Federation initially recognised the TGWU, paid holidays went from a week to eight consecutive days after one year’s service, wages were increased to 48*s*, and one-third of the men were to be freed from Sunday evening stables.¹¹⁵ In mid-May 1938 Trainers’ Federations at Newmarket and in Berkshire, Wiltshire and Hampshire passed resolutions refusing further increases. When strikes were threatened they refused either arbitration or the intervention of the Conciliation Board. Small-scale strikes at Newmarket had spread to Marlborough, Lambourn and Weyhill by late May 1938. At Lambourn, where three hundred struck, those lads who continued to ride out had to do so with police supervision, with widespread intimidation right through the summer, in attempts to raise the pay of less-experienced lads to 38*s*. At Wantage three stable lads pushed about and kicked a non-striker who didn’t ‘see any good in it’ as late as December 1938.¹¹⁶ Eventually the intervention of the Conciliation Board, and newspaper pressure for ‘a living wage’, orchestrated by Ernest Bevin, who was now general secretary of the recently-formed Stable Lads’ Union, led to minor increases.

Stable difficulties should not be over-stressed. Although many lads put on too much weight to ride out and had to depart, for lightweight stable lads long careers were possible. Unsuccessful jockeys often returned to the yard, while a bad employer could be left. There was a fair amount of mobility between yards, with opportunities to work abroad too, through recruitment advertisements for apprentice-served grooms of 8 st. who could ride out, offering ‘good wages and presents’.¹¹⁷ In many yards the atmosphere was quite jolly and happy-go-lucky,

with much laughing and joking, along with the coarse language. And lads always had the horses, or the sight of the Heath on a work morning in high summer, to sustain them.

Notes

- 1 *The Times*, 9.11.1933.
- 2 Marcus Marsh, *Racing with the gods* (London: Pelham Books, 1968), p. 17.
- 3 Jack Fairfax-Blakeborough, *The analysis of the turf* (London: Phillip Allan, 1927), p. 102.
- 4 *Daily Mirror*, 7.6.1923. Donoghue managed two autobiographies: Steve Donoghue, *Just my story* (London: Hutchinson, n.d. but c. 1923); Steve Donoghue, *Donoghue up!* (London: Collins, 1938).
- 5 Gordon Richards, *My story* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1955).
- 6 *Daily Mirror*, 26.3.1938.
- 7 *Daily Mail*, 9.11.1933. Richards ended the season with 259 victories.
- 8 C. R. Acton, *Silk and spur* (London: Richards, 1935), p. 106; Quintin Gilbey, *Fun was my living* (London: Hutchinson, 1970), p. 147.
- 9 See Donoghue, *Just my story*, p. 225.
- 10 *Sporting Chronicle*, 8.6.1935.
- 11 Rae Johnstone, *The Rae Johnstone story* (London: Stanley Paul, 1958), p. 12.
- 12 John Hislop, *Far from a gentleman* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), pp. 110, 185.
- 13 See Hotspur's comments in the *Daily Telegraph*, 15.6.1933. See also A J. Dickenson, 'Jockeys and jockeyship', in Ernest Bland, *Flat racing since 1900* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1950), p. 194.
- 14 *The Times*, 6.2.1928.
- 15 *Daily Telegraph*, 13.1.1924.
- 16 See Suffolk Oral History Project 1985–88, OHT 354, Snowy Shepherd.
- 17 Phil Welsh, *Stable rat: life in the racing stables* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), p. 68.
- 18 The situation is little different today. For an overview of the labour market for jockeys, see Wray Vamplew, 'Still crazy after all those years: continuity in a changing labour market for professional jockeys', *Contemporary British history*, 14: 2 (2000), 115–45.
- 19 Wray Vamplew, *The turf* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), p. 156.
- 20 Captain X, *Tales of the turf* (London: Partridge Publications, 1943), p. 57.
- 21 See report on their use in *The Sporting Life*, 21.2.1924. Chris Pitt, *A long time gone* (Halifax: Portway Press, 1996), p. 197 says they were first used at Cardiff in 1923. Roger Munting, *Hedges and ditches* (London: J. A., Allen, 1987), p. 141 says they were made compulsory that year. Pictures indicate that the rule was not always obeyed.
- 22 Meyrick Good, *Good days* (London: Hutchinson, 1941), p. 99.
- 23 Acton, *Silk and spur*, p. 23.

- 24 Letter from John Hislop, quoted in John Hislop and David Swannell, *The Faber book of the turf* (London: Faber, 1990), p. 195.
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