

Standside and the Racecourse: part 2

You may have read “Standside”, my little article on the popular racecourse sited on Fairfield Common.

However, Ian White and my friend Alan Roberts have kindly provided more material, taking our understanding of the racecourse to a whole new level.

I always felt that the track was oval, basically following the line of the ninth fairway and then returning parallel to the A6. This is probably being a fan of the film Ben Hur

However, the maps you can see here tell a different story.



The circular track is clearly marked on this OS map from around 1840.

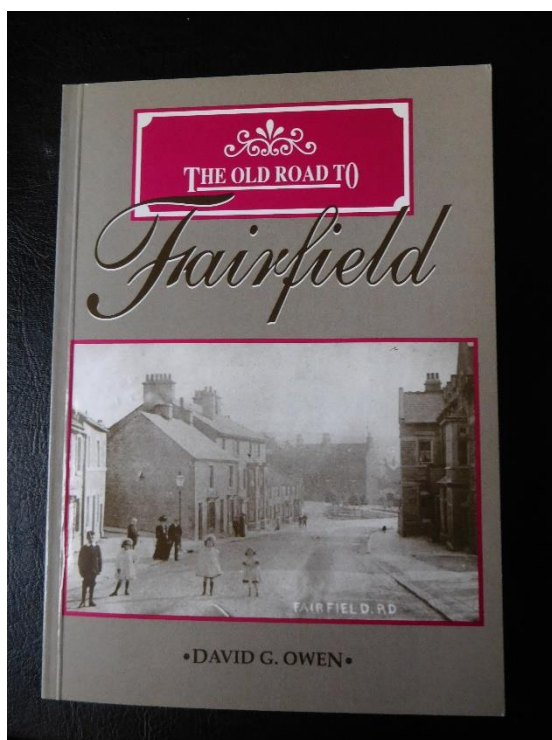


On this map, Ian has skilfully superimposed the route onto a modern map, identifying several significant buildings.

The Fairfield Halt was a station next to the racecourse site. This picture is from 1930. The railway station was not built until after the racecourse officially closed, so it is suspected that it was used for occasional informal meetings and local travellers needing a Fairfield train service.



This was taken from a book by David Owen (1996) The Old Road to Fairfield, kindly loaned by Alan Roberts.



There are several sections in this book relevant to the racecourse.

1. The course was one mile long and circular.
2. There was no admission charge as it was then “gated fields”, eventually becoming common land. *[Note: this is an issue worth exploring in a future article].*
3. The meetings were held over two days: The Devonshire Arms was a pub, hotel and had its own stables.
4. On Wednesday 25 July 1821, the Duke of Devonshire offered 50 guineas prize money for maiden horses of all ages. This was run in two heats.
5. Other prizes were offered for the North High Peak Yeomanry and the Cavalry Cup.

Bogtrotter

An Irishman called George Platel had a bay gelding named *Bogtrotter* which won the 10 guinea sweep. The visiting Irish racegoers celebrated by getting patriotically drunk. When the locals saw this the local prize-fighter George Slack attacked the Irish hero Paddy Halton.

There was a riot on the common. Stockport police were called.

The following day, George and Paddy met in single combat, with the latter emerging victorious.

6. Lomax’s Correct List (1827) from Stockport suggests that all the dogs wandering on the common were to be destroyed.

[Note: were there really that many dogs???]

7. By 1830, the races were a sideshow, with a range of other sports on offer: cock fighting, boxing matches and gambling.
8. By 1840, the last race was run on account of the “bad characters whom the race meetings brought to the place”. The Duke withdrew his patronage, but compensated Buxton by

erecting a fountain in the marketplace. *[Note: not really the same sort of thing, but I am sure it was appreciated....]*

9. Apparently, informal racing took place until the 1920s, by which time a better use had been found for Fairfield Common.
10. The grandstand survived until 1862, being mistaken by one visitor for an ancient abbey.

Finally, Ian White has provided further writings regarding the racecourse which you can see [here](#). What larks they had.....

and buildings, especially on the right, standing singly or in groups, separated by gardens, stackyards, or small 'folds,' and largely interspersed with spreading sycamore and other trees of considerable growth; and the intervening Common, with its many undulations and sharply-marked roads, combine to give Fairfield a very picturesque aspect; and, as you continue your walk across the Barms, where sheep and cattle quietly graze, or garrulous geese stretch their spiteful necks as you pass, it is impossible not to enjoy the fresh springy turf, the peacefully pastoral character of the scenery, and the refreshing breezes. On the north of the Common, surrounded by large trees, are some farm buildings, standing, according to tradition, on the site of a former Nunnery; but not the slightest evidence remains, unless it be the foundations of a thick wall which may have belonged to a large building. The place is called "Nun Farm;" the fields in the neighbourhood, "Nun Fields;" and the brook running below them to the Hogshaw, "Nun Brook." A little beyond, on the same side, its broken arches and dilapidated walls partly covered with ivy, the former "Grand Stand" makes a very picturesque and respectable ruin. So plausibly does it support the character that, not long ago, two *savans* on inspecting it closely, came to the conclusion that it was the remains of an ancient abbey! The old race-course is yet easily traceable, over which the high-mettled steed was urged with whip and spur at the Buxton Races, amid the bets and vociferations of thousands of excited spectators. It was a pity to mar so Fair a Field with the vices and passions of fallen human nature! Near those trees, when in their June-tide glory, were the gambling booths—rouge-et-noir and roulette—and disinterested individuals, behind tables piled with tempting gold, invited gentlemen to "make their game while the ball was rolling!" Here the white clover and the daisies were trodden into mud by those who formed the "boxing ring," and stupidly imbibed lessons in the

"noble art of self-defence," while their pockets were left, defenceless, to the light-fingered gentry at hand. There Thimble-riggers found their victims, or were found by constables and driven off, sometimes after a sharp encounter between staves and thimble-table legs; and more vice and misery were imported on race-days, than the parson and school-master, and they who aid them, could countervail in a year!

At the guide-post, the road branches to the left to Chapel-en-le-frith and Castleton, to the right to Tideswell. There are no fences to the roads, so that, though pleasant in the day, it is not so agreeable a place to traverse on a dark night. Ill-natured tales of the villagers in olden time have been current, which, like all bad reputations, it is difficult to remove; so that, however inapplicable to the present time, it is too generally believed that a "Fairfield Man will do no Good if he Knows it." This stigma is said to have originated as follows:—Once upon a time, as two Fairfield men were crossing the Common at night, with a lanthorn to guide their steps, cries of distress and shouts for help were heard, when one of the men implored the other to blow the light out to prevent discovery, "for," said he, "we'll do no good if we know it!" and they hurried home in the dark rather than give the assistance required. This has "stuck like a burr" ever since. Another "Tale of the Common:"—Sometime ago a local preacher of Buxton was crossing the Common after night-fall, when he beheld looming before him an exceedingly tall and majestic figure, with a ball of fire in place of an ordinary head. Notwithstanding his profession, great fear and trembling came upon him, but he still determined to meet the monster. It grew more terrible as it approached nearer, and, though only a few moments had elapsed from the time when he first beheld it, he was already in a profuse perspiration; then, to his intense relief, it resolved itself into a stalwart Fairfield swain returning late from milking, and the ball of fire was the reflection of

So there you have it!

What an amazing bit of history our Golf Course has.

Jon White 02/01/20

P.S. Alan is a local historian and has written several fascinating books on Buxton. His publications are available through Buxton Civic Association at Poole's Cavern or at any good bookshop.