

TAYLORSTOWN POINT-TO-POINT

BY EDWIN BRYSON



Runners crossing the dreaded ditch at Wylie's Hill c. 1956

An account of a race in 1752 seems to be the first recorded in this part of the world. Two young men called Blake and O'Callaghan raced over natural country from Buttevant Church to St. Leger Church in Doneraile, Co Cork. It was a distance of about four and a half miles, take your own line. They were running from steeple to steeple and that is how 'steeple-chasing' was named. Later, some hunts organizing a race couldn't find two suitable steeples so they just ran from one point to another, so 'point-to-pointing' began.

In the 1931 season Captain Close, the Master of the Newry Harriers, had the idea that it would be a bit of fun to run races here. So the search began for somewhere to run them and, probably with the aid of Harry Ferris, a course was obtained at Mullaghglass in 1932 on land belonging to James Best, an uncle of Harry's. That was on the top of the hill in Mullaghglass townland. I'm not sure exactly where they ran, because there's nobody about who can remember, but it did cross and re-cross the Latt Road. It was run under Irish National Hunt rules, the Irish National Hunt Steeplechase Committee having been formed a bit before this. It had to be a

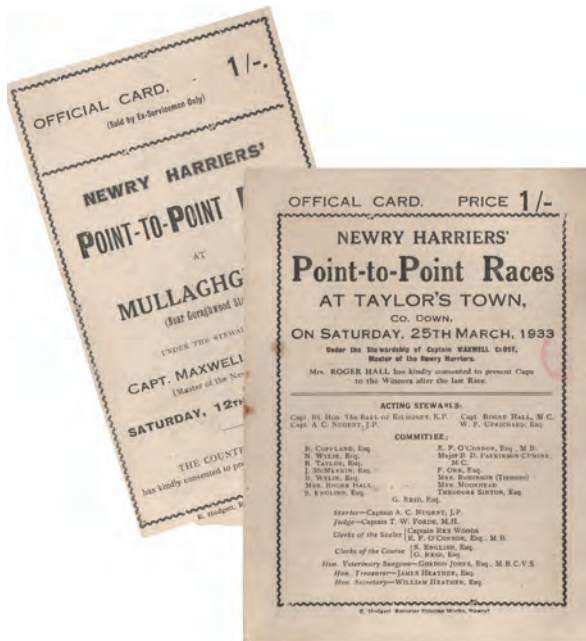
members' race when the point-to-point started, run for hunt members and you had to have a hunter's certificate and be a subscriber of at least three pounds to a hunt. The horse had to be fairly hunted for at least six days. That was the rule. So the first Newry Hunt point-to-point took place at Mullaghglass.

That first year there were fifty four entries, so racing must have been taking place somewhere. They raced for the *Newry Hunt Cup*, then the *Mullaghglass Cup*, *Eighteen Well-Wisher's Cup* (who were members of the Nelson Masonic Lodge in Newry, Lodge 18.) They presented a cup as the Master and others were members of that lodge. Interestingly, a Dr. G.F. Gillespie had a horse entered that year. His son J.F. Gillespie, born in 1932, a member of the Turf Club, is still very much involved in racing.

There was a train service to Goraghwood and it was advertised that it was a quarter of a mile to the course. If you know where Goraghwood station is, that was a fair walk, and all up a very steep hill. However, it was organized that horses would be boxed free to all the

stations, so you walked your horse up the hill. If he was fit to walk back down again, you put him on the train and off you went to Armagh, Downpatrick, Portadown, Newcastle, Dundalk, Dublin etc.

again.” So the search was on for another course and we came to Taylorstown in 1933.



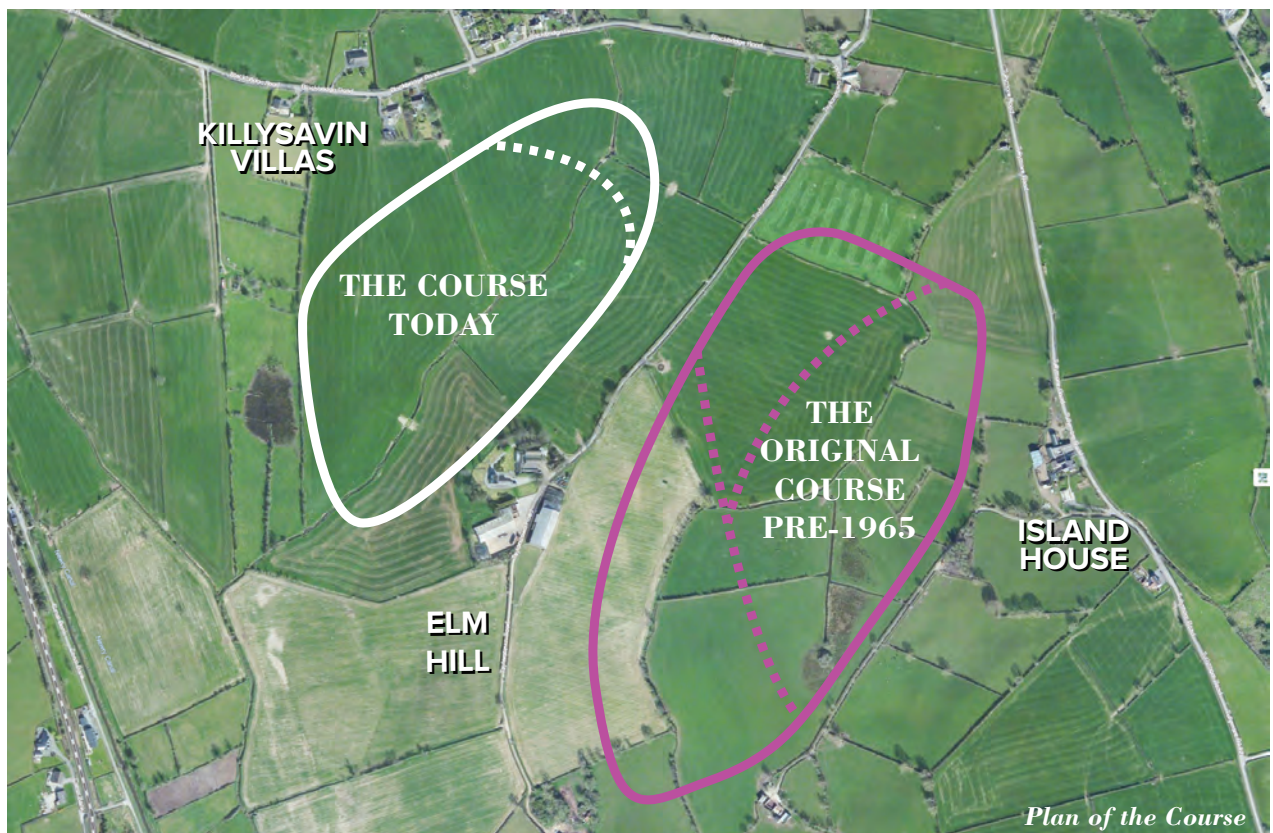
Taylorstown is in the townland of Tollymore and was called Taylorstown because a family called Taylor lived there. I imagine the redoubtable Sam English had something to do with influencing the selection of the site. Brysons might have been involved too. A big long course was organized and mapped out over the lands of Noel Wylie, Robert Copeland, James McMahon, Robert Taylor, Bobby Wylie and Fred Copeland. Race cards in 1933 cost a shilling.

There were five races that year. The first was a *Members' Race*. There were eleven entries and they all carried thirteen stones, which was quite a weight. I imagine that was because they were all hunting men and couldn't do eleven and a half stones. There was a race for cobs – a half-bred small horse, not too big. They only carried ten stone seven but they wouldn't have been very fast. The *Open Race* had nineteen entries and the *Farmers' Race* had eighteen; the *Adjacent Hunts' Race* had twelve entries from the Louth and Dundalk Harriers, the Iveaghs, Tynan and Armagh, Richhill Harriers, East Downs' and a while later, Serving Officers.

The first race cards, Mullaghglass Point-to-Point and Taylorstown race cards costing 1/- each.

The *Members' Race* included horses owned by Fred Orr, Billy Heather, T.F. O'Connor, Captain Close, Mrs. Moorehead and Sam Woods. Mrs. Moorehead was a great hunt member and her daughter was to take over as point-to-point secretary. This time there was a train service to Poyntzpass with all horses free. I presume they walked from the station to the racecourse, the punters did as well.

Now when James Best discovered that day that there were bookmakers at the course he wasn't very happy about the betting so he said "We're not having this





Taylorstown Races – the start of the four-mile race at the bottom of the Island Hill. There are 47 bookmakers' booths in the photo! The man in the lead is Sam English, then George Bryson, Jim Bryson and three or four ladies. Several ladies rode in those days; Mrs. Corbett, a Miss Merrick, Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Cowdy.

Taylorstown was settled and the next year's entries went up to 84. All the same races again and owners' names including Hale, Cowdy, Murdock, Orr, Carruth and Willis – names still about. Now 1934. Edward Curran, a solicitor in Newry, presented another cup, *The Edward Curran Memorial Cup*.

In 1935 the race meeting moved to a Wednesday because that was half-day in Newry. There was a new cup, *Hunter Moore Memorial Cup*. All these cups are still on the go. Hunter Moore was a business man in Newry and also a member of that famous 18 Masonic Lodge. The *Hunt Race* was all local people, and won by J.J. Cowdy, on a horse called *Keepsake* ridden by the owner. Sam English was second. Albert Uprichard's father's horse was ridden by a Miss Ferguson from Banbridge. R. J. Hale had a horse *Glenkirk* and a horse called *Wellington*. Some might remember that *Wellington* was a horse well-talked about, that the Brysons owned. He belonged to Willie Bryson and was ridden that day by my uncle Jim Bryson. My father, George Bryson, was in the race as well but he fell off at the second fence, so that was the end of that!

Frankie Fitzsimmons, 'F. Fitzsimmons' as he was known, first appeared – a famous jockey who went on for a long time. In 1936 the race was won by J.J. Cowdy again. Sam English was on a horse called *Morna*. *Morna* was the dam of the famous *Prince Hal*, that he hunted and point-to-pointed. *Morna* bred *Killysavan*, her third foal.

All Sam's horses were given local names except *Morna*. *Killysavan* was eventually bought by Miss Pat Smythe, a world-famous show jumper and re-named *Prince Hal*. There was good coverage of the point-to-point in the press.

Brothers Jim and George Bryson had great rivalry over the years. In 1940 Jim was second. Other jockeys then were Bambers, Fitzsimmons, Cowdys, Woods, Mr. and Mrs. John Corbett, Brian McNabb. These names keep coming back. Phil McCartan and W. E. Rooney first appeared that year.



1945 George Bryson winning on *Black Knight*. George is looking round to see if anyone else is coming!

In 1945 George won on *Black Knight*, a famous horse of Eric Fletcher's. Jim was second on a horse of R. J. Hale's

called *Gypsy* and Sam English rode a horse then for a Miss A. E. Hall. Sam had a lady friend at that time. He used to take her round all the dances. I'm not sure if that was Miss Hall or not. It didn't come to much because he finished up a bachelor and maybe he was better off. I don't know. Other riders that day were Peter McParland and Phil McCartan. The Point-to-Point was a very sociable day. In 1946 George was jockeyed-off *Black Knight* by Eric because Jim rode him and won. *Tullymore* was second for Sam.

Something I can't find an answer to – these men all started off in 1937 wearing racing-colours yet, in these later photos, in the '40s they have all reverted to hunting costumes. I don't know why. Maybe it came out as a rule.

The entry fee in 1946 was £1.0.0 so £47.0.0 was lifted for entry fees. 1800 race cards were printed. Now they print 400 and there are 50 left. There were 240 cars in 1946, ten shillings each and for farmers it was 2/6. Total income was £351.2.0., expenses £148.15.4d.; £23.6.8 for course work; loud-speaker for hire was £16 and printing 1800 race cards cost £12.15. Profit that year was £210.6.8. They had very efficient secretaries in those days! Not a penny went astray.

In 1946/47 race cards were 2 shillings. It wasn't like now where everybody comes and has it on their app. They don't want to pay for a race card. There was no racing during the war.



No chin-straps in those days! No body-protectors!

Out you went as you were. I have a photo of my father coming up to the finish and he's beating his horse with his hat. You would certainly be warned off if you were doing that now.

In 1947 Major Close died. His duties as Master were taken on by his wife, Alexandra Close and she was the longest-serving Master of the Hunt. She carried on there for thirty eight years.

In 1949 my father was riding a mare called *Iveagh*. It must have been one of his favourites because he always talked about it. He won in 1949 on *Iveagh*. Harry Ferris

was second on *Jockey's Brae* and Jack Ferris was third on *Acton Lad*. They didn't travel far for names in those days!

Cars were £1 then and farmers were charged 5 shillings. There were only three runners in that race, so 1st, 2nd and 3rd. *Golden Lady* appeared, a famous horse; Jim Bryson rode her that day. In 1950 the course was shortened and altered.

I don't know what the reason was but it was quite a steep hill at the start; the car park was moved and the course finish was away at the far side, just below Island House.

In 1951, the races reverted to a Saturday. There were only 31 entries; things weren't going so well then. Among the jockeys – Jim Bryson again rode a few; Michael Maguire was a name that came into hunt racing. He won the Hunt race and dominated for a few years. Jimmy Coburn was second and Jim Bryson third. Bambers were riding; Gillespies still had horses there. That was the first year I could see they had a bar. The bar profit was £12.12.0. A bottle of stout was only 2d so there was quite a lot of stout drunk!

Other point-to-point meetings listed on the race card that year included the Seskinore Harriers in Strabane, now no longer going. Leslie Griffiths had come down from Belfast, a land-valuer and he was Clerk of the course that year. A piece in the paper says that in 1952 there was "a new, improved course for Taylorstown". I have no idea what the improvements were, except maybe there was no ploughed land and maybe they fixed the fences up a bit. They were still running over the second course. There were no aprons on the fences, just a fence stuck in the hedge or a bit of bush thrown up against the hedge. There might have been a guard-rail but certainly no toe-boards in those days.



George Bryson, Mick Gribben and Eric Fletcher

In 1954 W. E. Fletcher entered a lot of horses. He was a great supporter of Taylorstown, and other places, for many years. Bill Buller rode that year in the hunt race which was won by Michael Maguire again; George

Bryson was second and Jim Bryson third on *Huntsman*. Things were going a bit rocky then because in 1956 there were only eighteen runners, but the profit for some reason was £208.16.5. Maybe they increased the price of stout!

W. E. Fletcher ran a horse that year called *LMP*. I don't know what it stood for and there was always a great debate about it. There used to be a gathering in Island House after the Point-to-Point. There were a lot of our relations down from Co. Antrim and a lot of hangers-on and reprobates. They didn't see much racing but I remember asking John Copeland "What does *LMP* stand for?" I was only a wee lad in short trousers. He said "lamp post." There were just eighteen runners and in those days you were getting what they called 'walkovers', when there was only one horse in it. You had to saddle him up, put on your silks, get weighed out and go and gallop past the post, collect your cup and your money. Luckily that didn't last.



1957 was a very lucky year for one lady at least. Barbara Falloon (Above) was, as far as I can gather, the first lady to win the Hunt Race at Taylorstown. Here she is on the famous horse, *Huntsman*. It was a good year for Barbara because she got married to Jim Bryson. Sam English became the official announcer and he carried on for a number of years, travelling round the point-to-points.

In 1958 the course was altered again. They took out the outer loop which meant that the race finished in front of the car park which was a lot easier to see. The competition between the Bryson brothers was always fierce. George was riding a horse called *Frank III* for Harry Ferris that year and Jim was riding *Steel of War* for James Grey; Tim Sinton was now on the point-to-point circuit and rode in that race, as did Tessa White of Tandragee and Mona Falloon, Barbara's sister, on *Huntsman*.

This race caused great debate for many years because the judge awarded a dead heat. Well, I can tell you categorically that my father won." *I was there and I remember it*". Those two men argued about it for years. Every time they went out to ride it was, "There'll be no dead heat today, boy!" It's recorded on the Hunter Moore Cup that it was a dead heat, which was fine.



George Bryson and Jim Bryson. Brothers and fierce rivals.

In 1959 the committee discovered that they could earn money by selling advertising in the race card and so the first advertisements appeared. White's Porridge Oats, Armaghdown Creamery, John Best & Son, Southdown Auctions among others took ads.

In 1959 the ditches were filled in. There was a ditch at the bottom of the hill out of Noel Wylie's field into Copeland's. They just ran down the hill, there was a white pole in the ground and all of a sudden there was a big ditch into the field below. There were a lot of fallers at it apparently and they decided to fill it in. That probably didn't go down too well with John McSherry because he had spent a long time building that bank up. There was a ditch in front of the last fence out of the Copeland's land into the last field, the car park field. When I say a ditch, it was a flowing river. This had been common enough on a lot of courses and on the Taylorstown course for many years but as a jockey, as you thought about coming to the last fence on a tired horse and you were up against it and there was a big open river, it wasn't very nice. It was bridged over and that was a good job.

W.E. Rooney, 'Willie' as he was affectionately known, a famous man from England in the 1930s, came to Buttevant, Co Cork where racing had started. He later came north, still very involved in horses, got married and eventually moved to Ballycraigy. He was a regular at Taylorstown in the '40s, '50s and '60s and rode for many owners. He was a popular rider because he nearly always won. He rode over one thousand winners and over four hundred point-to-point winners, a record that stood for a long time. It was eventually beaten by Enda Bolger, a trainer who had also ridden at Taylorstown. Remarkably, Derek O'Connor and Jamie Codd also passed that figure recently. Jamie Codd passed the eight

hundred-winner figure. It isn't a surprise really because the season now runs from September. It used to be from the end of January to April but the Turf Club decided that too many horses were running and so they extended the season from September right through. It means that you could ride in Co. Antrim on Saturday and Cork on Sunday.

Willie Rooney and W. E. Fletcher were regulars at Taylorstown and of course Ann, Jerry and Rosemary Rooney all followed in their father's footsteps; top jockeys, all winning many races. Ann was the first lady to win the Irish Grand National on *Bentham Boy*, who previously ran at Taylorstown.

On one occasion, all four of them were riding in a race. There were twenty nine runners. That was before divides came in. Now you can only run twenty, probably for safety reasons. They were all running in the one race and one of them asked their father "What do we do here?" He said "Everybody for themselves!" I have no record of who won that day.

Willie Rooney went on to found the *Mount Top Stud* and had a lot of good stallions there, including *Cantab* and *Bowling Pin*. Eventually Ann's daughter Gaye also started point-to-point riding, so there were three generations of the Rooney family in point-to-pointing.

In 1962 Ann won again on *Liberetta* and second was *Mintorette*, belonging to my father, ridden by Billy Patton. *Mintorette* was trained by George Dunwoody.

Point-to-pointing was a bit unique. If you put a couple of quid on a horse, for the period when that race is going on, you actually think you own that horse. You're willing it to win; you think you'll have a share in it and hoping it will win; or if you back something else, you're hoping it will not win. It's a unique sort of a sport that you can actually share in the whole joy of the occasion as well as the riders, owners and trainers.

In 1963 Mrs. Watson won The Hunt Race on her brother, Tim Sinton's horse, my father was second on a horse he rode for Billy Hollywood of Newry, Tim Sinton was third. My father was cross that day. He didn't like being beaten by Mrs. Watson, I can tell you.

Ann Ferris, Bill Buller and a famous character called Johnny Watts were riding. Johnny came from Belfast, started to hunt with the Newry Harriers. He wore a flat bowler and sat on the back of the saddle all day and knocked about, but he always got there. His heart got him across. He rode good horses. Whenever he said he was running the point-to-point everybody was fascinated to see how Johnny was going to sit up forward and perform, but not a bit of him. Johnny just slapped about but he got round and he finished. Dessie Osbourne, another good jockey, was riding that day as was Alec Murdoch in the famous black and gold colours.

In 1964 my father won on *The Burglar* and Frank

Kernan was second on *Attaboys*. Roddy Bamber came onto the scene. The main men were Roddy, Willy Rooney and Frankie Fitzsimmons while Ann Rooney Ferris of course was the main lady. Something I didn't know until recently! In 1965, my big sister Hilda won the race on a horse called *Forkhill* (actually called *Merryman* but his racing name was *Forkhill*) and guess what she did that day? She beat Ann Rooney/ Ferris! I don't know what Ann was riding but it was too slow!



George Bryson and Sam English

In 1966 George Dunwoody rode at Taylorstown. He had come from England as well. That was Richard Dunwoody's father and he trained here. He trained *Mintorette* for my father. It was George Dunwoody who got my father's colours registered. Recently I signed them over to my nephew, George Bryson's grandson, Stephen Crawford.

There were three elegant ladies from Lurgan, the Shanes sisters, Rosalind, Bunny and Joan. They rode a lot of horses, mostly for their father who was a doctor in Lurgan, but they also rode a few outside rides as well. Surprisingly, Willy Rooney was riding for W .E. Fletcher then. That didn't last very long because they were two forthright men and eventually fell out! Raymond Nicholson was riding, as were Raymond Martin and John Kidd.

I won in 1968 on *Forkhill*, beating Lyn Morton and Tim Sinton. Rosemary Rooney won that day on her father's horse *Rosemary's Pet*. She also rode a second.

In 1970 the winner was *Donnarece* ridden by Gilbert Fletcher, Rex's son. Second was Lyn Morton again. I was third in that and Frankie Fitzsimons and Frankie Junior rode in the same race.

Sometime in the 1960s my father was up at the point-to-point course on a Saturday morning just putting the finishing touches to it with Edith, my other sister, that's Mrs. Crawford. Before he had left, the bookmakers had arrived and started to set up but they didn't set up in the right place so my father instructed them to move. These were mostly boys from Belfast and they weren't going to be told what to do. So after a couple of attempts to get them to move, the bookies got their way because they

thumped my father and knocked him down. The only person in the field apart from the bookies was my sister who wasn't very old and she didn't know what to do. Eventually she got him gathered up, took him down to Noel Wylie's and told Noel what had happened. Noel hit the roof: "*We can't have that! There'll be no race, it's all off. We can't have those boys in my field!*" So my father had a bit of trouble telling him that the races had to run.

In 1973 Gilbert Fletcher won again.

1974 was a good year too because John McNeill won the hunt race; Don Ferris was second and another unlikely suspect, Sean O'Brien from Lissummon was hunting with us at the time and decided he would ride his horse *Guinea Star* but he fell off at some stage and was told he jumped the hedge instead of the fence. Sean was going to get his money's worth so he ran him again in the sixth race though he got someone else to ride him!

Teddy Matthews rode that year as well, and Robert and Mayne Kidd of the famed Loughbrickland family.

I mentioned Eric, 'W. E.' Fletcher, He was a local vet, another great character, a keen racing man and a great supporter of Taylorstown. It was said of Eric that he could have diagnosed your animal's problem coming down the lane! He never stopped talking and surrounded himself with influential people including Judge Begley, Sergeant McCarroll, the local sergeant in Newry, Jack Crory the local draper and Billy Heather. On one occasion Sergeant McConnell managed to rig up a car that ran on diesel for Eric (there was no duty on diesel in those days). Eric frequently gave the Sergeant a lift to the races. One day, Eric called at the house to take the Sergeant to the races and Mrs. McCarroll wasn't a bit pleased. She said, "*If you go to the races today, I'll not be here when you get back!*" So he just walked forward, shook her by the hand and said, "*Bye Bye Dora!*"

1975 was a good year for Eric because he had a horse called *Southern Quest* in the Grand National, ridden by Uel Shields from Dromore. We were all gathered round the television watching the race. The horse ran really well and was in the lead at the second-last fence; then *L'Escargot* and *Red Rum* passed him. *L'Escargot* won that year and *Red Rum* was second. *Southern Quest* finished seventh which was very good, but if you had heard Eric talking about the race for about the next six months, it was very bad luck that he was seventh. He got a bit of mileage out of it anyway.

That same year was the last year, because of a rule change, that there was any necessity to run a members' race. Alfred Buller's horse *Yorick* won, John McNeill was second. Jackie McLarnon was in third. I had a ride on *Apollo*, not in the first three. Teddy Matthews was riding. Terry Smith joined the official veterinary panel that year to be joined the next year, 1976, by his partner Ian Young.

In 1977 the point-to-point was cancelled in March for some reason. It went ahead an evening in April. I was on

a horse called *Tom's Lad*. The car park field was moved down the road to the next field because the usual field was in potatoes. The race was run over the potato ground. I remember point-to-points going on over ploughed land and all sorts of things. It wouldn't be allowed now.

Things started to look up a bit in 1979. There were one hundred and seventy three entries. The *Cantab Maiden Stakes* had fifty two entries. It was run for some reason on the afternoon of Thursday 19th April. The clerk of the scales was Chris Cowdy, son of the Banbridge family, and his assistant was the one and only Eddie Haughey, Lord Ballyedmond, who sponsored the *Norbroke Chase* that year.

In 1980 W. E. Fletcher was still running horses; Tom, his son, was riding. Other jockeys included Liam Lennon from Newry, a famous jockey who rode a lot of good winners; Robert Steele and Robert Patton, son of Willie Patton.

In 1984 there were thirty eight advertisements in the race card. I don't remember much about the point-to-point but Ann Ferris rode *Bentham Boy* to win the Irish Grand National. That horse had previously run at Taylorstown, which just shows that point-to-pointing was a good grounding for horses that were going to go on to bigger things. In fact nine out of the last thirteen Cheltenham Gold Cup winners were former Irish point-to-pointers.

1985 was the last year of the course on that side of the road. The first year they just moved across the road to this inner circle. That was all run on the lands of Harry Thompson. They ran there for a few years. Owners included Wilson Dennison, George and Jimmy Wilson and Pattons. James Jenkins was riding that year.

James Jenkins wore a pair of big thick glasses. His father rode before him and he wore a pair of even thicker glasses. One day the stewards called him up and said "*You shouldn't be wearing these glasses when you're point-to-pointing. It could be dangerous.*" James Jenkins said, "*Dangerous? Dangerous to who?*" "*Dangerous to you if you fall off.*" He said: "*Well it would be a lot more dangerous to other riders if I didn't have them on!*"

1980s A lot of the jockeys who rode through the '80s went on to be successful trainers. For instance Tony Martin, Enda Bolger, Paddy Graffin, and Gordon Elliott who trained *Silver Birch* to win the Grand National in 2007.

Maynard Sinton took over as secretary from his father Tim. *Ballyholland* won the Galway Plate. There were four new cups: the *Harry Ferris Memorial Cup*, the *Lesley Griffiths Cup*, the *Edward Fitzpatrick Cup* and the *Luke McKee Memorial Cup*.

There were eleven races in 2007 and local rider Mark O'Hare won six of them. Two years previously he had

won the Foxhunters' at Cheltenham on a horse called *Another Run*.

Willie Patton's grandson John Bright was riding then.

In 1994 the course was lengthened onto Griffith Wylie's land and that remains the course today. In 2004 the famous *Tammy's Hill*, a regular at Taylorstown won the Foxhunters' at Cheltenham with James Smyth riding him. A great feat.

We obtained the *Linda Hughes Memorial Cup* that year too. Riders that year – Jason McKeown, Noel McParland, Patrick Kearney, Daniel Fitzsimmons. Ben Crawford (my nephew, George Bryson's grandson,) rode that year making it three generations who have ridden and won at Taylorstown. I'm very proud of it and I'm sure my father would have been proud of that as well.

In case anybody backed *The Last Samurai* last year at the Grand National, -he was 2nd. – he had won his first point-to-point at Taylorstown in 2013.

The point-to-point would now be making a profit of £5000 - £6000 from income of £17000 with expenses of about nine thousand. Looking back, £200 profit in the forties would have bought two acres of ground and now £6000 would buy you half a garden. It's now £5 a head to get in and farmers are still free. It's a very popular course; horses come from Cork, Kildare, Westmeath and all over the country, and it's still a great social day out as well as being very good for the local economy. Farmers supply oats, straw, hay; they need veterinary surgeons, blacksmiths, feed merchants, tack suppliers and as Dr. Fitz Gillespie pointed out, it's been very good for the medical profession as well!

The point-to-point has been a great sport because it doesn't care about gender, class or creed. It doesn't matter who you are, everybody gets on. Men ride against ladies and it all works wonderfully well.

This year's point to point was the eighty sixth running of the races at The Taylorstown.6

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