

TONY MORRIS

Life in Newmarket



IN an era when the ability to access hundreds of channels merely confirms it's well-nigh impossible to find anything worth watching on television, it's hardly surprising that some people hanker after the good old days and become addicted to DVDs of old films.

I make no apology for counting myself among that number and have been building my collection, most of which seem to pre-date the age of technicolor. Quite a few of them, in fact, make no demands on my hearing and render the volume control superfluous.

But one recent acquisition is from more modern times, featuring both colour and sound, and it was made not much more than 50 years ago. I bought it, knowing little about it, because it was cheap and because the story concerned racing, my thinking being that even if it turned out to be as lousy as most other films on the subject it might just serve up a welcome dose of nostalgia about the game as it was when it first grabbed my attention.

Most specifically, it struck me that it would surely have to contain shots of racecourses as I knew them before they were revamped and had their souls removed. I would be treated to sights that had long been lost and, over the course of half a century, had become indistinct images in my mind's eye.

And I was not disappointed. The film that supposedly inspired Willie Carson with the ambition to emulate the young hero's rise from working-class obscurity to leading jockey gave me what I wanted as well. Never mind the implausible storyline, the photography is first-class and, though it was aimed at a 1950s audience for whom the racecourse scenes might have been familiar, it serves now as a historical record of how things used to be – an education for the 21st century racegoer, a vivid reminder for those of us of an older generation.

The film is called *The Rainbow Jacket* and it tells the tale of a horse-mad kid who is befriended and taught to ride by a disgraced former jockey, warned off for stopping a favourite at Royal Ascot. The part of the ex-jock is admirably played by Bill Owen, who did not become a household name as the result of this rare exposure in a leading role, but who, many years later, earned enduring fame in TV's *Last of the Summer Wine*.

Given that the story featured a couple of Jockey Club members who were also racecourse stewards and peers of the realm, the casting director would not have wasted much time in signing up Robert Morley and Wilfrid Hyde-White, who as regular racegoers and racehorse owners, were naturals for the parts.

Former amateur steeplechase rider Edward Underdown, a close friend and weighing-room colleague of John Hislop (who acted as a consultant on the film), was an equally obvious choice to play the trainer. Honor Blackman, yet to feature as Avengers

Rainbow view gives a glimpse of bygone charms

heroine Cathy Gale and Bond girl Pussy Galore, has the relatively inconspicuous role of trainer's wife, while Sid James appears for no better reason than he made himself available for every British film of the period.

The plot, such as there is, inevitably concerns skulduggery on the Turf, with a villainous bookmaker at the heart of it. At the denouement it's all about how the leading characters are going to behave when the nasty rotter wants the St Leger favourite pulled.

I thought the tale a bit too far-fetched to care what happened at the end, but it is a film I shall watch again for the reminders of racecourses as they were – notably Lingfield, Doncaster and, most of all, Newmarket, parts of which have changed beyond recognition.

ISAT up with a start when the lad, arriving in the town to start his apprenticeship, asked a policeman in the High Street for directions to Ormonde House. When he was told it was just behind the Jockey Club, I was half-expecting a knock at the door; the fictional stable had the very name I bestowed upon my own humble abode.

The shots of the Rowley Mile brought back memories of that wonderful old paddock, so hard to call to mind now that it forms part of the members' car park, and there was what is now the annual members' bar in its former incarnation as the weighing room.

Of course, changes become necessary over time and nobody can deny that the Rowley Mile has become a more racegoer-friendly environment. Now that my days of leaping up steps two at a time are over, I'm quite grateful for the provision of an escalator.

But where is the charm in these functional modern buildings? In 30 years' time, when they revamp things again, will old-timers look back with affection on the facilities of 2010? Somehow, I doubt it.

The tradition and the sense of history that attached to the old environment has gone and is accessible now only through something like *The Rainbow Jacket*.

MARTIN WILLS AWARD

Aisling Crowe was recently announced winner of the Martin Wills Award for budding racing writers. Here we publish her entry, 'Promises'



SHE noticed the sudden chill in the air and the darkening of the skies as the sun disappeared behind the clouds. She had been standing there for ten minutes, trying to force her unwilling legs to move. The hollowness she had felt for the last few weeks had engulfed her as she made her way to the course and, as she stood in front of the gates, it threatened to overcome her. The drops of rain that began to fall were a signal she couldn't ignore, reminding her of promises made. She looked to the sky, smiled to herself, tightened her scarf, pulled her hat down on her head and strode up to the turnstiles.

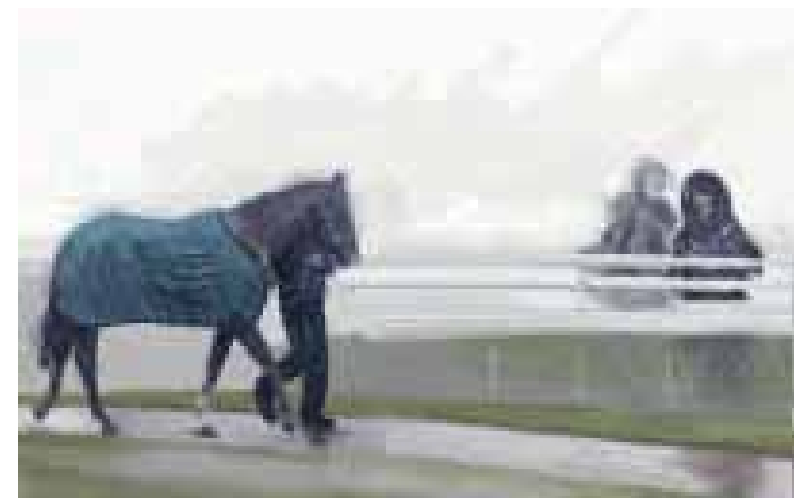
Once inside, she found herself in familiar territory, among a vast crowd in a place where she had always felt she belonged. It was different this time though. She felt anchorless and lost in the sea of people. The excited chatter had always intensified her anticipation, but now it made her feel isolated. The hollowness almost overwhelmed her again. She hadn't wanted to come, but he had made her promise that she would go, even if he couldn't. It was a promise that she couldn't break. She didn't have to go alone, but she wanted to. It wouldn't have been right to bring someone else in his place.

The annual trip had always felt like a pilgrimage. Horses had been her passion for as long as she could remember and her dreams were all of the glory that could be found in this place. He had encouraged and supported her in every way he could. So every year they went to honour their heroes and renew their promise that one day they would visit the hallowed turf of the winner's enclosure. More than that, it was a chance for them to reconnect the ties that had been loosened as she had grown up and they had grown apart. No matter what else happened in their lives, they had this place to renew their bond. This time, more than ever, that sense of pilgrimage was apt. She had come to honour him.

Everywhere she turned she was reminded of him. The women selling racecards with whom he always shared a joke. The sign under which they would arrange to meet in case one of them got lost. It was usually he who got lost because he would bump into someone he knew and lose track of time. The chip van where he always bought the same meal for them – sausages, chips and coffee. The spot at the top end of the parade ring where they stood to inspect the horses and pick the one who would carry their money. The memories kept flooding back. Memories of races run, beloved horses, bets won and lost and heroic feats on the track. The memories comforted her. She knew she would never be alone here.

She made her way to the parade ring and took up her usual position. The horses for the first race were just starting to file in and the steps were quickly filling up around her. She took the racecard from her pocket and scanned it for information. She watched intently as the horses circled in front of her and the jockeys received their last-minute instructions. There was no one to debate the merits

He made her promise she would go even if he couldn't



of her selection with, but it didn't matter. She wasn't betting in this one. She was waiting. The bell sounded and the crowds began pushing towards the betting ring and the stands but she didn't move. She remained by the railing at the top of the parade ring and watched the race unfold on the giant screen at the other end. Three more races passed by in the same way before she found what she had been looking for. She was looking through the entries for the fifth race when the name leapt off the page. This was the one she had been waiting for. She put her hand in her pocket and felt the thick envelope which he had given her and remembered his instructions about what to do with it.

SHE turned around and pushed her way through the crowds towards the betting ring. She scanned the bookies' boards, looking for the best value, just as he had taught her. She saw one bookie offering odds of 14-1 and hurried over before it was snapped up by punters desperate to recover their losses.

The realisation of what she was about to do dawned on her as she took the envelope out of her pocket. It was filled with sterling that he had bought in anticipation of a trip he didn't make. Her hands trembled and her voice faltered as she placed his last bet.

She put the betting slip into her pocket and turned toward the spot in the grandstand where he would wait

'She couldn't fight back the tears any longer, but it was a relief to feel them flowing down her face'

while she placed their bets. He wasn't there to guide her this time, but she knew exactly how to find the place – 15 steps up and directly across from the winning post. He had always said it was the best vantage point.

She fought her way through the throng to their spot just in time to see the tape rise. Her eyes sought out the green and yellow silks that carried his final bet and, once she found them, her gaze never left them. She watched silently as his chosen horse hunted round in mid-division. As they rounded the home turn, the roar of the crowd got louder and louder as the horses climbed higher and higher up that famous hill, until it reached a crescendo as they approached the final fence.

Those green and yellow silks were among the leaders and she was taken aback to hear her own voice join with the thousands around her exhorting their horses and jockeys to give their all for victory. She shouted until there was no more breath left in her lungs and her voice had dissolved into a whisper.

When the green and yellow silks crossed the line in front, she turned to where he should have been to hug him, but a stranger stood there instead. She couldn't fight back the tears any longer, but it was a relief to feel them flowing down her face.

Everything around her was a blur as she climbed back down the steps towards the betting ring to collect his winnings. She could just about make out the bookie's yellow umbrella and she fumbled in her pocket for the slip. Her body shook as she collected his winnings. She had never seen so much money. His last bet had been his biggest. She looked to the skies as the rain began to fall. She smiled through her tears as she remembered the promise he had kept and the one she had still to keep.

► The winning entries in the under-19 and under-15 categories will be published tomorrow and Friday

'The shots of the Rowley Mile revived memories of the wonderful old paddock'