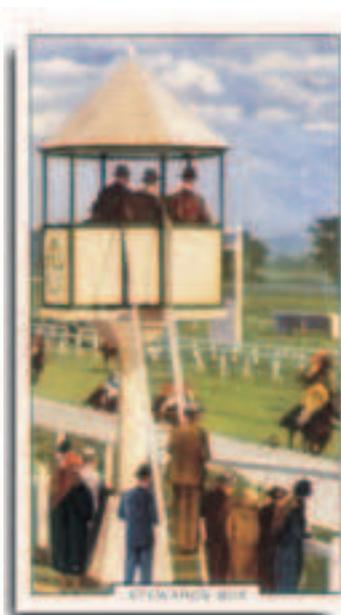
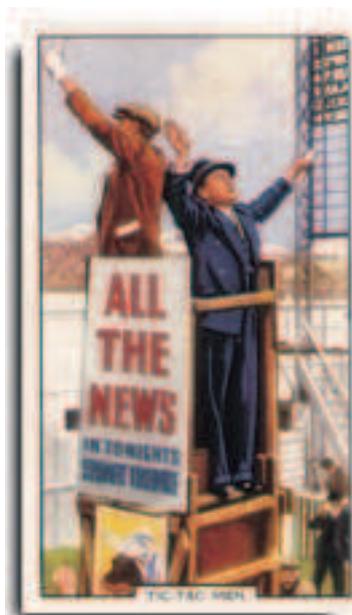


STUDIES IN  
POPULAR  
CULTURE

# Horseracing and the British

1919–1939

MIKE HUGGINS



Horseracing  
and the British  
1919–39



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Horseracing  
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1919–39

**MIKE HUGGINS**

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# STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

There has in recent years been an explosion of interest in culture and cultural studies. The impetus has come from two directions and out of two different traditions. On the one hand, cultural history has grown out of social history to become a distinct and identifiable school of historical investigation. On the other hand, cultural studies has grown out of English literature and has concerned itself to a large extent with contemporary issues. Nevertheless, there is a shared project, its aim, to elucidate the meanings and values implicit and explicit in the art, literature, learning, institutions and everyday behaviour within a given society. Both the cultural historian and the cultural studies scholar seek to explore the ways in which a culture is imagined, represented and received, how it interacts with social processes, how it contributes to individual and collective identities and world views, to stability and change, to social, political and economic activities and programmes. This series aims to provide an arena for the cross-fertilisation of the discipline, so that the work of the cultural historian can take advantage of the most useful and illuminating of the theoretical developments and the cultural studies scholars can extend the purely historical underpinnings of their investigations. The ultimate objective of the series is to provide a range of books which will explain in a readable and accessible way where we are now socially and culturally and how we got to where we are. This should enable people to be better informed, promote an interdisciplinary approach to cultural issues and encourage deeper thought about the issues, attitudes and institutions of popular culture.

*Jeffrey Richards*



To Jeff Richards, John Walton, Jeff Hill and Jack Williams,  
for kindly introducing me to the fascinating cultural world of  
interwar leisure and sport



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# General editor's foreword

Traditionally known as 'the sport of kings' – and famously patronised by the House of Windsor, horseracing was also the people's sport and that long before football acquired the appellation. In this welcome follow-up to his award-winning *Flat racing and British society 1790–1914*, Mike Huggins explores the paradoxes thrown up by that conjunction of classes in the hitherto under-researched interwar period.

Drawing on an impressively wide array of primary and secondary sources, he summons up a vivid and vibrant world of owners and breeders, jockeys and trainers, bookies and tipsters, on-course and off-course gamblers, racegoers and race gangs. It was a world in which the Grand National, the St Leger and the Derby were major national events; Aintree, Epsom, Ascot and Goodwood familiar places in the imaginative geography of the populace; and owners like the Aga Khan, Lord Derby and Tom Walls, jockeys like Steve Donoghue and Gordon Richards and race-track characters like Prince Monolulu, legends in their own lifetimes.

But along with his richly detailed narrative, Mike Huggins explores every aspect of his subject. He analyses and evaluates the structure and nature of the racing industry. He uncovers all the nuances of class and gender integral to the sport. He assesses the role of the mass media in promoting horseracing, with cinema and broadcasting joining the previously dominant fields of journalism and popular fiction. He explores the appeal of betting and measures the impact of the anti-betting campaigners. His consistently subtle and sensitive analysis reveals a sport which at the same time mirrored the structures and snobberies of a class society and helped to promote cross-class harmony and a sense of national unity. His book constitutes a major advance in our understanding of the role of sport in British society.

*Jeffrey Richards*



# Preface

The interwar period is now emerging as the new era for investigation by sports and leisure historians. My earlier interest has been in Victorian and Edwardian leisure, but the high quality of much recent work has prompted me to move tentatively forward chronologically. I have long been an admirer of the work of Ross McKibbin, and his comments on racing, with which I sometimes disagreed strongly, first gave me the impetus to write this book. It depends heavily on source material gathered in the British Library, Newmarket Library, York Racecourse Museum and Cambridge University Library, although library staff at Newcastle, York, Leicester and Liverpool also deserve acknowledgement. So do the many county archivists and racecourses whose racing material I consulted, although space precludes naming them individually. Martin Johnes, Wray Vamplew, Jack Williams and Tim Cox read and helpfully commented on earlier drafts.

In due course I hope to produce a cultural analysis of the place of sport in British society between the wars. This book is a first foray into that exciting field.



# Price conversion index

<b>Year</b>	<b>Index</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Index</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Index</b>
1918	100.0	1926	92.3	1934	79.1
1919	109.6	1927	90.3	1935	79.6
1920	126.5	1928	90.3	1936	80.6
1921	115.8	1929	89.3	1937	83.2
1922	99.5	1930	86.7	1938	84.2
1923	93.9	1931	83.2	1939	87.2
1924	92.9	1932	81.1		
1925	93.4	1933	79.1	2001	3206.1

This index is provided to help readers convert spending between the wars to modern equivalents. To ascertain this for any year compared to (say) 2001, the index for 2001 (i.e. 3206.1) should be divided by the index for the year in question. So to find out how much £1 in 1920 was worth in the year 2001 you would divide 3206.1 (the index for 2001) by 126.5 (the index for 1920), giving the answer £25.34. (All long-term price indices should be treated with caution because the nature of goods purchased has changed over time.)



# Introduction

Horseracing has a powerful claim to be Britain's leading interwar sport. Cricket had its adherents; indeed, Jack Williams, the historian of interwar cricket, shows that its supporters presented it as the English 'national game'.<sup>1</sup> But British racegoers claimed that racing was 'our real national sport'.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of active *participation*, cricket was certainly superior with somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 playing each week in the early 1930s, although football had even more participants, with 37,000 clubs affiliated to the Football Association by 1937, and many others unaffiliated. In terms of *spectatorship*, First Division soccer attracted average crowds of over 30,000 in 1938–39, but cricket only got large crowds for test matches and a few important county matches, and these probably never exceeded 50,000 in a single day. Such figures were dwarfed by the crowds attracted to racing's 'national' events: the Grand National, the Derby, 'Royal' Ascot and the Doncaster St Leger. Even small race-meetings got higher crowds than most country cricket games. If a third criterion, interest in betting on the sport, was included, horseracing was supreme, although football pools and greyhound racing were also important. It was racing, not cricket or soccer, which really sold newspapers across Britain. Widespread public interest in results, longer traditions, its year-round season and largest crowds, all support racing's claims as Britain's leading national sport.

Yet Ross McKibbin's critically well-received book on classes and cultures in England between 1918 and 1951 marginalised racing, arguing that:

Horseracing was a national sport only by a somewhat skewed definition of 'national'. What made it 'national' was popular betting which linked a mass of working-class betters to a sport which was, in fact, aristocratic-plutocratic. Without betting it would have been no more national than 12-metre yachting or deer hunting... many had little interest in horses or horseracing as such. The middle class as a whole and the sober, serious working class were even more indifferent, even hostile.<sup>3</sup>