

‘The beat drops and the crowd goes nuts, gassed up on hormones’

ON LOCATION

On the hunt for love and forever optimistic, **Tom Kerr** pays a visit to Pontefract to check out its annual singles' night



EVERY year for the last half decade Pontefract racecourse has hosted an evening in mid-May it calls its singles' night. I've travelled up from London for it because a racecourse a few hundred miles away from home seemed a logical place to look for love. Some people try dating websites, others try speed dating, some haunt weddings: me, I try small Yorkshire racecourses.

Here's the hand I've been dealt: in a dimly lit room I'm not the worst specimen on Earth. I'm six foot one when I straighten out and a shade over 13 stone last time I checked in 2009. Teeth and hair and all that stuff. In the right sort of company – as in a room full of winos – I'd do all right. Who says I wouldn't?

My fancy for the night was tickled when I heard they'd be deploying something named the Traffic Light system here tonight. If you've seen the film The Social Network about the creation of Facebook you'll know that the catalyst for the site's development was the desire of nerdy, autistic spectrum-wandering founder Mark Zuckerberg to know whether girls in his college were single or in a relationship without having to actually talk to them. This works on the very same principle.

So some folk go wandering about the racecourse asking punters if they'll allow a coloured sticker indicating their relationship status to be slapped on their body so punters can home in on the most desperate like unstoppable love-Exocets. It's probably



the first time a racecourse has deployed stickers on course since Ascot's fashion police soured our relationship with visible identification markers last year and therefore a bold rehabilitation move by the Pontefract executive.

Staggering in from an implausibly arduous 15-minute walk from the station, I collar the evening's host, a local radio DJ named Dixie, and demand an explanation of what the red, amber and green stickers could possibly mean. "Right. If you've got a red sticker, it means you're not available," he says patiently. "Amber means 'I could be persuaded'. And green means 'buy me a drink and let's go to your place'." Dixie's wearing a red sticker, which, like an education minister sending his kids to private school, is a bloody typical vote of no-confidence in the very system he's responsible for.

I take a stroll before racing and notice there's a distinct lack of people wearing stickers, which is a roundabout way of saying no-one is. The veterinary surgeon has an orange armband but I don't think he means anything by it, at least not in the dating line. I adopt a faintly forlorn look and take a wander around the track.



Main picture: young ladies at Pontefract make their way to the Love Zone; (clockwise from top right) a green sticker means 'I'm available'; Tom has yet to hit the jackpot; the evening's host, DJ Dixie

‘If you’re after love or something simpler, the place to go is a grubby marquee called the Love Zone’

Pontefract racecourse, if you've never been, is a likeable old track, the sort that is clearly spoilt rotten by staff and owners who care. It's friendly. Everyone smiles a lot (not in a sexual way) and calls each other love or pet or duck. In the distance the endless traffic on the M62 forms a noiseless ribbon of light and in another direction the great cooling towers of Ferrybridge Power Station peek over the rise of a hill. The facilities have the solid, red-brick look of old football grounds and are set in a quiet spot of parkland that creates a pleasing contrast set against its industrial neighbours.

It's a nice place to go and a good crowd streams in until the track feels full but not crowded. I go and back some of the losers in the first, smoke a cigarette, lean on the rusty grandstand rails and muse on regrets.

After the first race and a spry whisky I spot a trio of sticker-wearing punters and sidle up all nonchalant-like. There are two girls – pretty, but not so pretty you'd need to take a cosh with you on a night out – wearing red, which is a bit grim. The fella they're with is sporting a green sticker, a grey three-piece suit and a befuddled expression.

Understandably, he looks startled when I tell him I noticed his sticker. "I'm writing an article for the paper," I say, by way of defusing the situation. He still looks startled but maybe that's his thing. His name is Alex and he's not optimistic. You and me both, buddy. I ask if he was ranking places to pull, where would racecourses fall? "Not near the top," he says honestly. We both watch as a green-sticker-sporting girl who looks like a ripe tangerine totters past advertising all the dexterity of a newborn fawn.

THE singles' night is racecourse-wide but by my useless estimate somewhere between 95 per cent and all this crowd are here for the racing. Still, you can be proper racing folk and single and if you're after love or something simpler the place to go is a small and slightly grubby marquee known as the Love Zone. On another day it's probably 'the cider tent' or 'the first-aider centre' but today it's the Love Zone, okay?

Up in the Love Zone DJ Dixie and the bar staff are doing their best to encourage the blossoming of affection with repartee and lager. It's only the third race of the evening when I spot the first couple of the night making a dash for the exit and set myself on a collision course. There's a bit of an age gap and I ask if they met tonight and if I can come to the wedding. "He's my dad!" the girl shrieks in mortification. Dad looks pretty pleased but offers a mollifying "and we're not into incest" as they stroll off arm in arm. Good luck to them.

Back in the Love Zone people are scattered about drinking heavily like at an unhappy wedding. Gaggles of girls hoot excitedly and at the other end of the marquee Pontefract's answer to One Direction are getting geed up by Dixie, who works the room with the skill of someone who has played worse gigs than this. It's as divided as a tween's birthday disco but with an age range of 16 to 66, or perhaps higher in

one or two terminal cases.

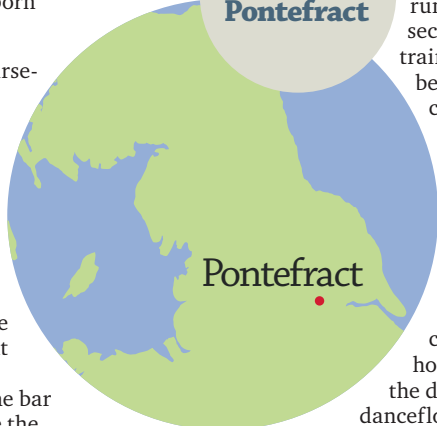
They say love takes time – actually Mariah Carey said that – and it's only when racing finishes and the gamblers and drinkers turn up that the party really kicks up in the Sex Gazebo or whatever it's called. It's really a very small marquee and rapidly descends into a scene of total chaos. A dozen men pack round the bar shouting orders at the poor lad running the show, probably on secondment from the owners and trainers bar or some genteel place, and he becomes so flustered he actually clutches his head in comical confusion at one point.

The tireless Dixie builds up to the high point of the evening, a Pontefract-does-Dirty Dancing finale featuring five new couples dancing to (I've Had) The Time Of My Life with a prize fund of £250 going to the winner. The beat drops and the crowd goes nuts: they're gassed up on hormones and gallons of Strongbow and the dancers spin and twirl about a dancefloor the size of a Roman-made coupee. "This is what the film would have looked like if everyone was drunk and they filmed it in a tent in Pontefract," shouts Dixie.

An older gentleman named Barry and a sweet young thing he'd probably like to take home narrowly snatch the victory from a young lad who swung his gal about like she was a burning shirt he couldn't shake off. Dixie begins to introduce the final challenge to see which of the duo snares the £250 top prize, but he's cut short by Barry.

"She told me she had a baby a few weeks ago," he says, pointing at his flushed-cheeked partner, "so she can keep the lot!" Utter bedlam breaks out. A triumphant Dixie heads back to the decks. "There's only one way to end a party," he shouts over the microphone. "Gangnam Style!" Well, it's a point of view, okay?

On location in . . . Pontefract



Pictures: JOHN GROSSICK



TONY MORRIS



SOME weeks ago I made some observations in this space on racing's place in popular culture over the years, noting that whereas it featured prominently in songs and stage shows of the music hall era, the sport now lacks recognition of that sort. Once the king of sports as well as the sport of kings, racing is now perceived in the wider world as an esoteric pursuit, of interest only to its devotees. Acknowledge that fact and you don't have to wonder why the BBC has removed racing from its schedules. Or why entertainers no longer make allusions to the sport.

In my article in March I gave examples of popular songs and sketches from the first half of the 20th century which made reference to racing, the performers including Dan Leno, Ben Albert and Lily Morris. I should also have mentioned the great Billy Bennett, for whom the turf was a favourite topic; one of his popular monologues was called The Bookmaker's Daughter.

I recalled having seen footage of the day in 1933 when Gordon Richards broke Fred Archer's record for the number of winners in a season, the clip being accompanied by a ditty whose lyrics contained the line: "Good old Gordon, how he can ride." My memory failed me over that, and I am grateful to reader James Walker, who unearthed the true version and kindly passed it on to me.

The song, actually called Well Done, Gordon, was performed by Bud Flanagan and Chesney Allen, which I really should have remembered, and it was resurrected almost half a century after its composition for a show called Underneath The Arches which was staged initially at Chichester in 1982 and subsequently had a run in the West End. The correct lyrics ran as follows:

Well done, Gordon, how you can ride!
You just win on any old horse . . .
Crowds shout 'hooray' and the bookmakers pay.
Well done, Gordon, well done.

Well done, Gordon, on ev'ry course
You just win on any old horse . . .
Crowds shout 'hooray' and the bookmakers pay.
Well done, Gordon, well done.

Wordsworth it ain't, but no matter. It was an affectionate tribute to a great jockey by two headline entertainers who were themselves enthusiastic racegoers and had many friends on the turf. Bud and Chesney actually roped Gordon in for a cameo role in their 1945 film, Dreaming.

The snatch of film over which the song was originally performed could have been from either of two that were first shown in cinemas on November 23, 1933, one called simply Gordon Richards, the other A Day in the Life of Gordon Richards.

You will gather that all the above –

I say, I say. Have you heard the one about racing?

the songs, the sketches, the monologues and the films – came from an era very different to our own. Racing then seemed to impact on the lives of the entire nation, everyone was au fait with the game and recognised its characters.

Can you imagine two separate film companies simultaneously putting out a feature for general release in cinemas on one of today's leading jockeys? No, nor can I. The fact is that while we, the committed, have the deepest admiration for such as Richard Hughes and Ryan Moore, the proverbial man on the Clapham omnibus may not have heard of either.

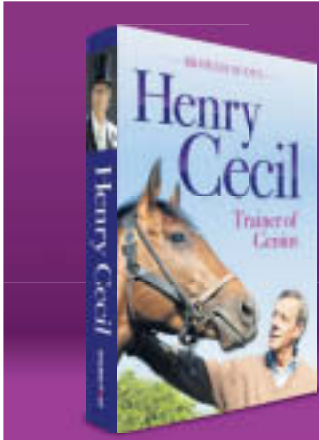
IN THE first half of the 20th century every adult in the country would have known who Steve Donoghue and Gordon Richards were. In the second half of the century everyone knew who Lester Piggott was. But Hughes and Moore aren't known – and that's not because they aren't highly gifted practitioners of their craft; they are. It's because a majority of two adult generations have been brought up without familiarity with the horse, and because racing is seen as an esoteric pursuit that doesn't present the opportunities for participation that a ball, a bat or a bike provide. Racing long since ceased to feature as an element of popular culture and is easily ignored by the masses.

But of course, the masses can't ignore it when it reaches the front pages of the papers and receives prominence in radio and TV news bulletins. In years gone by a great horse sometimes managed that, but now it happens when there's scandal to report, and racing has suffered more than its fair share in recent years, never worse than at present.

Not so long ago a taxi driver taking me to the Rowley Mile volunteered the information that he had spent all his life – 50 odd years, I guessed – in Newmarket, but had never once set foot on the racecourse.

"Racing's not for everyone," I ventured, which brought the swift retort, more as an assertion than a question: "Well, it's all bent, isn't it?"

‘One of his popular monologues was The Bookmaker’s Daughter’



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