



Lilley Hoo

Until ploughed for the first time in 1946 for post-war food production, this two-mile tract of formerly fine-turfed grassland was a popular beauty spot that had long attracted trippers from the nearby towns of Luton and Hitchin. Summer weekends were particularly busy during the 1920's with cricket matches, picnickers, an Italian barrel organ operator complete with monkey, a scissor grinder, traders in ice cream, oranges, sweets, muffins and crumpets.

Two centuries earlier, it had escaped a similar fate (that is, the ploughing) when it was specifically exempted from the 1768-9 parliamentary enclosure of Lilley, not for the sake of the commoners' grazing sheep but because, as ancient common land, it was in regular use as a racecourse popular with Hitchin gentry.

The first took place on Michaelmas Day 1693 for a plate of £30.00 (worth thousands of pounds at today's value) advertised by a notice in the London Gazette which required entries to be made the previous morning at the George Inn, Silsoe (a convenient route to Lilley across the Barton Hills probably then existed). A four-mile point-to-point, it was strictly for amateur riders: gentlemen rode their own horses and the results were not published.

Nevertheless, it was a sell-out and became an annual event for the next 105 years, extending over three days and with prizes up to 100 guineas. A regular participant was the dissolute (but then athletic) young tearaway, George Prince of the Wales, who occasionally visited his 'Gentleman of the Stud' Emilius Henry Delmé.

A descendent of the Radcliffes of Hitchin Priory and Henry Howard, Earl of Carlisle, Delmé was passionate about matters of the turf and had transformed his Pirton residence, High Down House into a racing establishment, using Lilley Hoo as an exercise and training ground. Returning there on one particularly drunken occasion, he managed to smash every window at High Down.

In later years, George (now the fat Georgy Porgy of pudding and pie fame) would later become King George IV.

After years of arable cultivation, Lilley Hoo is now a rather dull expanse of ordinary fields, having long ago lost its communities of colourful and delicate chalk plants along with their attendant butterflies. With some benign neglect and a resumption of grazing, it could be allowed to return to its former glory to expand on and complement the important nature reserves of the Barton and Pegsdon Hills.