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7.10. Shrewsbury races and racecourse

This text has been prepared for VCH Shropshire by Sara Downs. It is made available to readers in advance of its full publication. We welcome suggestions for improvement, references and, of course, we invite readers to point out errors.

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7.10. Shrewsbury Races

There have been three racecourses in Shrewsbury.¹ The races at Kingsland started in 1717 but ended when the land was enclosed in 1724. The races started again in 1729 at a new course at Bicton Heath, two miles to the west of Shrewsbury town centre.² The racecourse and grandstand at Bicton was located just south of the Grapes Inn.³ The Borough of Shrewsbury had a part interest in the racecourse but sold off their stake in the grandstand in 1792.⁴ The Borough leased its remaining interest to John Probert in 1809, whilst retaining their licensing fees for stalls and booths erected on race days.⁵ The Borough later sold their land in Bicton in 1829.⁶ The majority owners of the racecourse were the Mytton family of Halston, the racecourse being part of their Cophorne estate. The races on this course ended when John ‘Mad Jack’ Mytton, sold the estate due to debt in 1831.⁷ The land at Bicton then reverted to agricultural land. Shelton Asylum was built on the east side of Racecourse Lane between 1843 and 1845. The site had extended up to the lane by 1880.⁸ In the twentieth century properties were built along the west side of the road. The new Oxon school opened in 1959.⁹ Ashley Homes built the Gains Park housing estate on part of the former racecourse in the 1980s.¹⁰

In 1832, after the sale of the racecourse at Bicton Heath, the Earl of Tankerville offered the use of his fields in Monkmoor on the opposite side of Shrewsbury as a new location for the races. The course was described as an oval with a circumference of one mile and 185 yards which included a half mile straight run.¹¹ At a meeting convened by the Mayor on 14 April 1834, it was resolved that a Race Committee be formed to draw up a prospectus determining the number of shares required to purchase the racecourse and also to negotiate a land exchange with Holy Cross (Abbey) parish.¹² In 1837, the Earl of Tankerville offered to sell the course comprising of 56a.1r. 17p. for the sum of £10,000, but the offer was time limited. As an inducement he offered £500 towards the construction of a new grandstand. At

a meeting of subscribers on 21 June 1838, the Shrewsbury Racing Company was established. A sum of £11,000 was agreed upon to complete the sale and to purchase stands. Four hundred shares were issued at £25 each to purchase the land.¹³ In 1839, the new grandstand was constructed following the design of Mr Carline that incorporated a tavern, betting and retiring rooms and glazed and open rooftop galleries (Figure 1).¹⁴

In 1843, John Frail was appointed clerk to the Shrewsbury Racing Company. Frail was a former hairdresser and Conservative election agent with a history of bribery. He became the virtual owner of the racecourse by unscrupulous means.¹⁵ Following the death of Frail in 1879 his sons took over as clerks but resigned in 1884.¹⁶ In 1885 a new Racecourse Company was founded and secured a lease of additional land which was used for the mile straight.¹⁷

The Company went into liquidation in December 1887, the last formal races being held in October.¹⁸ Its failure was blamed on its adoption of Jockey Society rules.¹⁹ The racecourse estate was sold at auction on 10 February 1888 and was purchased by Mr Attfield, a corn dealer, for £12,000.²⁰ The *Sporting Gazette* felt that the fate of the races had been sealed even before the Frail brothers withdrew in 1885 and that the new company had failed to breathe life into them.²¹

In 1910, the racecourse site was advertised for sale as the site of a new garden suburb estate but no purchaser came forwards.²² The racecourse buildings, including the grandstand, were sold in 1912 and later demolished.²³ The racecourse was later purchased by the council in 1925 for £8,500. The council intended to use the land for council houses, private builds, a school and the rest was to remain as open ground.²⁴ The housing estates at Racecourse Crescent, Racecourse Avenue, Crowmere Green and Abbots Green were built by 1937.²⁵ The school designed by Derby architect Bernard Widdows was opened in 1930.²⁶ Monkmoor

infant school was opened in 1935.²⁷ Much of the remaining open space was laid out as playing fields.²⁸

During its existence the third racecourse was the venue for a variety of sporting and social events. In 1838, it was the location of a balloon ascent by Mr Graham.²⁹ It hosted a wide range of sporting events including football, archery (Figure 2) and athletics.³⁰ In 1845, 1884 and 1914, it was the venue for the Royal Agricultural Show.³¹ In 1887, it hosted part of the town's celebrations for Queen Victoria's golden jubilee.³² The racecourse had a long connection to the military. The land historically called the 'Soldier's Piece' regularly accommodated the yeomanry cavalry reviews.³³ In 1917, it was reported that the site was to be used to billet soldiers brought in to complete the local harvest.³⁴

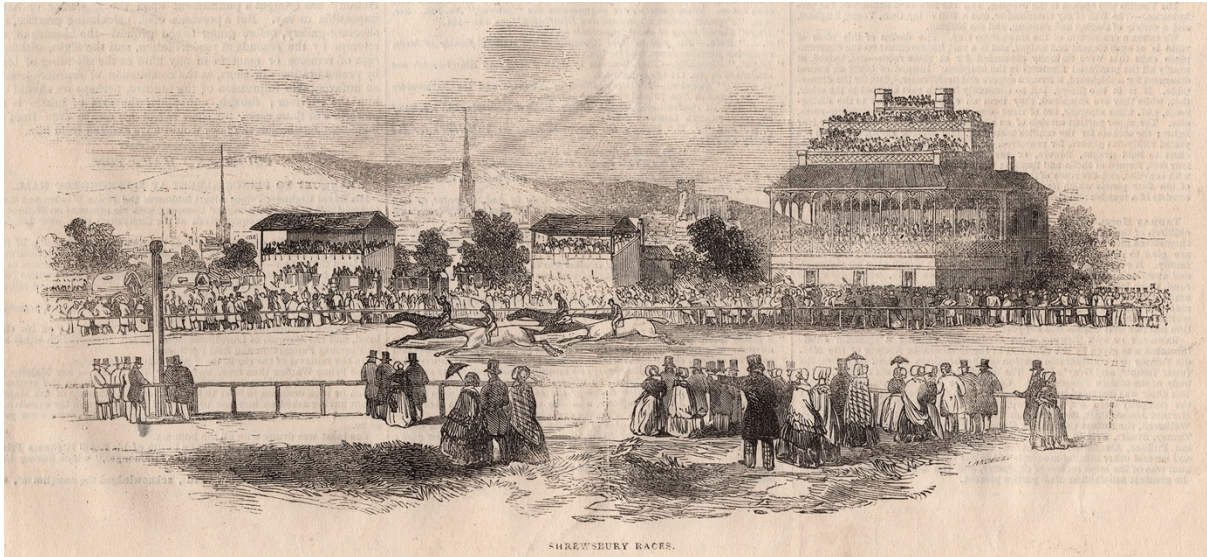


Figure One. Shrewsbury races. From *Illustrated London News*, 24 May 1845. Reproduced by permission of VCH Shropshire.



Figure Two. 'The Grand National Archery Meeting on the race-ground at Shrewsbury' showing the grandstands. *Illustrated London News*, 22 July 1854. Reproduced by permission of VCH Shropshire.

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- ¹ The history of horse racing in Shropshire can be found in *VCH Shropshire*, II, 177-83.
- ² *Ibid.*, 177; SA, 6001/299.
- ³ SA, 6000/10353.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *VCH Shropshire*, II, 178.
- ⁶ SA 3365/2514.
- ⁷ *Morning Herald (London)*, 15 Oct. 1831.
- ⁸ *VCH Shropshire*, III, 160-2.
- ⁹ SA, ED8852/2
- ¹⁰ SA, D 71.1 v.f. Ashely Homes, *Plan of Gains Park* (1987).
- ¹¹ *Eddowes's J.*, 4 Jul. 1832.
- ¹² SA, 8184/2, 'Watton's Cuttings', 319-21.
- ¹³ *Shrews Chron.*, 22 Jun. 1838.
- ¹⁴ *Staffordshire Adv.*, 11 May 1839.
- ¹⁵ Andrews Pattison. 'The "Demon Barber" of Shrewsbury', *Salopian Recorder*, 104 (Autumn 2022), 4; *VCH Shropshire*, II, 179.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Eddowes J.*, 11 Mar. *Wellington J.*, 21 Mar. 1885.
- ¹⁸ *Eddowes's J.*, 26 Oct. 1887.
- ¹⁹ *Eddowes J.*, 28 Dec. 1887.
- ²⁰ *Eddowes's J.*, 15 Feb. 1888.
- ²¹ *Sporting Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1888.
- ²² *Shrews Chron.*, 12 Aug. 1910.
- ²³ The grandstand was no longer standing in 1925. *Shrews Chron.*, 17 May 1912; *Ordnance Survey map, Shropshire XXXIV.7*, 1925.
- ²⁴ *Shrews Chron.*, 6 Mar. 1925; 13 Mar. 1925.
- ²⁵ Barrie Trinder, *Beyond the Bridges: The Suburbs of Shrewsbury, 1760-1960* (2006), 67.
- ²⁶ SA, DA5/710/53/110; *Shrews Chron.*, 29 Aug. 1930.
- ²⁷ *Shrews Chron.*, 1 Feb. 1935.
- ²⁸ SA, DA5/790/302.
- ²⁹ SA, 8184/2, 'Watton's Cuttings', 324.
- ³⁰ *Shrews Chron.*, 4 Feb. 1876; 15 May 1854; *Eddowes's J.*, 28 Sep. 1887.

³¹ *Eddowes's J.*, 11 Jun. 1845; *Shrews Chron.*, 12 Jul.1884; *Staffordshire Adv.*, 4 Jul. 1914.

³² *Shrews Chron.*, 17 Jun. 1887.

³³ SA, 7305/S29; SA, 2183/233.

³⁴ *Wellington J.*, 19 Aug. 1916.