

# A GRAND NATIONAL CENTENARY

By E. C. KERR

IT is exactly one hundred years ago that the Gloucestershire rider, George Stevens, won his first Grand National. He went on to set up an unequalled record of winning it five times, and in addition won twice in two consecutive years on the same horse. Steeplechasing in Stevens's day was not the highly organised affair that it is now. Jockeys were called upon to ride over courses much more like the natural countryside, and the going often included plough. The Grand National course in Stevens's time had not grown too far from its small beginnings. The brooks, including Bechers, had been widened, and the fences built up a little. There were stands for the racegoers, and part of the race-course had been railed off. Spectators still rode on the course and cantered down to watch the start and the ladies came in their carriages. In 1863, when Stevens won his third big race at Aintree, the course was still a little rough. "Each of the eleven fields comprising the course were traversed twice and they were nearly all fallow and wheat and seeds, the race-course and common being almost the only grass."

It seems extraordinary in the light of present-day events to read that complaints were being made against the size of the fences. Bechers and Valentine's Brooks were formidable, "but all the other fences were mere narrow ditches with thin thorn fences of the most contemptible description and practicable for a schoolboy of ten years on his 12-hand pony." Despite this there were usually plenty of falls, and injuries to both horse and rider. To the risk of injury was added the dangers of the crooked practices of the time. Riders were not above pulling their horses, doping was not uncommon and bribery had its place as well. Stevens, however, seems to have been an exception to these unpleasant happenings, and there is no mention of trickery where he is concerned. Lord Coventry, for whom he rode on many occasions, said "a quieter and more straightforward fellow does not exist." A contemporary described him as being "fond of steeplechasing, but he was not a betting man, and was a good husband and father, saving without parsimony and a sportsman without stain."

Stevens was born at Cheltenham in 1833, and rode in his first National at the age of nineteen. Altogether he rode 76 winners, but was killed at the age of 38. His family, not unnaturally perhaps, frowned on Stevens's love of racing and put him into business. He ran away, however, and took a job in Shepherd's Stables at Hednesford in Staffordshire, after which he rode for a Mr. Vevers, of Hertfordshire. Eventually he returned to Cheltenham and became friendly with Black Tom Olliver, a well-known steeplechase jockey, who won the Grand National three times. Olliver taught Stevens much of what he knew about the art of steeplechasing.

The Colonel was George Stevens's best known National winner, but Free Trader was the horse on which he was successful for the first time—in 1856. This horse was owned by Mr. W. Barnett, of Cheltenham, and had been bought for only ninety guineas. Free Trader was trained by the Holmans, whose stables were at Prestbury, near Cheltenham. Stevens's first win in the big steeplechase coincided with two changes at Aintree. The meeting became a two-day affair and Mr. Topham managed the event, presumably for the first time. The race was run at a fast pace and there were several accidents, none of

them fatal. Free Trader's owner is said to have given Stevens £500 for winning as well as presenting him with "a capital hunter" to the value of £80, but no indication is given whether this was a horse or a watch.

Stevens's next win was on Lord Coventry's Emblem in 1863 and again on Emblematic in 1864. These two mares were sisters and were distinctly "weedy." Both were trained by Mr. Weevey at Bourton on the Hill, Gloucestershire. Emblem was a thoroughbred mare, bred in Wales. As a chaser she had a somewhat chequered career. She raced unsuccessfully for some time but suddenly refused to jump. Later she regained her confidence and became a tremendous jumper. Stevens named his cottage in Prestbury after her, so that he must have had a considerable affection for the mare. Emblematic

In dealing with horses he was a man who seldom raised his voice. "He would just talk to them and they would do things" was a contemporary description of his methods. One mare called Maria Agnes, fourth with Stevens in the Grand National of 1860, would do tricks for him. In his garden he and Thomas Pickernell, another well-known rider, trained the mare to jump over two long churchwarden pipes which they held in their mouths. Such tricks could only have been taught by kindness and Stevens seems to have had a remarkable capacity for inspiring confidence in his horses.

There was never any need to caution Stevens to ride carefully and Old Tom Olliver's advice on the occasion of his victory on The Colonel in 1870 was superfluous. Olliver wrote to a friend of his asking him to pass the following advice on to Stevens:

"Nothing can beat The Colonel if he stands on his legs and he is well on the day. The Master means it, the jockey rides honest and they have a great horse. If Stevens lays away from his horses and not be interfered with it will be like a lot of terriers leading a staghound a gallop. The Colonel is a good horse, the weight is of no consequence when rode [sic] by a man like George Stevens. Give him an old man's advice and tell him to be Patience and it is a Virtue and he will win. . . ."

The Colonel was indeed an outstanding horse. He was by Knight of Kars out of Boadicea. He was not a particularly big horse, being 15.2 hands, but he won the National twice running in 1869 and 1870. He was foaled in 1863 and a description of him is: "He has somewhat drooping, very jumping like, but almost short quarters, beautifully laid shoulders, capital back and clean legs. Quite big enough in bone for any useful purpose. He is not particularly deep in girth, but his forehead is perfection." The Colonel was a difficult horse to train, and no doubt Stevens's tactful handling had much to do with his success on the race-course.

The Colonel seems to have been attended with bad luck. Two of his trainers were accidentally killed, and it is said that his owners were equally unlucky. Stevens himself was killed when he was riding up Cleeve Hill, near Prestbury in Gloucestershire. A gust of wind caught his hat, and the horse whipped round in fright and bolted back down the steep hill towards Cheltenham. Stevens was such an accomplished rider that he might have been all right if the horse had not stumbled and fallen, fracturing his rider's skull against a stone—an extraordinary end for a man who had ridden so often in a race like the Grand National and never even had a fall.

An impressive monument was erected to the jockey in Cheltenham Cemetery, the money being raised by a subscription from Stevens's many friends. On it is written: "His name will be inscribed with honour in the annals of the turf for his general character and for his accomplished and successful achievements. This monument, raised by a subscription among the numerous friends who knew him, is a slight memorial of his virtues and of deep general and unaffected sorrow for his loss. The integrity of his principles and the uniform propriety of his conduct obtained for him the confidence of the public and he enjoyed in no common measure the respect and esteem of his employers. In the intimacy of social life his unassuming merit, fine temper and pleasing manners inspired a general affection."



GEORGE STEVENS, THE GLOUCESTERSHIRE JOCKEY, WHO WON HIS FIRST GRAND NATIONAL IN 1856. He won five Grand Nationals, including two in consecutive years on the same horse

was such a shocking-looking animal that Stevens bewailed his luck at having to ride such a "roaring brute." A contemporary gave it as his opinion that the mare would not have made £50 at Tattersalls. However, she was third again the following year, which proves that it was not merely a lucky fluke. In fact, Stevens was blamed for waiting too long and so losing the race.

However, a description of the race in 1863 shows that Stevens was in fact a very clever rider and an excellent judge of pace: "The field of 16 comprised at least a couple of headstrong horses. One of these, the Orphan, had to be restrained with a leading rein. . . . At the hurdles placed about a distance from home, Emblem was leading; but jumping sideways she stumbled on landing, and it speaks much for the strength of seat of George Stevens that at the end of a long and tiring race he sat perfectly still. The mare recovered herself and won by 20 lengths."

In fact, Stevens's reputation as a professional jockey seems to have rested on two factors: his trustworthiness in the face of crooked practice, and his quietness and imperturbability.