

‘It’s not about the money – we enjoy doing the job’

ON LOCATION

Steve Dennis visits Wincanton to monitor the unglamorous yet invaluable work of the raceday staff who help keep the show on the road



WHAT do you see when you go to the races? Horses, yes. Brightly clad jockeys, a trainer or two, an excited flock of owners. The same every time.

What don’t you see? Or rather, what do you see out of the corner of your eye but hardly register? The unnamed extras in the crowd scene, as vital to the smooth running of raceday as the watch-workings behind the dial but similarly unseen.

The usual icy wind is flaying Wincanton, sharp enough to take the bristles off a pig, cold enough to make Shackleton stay in bed. In the car park, Brian Morris is marshalling the traffic into neat rows, waving drivers here and there with a broad smile and the occasional theatrical gesture. Upstairs, in the warmth of the Winning Post restaurant, Megan Pugh is polishing glass, putting out cutlery, unobtrusive in her black waitress garb but busy.

Through the restaurant’s plate-glass wall one can see a group of men at the final fence, dressed in the fluorescence of hard and chilly work and nagging away at the soft Somerset soil with their forks, erasing the evidence that 12 handicap hurdlers recently came that way. And if you were to pop your head out of a window, you might hear that evocative call “Racing Post, all the form!” Mike Conway, Racing Post seller, is doing a steady trade.

Newspapers have been Conway’s life – he started out as an office boy at the Sunday Mirror – and here he is at 78 with newsprint still on his fingers. He’s inside the main gate, a stack of newspapers on his stand, a twinkle in his eye, a branded baseball cap at a jaunty angle. On the other side of the gate his wife Maureen sells Posts from her stand, tucked away out



of the worst of the wind. “We’re used to the weather,” she says, with the usual British fortitude.

“I used to be the West Country rep for the Racing Post, took early retirement at 60, but I wanted to carry on because I love my racing,” Mike says. “So I took a job at the racecourses. I cover Wincanton, Newton Abbot and Exeter and Maureen helps me out. Our daughter Marion took over my rep’s job. I suppose we’re a racing family.”

Conway started early from his home at Burnham-on-Sea in Somerset, picked up 140 copies of the Post from his newsagent and arrived at the track three hours before the first race.

Customers make a beeline for him, sometimes the transaction is a silent exchange of coins and newspaper but usually there’s a snatch of humour to sweeten the deal. “You’ve got all the winners here,” says one chap. “Yes, but all the losers too,” replies Conway.

“We’ve got so many regulars around the tracks, so many friends – when we’re on holiday the punters are always asking where we are. When I’m not working I like to go fishing, we take our caravan out, always doing something.”

Conway passes on a tip for Miss Tenacious in the second race, says he likes to read Pricewise but doesn’t really bet, doesn’t see much racing what with him and Maureen heading home after the second race, customers thin on the ground by then and the fireside

(Main picture) Racing at Wincanton last Thursday; (clockwise from top left) the people who keep things ticking over, Racing Post seller Mike Conway; car-park attendant Brian Morris; hospitality manager Holly Speight (top); waitress Megan Pugh; treaders (from left to right) Kevin Smith, Mike Stokes, Jim Selway and Rob Townsend

‘When the season starts it’s like everyone returning to school at the start of term’

beckoning. He’s paid £15 a day plus travel expenses, and commission of 25 per cent on every paper sold.

“It’s not about the money, we just enjoy doing the job. It gets us out, it’s a healthy way of life, plenty of fresh air,” he says.

There’s plenty of fresh air in the car park, where Brian Morris, 57, is taking the fine art of spatial awareness to new levels, slotting mud-splashed motors into place as though they were pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. His day job puts him on a forklift truck at a Marks & Spencer distribution factory, its four days on-four days off nature enabling him to work at every Wincanton meeting.

“I’ve been doing this for about seven years and I really enjoy it, you meet some really nice people,” he says, breaking off to wave a Range Rover into place, a dog peering beadily through the rear window. Like Conway, he sees the same faces time and again and has built a rapport with the regulars, relishes the brief call and response that makes the world go round.

“When I come in I check the ropes are in the right place, shift them where I want them, avoid any boggy patches,” he says of a day that begins at ten and ends in the half-light of half past four and that earns him between £50 and £60.

“There’s four of us in this particular car park, and when we get here there’ll be lines mown into the grass to act as a guide – pull the front car up to that, slot one in behind, bring the next car up to the next line and so

on. When I started I was told ‘give them a smile and they’ll remember you and smile back’ and that’s how it works. When the season starts it’s like everyone coming back to school at the start of term, it’s all ‘how’ve you been all summer?’”

Morris keeps the locals happy by saving them a few spaces by the rails. He’s not a racing man, prefers football and Formula One, so doesn’t mind spending his afternoon out of sight of the horses. Much closer to the action are Jim Selway and Mike Stokes, who have just removed the last flight of hurdles – a flight poor Dave Crosse will be happy to see the back of after a cruel fall from Foxcub that denied him a first winner of the season – and are tidying the approach to the final fence before six novice chasers come and carve it all up again.

IN THE professional world Selway, 47, is a dairy farmer from Wells and Stokes, 62, runs a building business, but for the last five years or so they’ve been part of the ‘treading team’ down by the final fence on racedays, working away with garden forks, filling in the divots, levelling the land.

“We do it because we love it,” says Stokes. “It’s not so much the racing as the horses themselves, it’s being close to the horses. Sometimes ground conditions are atrocious and there’s 80-odd runners, which keeps us busy – so does keeping an eye out for loose horses.”

Selway puts his shoulder to the final fence, shoving the birch back into place. He was here an hour before the first race, will be here half an hour after the last, might be back in again tomorrow if there’s anything that needs finishing. A six-race card earns them £45, seven races takes it up to £50, with something on top for those – like Selway – who are qualified first-aiders.

They’re off. After the field has passed, Selway and Stokes are quickly out on the course, looking after the worst of the damage before they come around again. Only three make it that far and Steady Girlfriend takes a tired fall, made much worse by being clobbered by the falling Kindly Note, who gets up straight away and leaves Steady Girlfriend gasping on the ground.

Pictures: EDWARD WHITAKER (RACINGPOST.COM/PHOTOS) AND STEVE DENNIS



On location at . . . Wincanton



The treaders are lightning quick with the green screens and Selway moves to the mare’s head, his steady dairyman’s hands swiftly in among her teeth to remove the tongue-tie, loosen the bridle. After a few minutes she hauls herself to her feet, an unsteady Steady Girlfriend, and the finest sound you’ll ever hear on any racecourse carries easily from the grandstands, that great cheer of relief and delight as the worst fears are allayed. It’s probably loud enough to rattle glasses in the Winning Post restaurant, where hospitality manager Holly Speight is scribbling notes and 18-year-old Megan Pugh is serving afternoon tea.

Speight covers the southern tracks for Jockey Club Racecourses, was in at eight this morning and won’t put on her coat for the long journey home to Leicestershire until eight this evening. “It’s a very long day,” she says, although her broad smile hasn’t wavered all afternoon.

“Today hasn’t been as busy as Badger Chase day but it’s a constant service, starting at about midday when the kitchen opens and continuing all afternoon.

“The people here are very nice, very friendly, it’s one of my favourite places to work.

“I’m not into racing – I wouldn’t even know how to place a bet – but it’s quite nice to see the horses pass by the window every half-hour.”

Pugh’s the same, knows who AP McCoy is but no-one else, has hardly had the time to gaze out at the racecourse in any case. She was in at nine, will finish whenever the work finishes, says the tipping is quite generous, makes £6.31 an hour and earns every penny. And then someone else wants some tea and she goes to fetch it.

By half past four Wincanton is in darkness. The Conways are back home with their feet up in front of the fire, Pugh is picking up discarded betting tickets from the floor of the restaurant, Morris stands in the rosy glow of disappearing tail-lights, Selway and Stokes are no more than blurs in the deepening dusk, doing the last bit of ‘gardening’. It’s just another day at the races.

TONY MORRIS



THREE days after I left school, I was a racing journalist working in Fleet Street, a place I had known previously only as a site on a Monopoly board.

I arrived there about as ignorant of the real world as an 18-year-old kid from the sticks could be, and I wouldn’t have survived my six months as a trainee on the desk at the Press Association without a lot of help from my new colleagues.

I needed, and got, a lot of instruction on how the job was done and I was grateful for all the advice I received, not least on how to cope with the boss, who was very much a creature of moods.

I particularly remember one supposedly helpful early hint, which came in the form of a warning. There were a couple of out-of-office tasks that were never to be relished, so I was advised to hope not to be assigned them and on no account ever volunteer for either of them.

One of those avoid-like-the-plague events was the Waterloo Cup, the coursing classic that took place – so I was advised – in the coldest, bleakest part of England and always started at a time of day when any normal human being should still be in bed.

I really don’t know whether it was always like that at Altcar, because I never did get the assignment that apparently equated to the Black Spot I recalled from Treasure Island.

The other fixtures I was told should be given a wide berth were bloodstock sales, and they weren’t just an annual event. There were a lot of them, they tended to last all day, and they were guaranteed to bore the pants off anyone.

Because there were so many, it was quite likely that I might have time inflicted on me from time to time; if I didn’t, I shouldn’t invite the torture. As it happened, before I’d been in the job a month I had a bloodstock sale inflicted on me. It was just a minor one-day event at Doncaster, staged by a company that had been in operation no more than a year, so if I made a mess of my first reporting assignment it would be no big deal.

I duly made a mess of it, failing to take note of a correction to the catalogue which resulted in the Sporting Life carrying an erroneous headline the following day. But I hadn’t actually been bored by the experience and was rather sorry that, because of my blunder, I was unlikely to be assigned to another sale.

Some two and a half years later the boss called for a volunteer to join the reporting team for the December Sales in Newmarket. I remembered the advice I’d been given, but I ignored it. Of course, I wasn’t to know that I was embarking on a 32-year odyssey when I would cover just about every bloodstock sale in Britain, as well as plenty in Ireland and the States, with occasional ventures to similar events in France,

Unheeded warning led me to fun and friendship

Italy, Germany, Belgium, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Sure, there were dull days when I would much rather have been doing something else, but I remain deeply indebted to the sales scene for a lot of fun, many enduring friendships and plenty of memories. And much of what I value from all that experience was derived from in and around the Tattersalls arena that my old pal Jim Peden called ‘the Temple to Mammon’. I once calculated that something like two years of my life were spent in that building.

THE December Sales are almost with us again. In fact, the annual invasion of Newmarket has already begun with lookers on site for the yearling session that opens proceedings at 10am tomorrow. The foals and breeding stock to come will challenge the professionals to survive until Thursday week.

I wouldn’t have survived until now if I’d not called a halt when I did, but there are others tougher than me, such as my venerable chum John Hancock, doyen of bloodstock insurers, whose first December Sales were in 1963 and who will be in business there for the 51st consecutive year this week.


Sales took me around the world and enabled me to see some extraordinary events, but the eight-figure sales I reported on at Keeneland never threatened to top the memory of Vaguely Noble’s sale for 136,000gns at the 1967 December Sales.

And though there was usually plenty to interest me at yearling auctions everywhere, it was always the December occasion in Newmarket to which I looked forward and enjoyed most. Yes, that was in part because it meant the end of the exhausting autumn slog, but it was mostly about relishing the company of the most cosmopolitan group of vendors and buyers of the year.

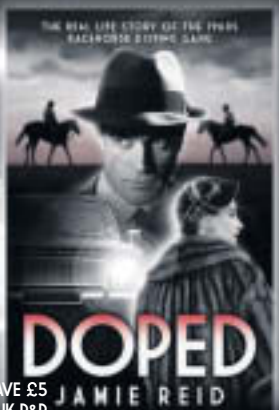
There won’t be so many there that I know now, but I will have known the grandparents of plenty. I’d better put in an appearance, just for old time’s sake.

‘Sales enabled me to witness some extraordinary events’

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