

Port Meadow Races

By E. H. CORDEAUX and D. H. MERRY

HORSE-RACING has doubtless always found a place in rural sports. Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* observes 'Many other sports and recreations there be . . . which are the common recreations of country folkes. Riding of great horses, running at ring, tilts and turnaments, horse-races, wilde-goose chases, which are the disports of greater men, and good in themselves, though many Gentlemen, by that meanes, gallop quite out of their fortunes.'¹ Organized racing in this country dates from the reign of Henry VIII. Chester, Croydon and Doncaster are all mentioned as racing centres in Tudor times ; Newmarket was patronized by the Stuarts.

An early and picturesque account of a race is to be found in *Annalia Dubrensis, upon the yeerely celebration of Mr. Robert Dovers Olimpick Games upon Cotswold-Hills*, published in 1636.

'Then by and by, swift racing Naggs contend
Who first, shall message conquest to the end,
Of their appointed course. At first begin
All equall in their steps, and hope to win.
And Fortune hides her favorite from the eye
Of each beholder, and joy'd Ryder, by
Some mile, till one, that scorns rivalitie,
Blushing at this so long Equallitie :
Loosens his hard borne raynes and then most cry,
Proclaiming him the hope of Victory.

Like halfe-shap'd-centaures, all the rest do ride
Not equalling, but envying the pride
Of fortunes fore-man, who darts by the Post,
Like flashing lightning : then those, that have lost
Both prize and glorie, after him do come,
To magnifie his Tryumphe, too late home.'²

¹ Pt. 2, Sect. 2, Memb. 4.

² The games originated about the year 1604, as a protest against the growing Puritanism of the day. This poem, signed W. Denny, seems to have been overlooked in histories describing the early days of horse-racing in England.

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The ascertained history of racing at Oxford begins in 1630³ with the following brief entry in the diary of Thomas Crosfield.⁴ 'July 10. At the Act, a prize, a horse race.' This racing was apparently an incidental amusement, as yet neither commercially nor socially developed.

After this brief reference nothing is heard of racing at Oxford until 1680, when political events led to its being encouraged by well-known and influential persons. From many sources we learn of the Duke of Monmouth's attending and participating in the races for a plate given by Lord Lovelace, Monmouth's chief supporter. Until then Lord Lovelace had given his support to the Woodstock races, but 'becing angry with ye town because they showed respects to the Ld Norris [later 1st Earl of Abingdon] by way of revenge he removes the race from Woodstock, and to collogue with our townfolk, whom he thought more for his turn, sets up his posts in Portmead and there last year his 50 l plate was run for . . .'⁵ Arrangements were made to continue this in 1681, but Alderman Wright, who was asked to order the plate, declined to guarantee its cost, which discouraged the goldsmith from making it. Lord Lovelace, therefore, cancelled his invitations, and the horses were sent away after they had 'been here some time a dieteing for ye sport'.⁶

Then, after an interval of fourteen years, there is a casual mention in a letter from James to Roger Fleming of a race when 'Mr. Willis woun ye plait in pourt-mead last Thursday [28 July, 1695] where a great many scholars were gadered; but ye undergraduates of our house, were all welcom'd home with an imposition of 20 distick. Quo strepit in Campo hic solet in Scholis.'⁷

In 1706 politics again had an effect upon the meadow races. Thomas Hearne under 6 September, 1706, notes in his diary, 'Upon ye turning out from Court of ye Earl of Abbingdon, the Earl remov'd ye Horse-Race, wch us'd to be yearly, for a plate wch he gave, at Woodstock, to Port-Meadow by Oxford . . .' From this time advertisements of the races begin to appear in the *London Gazette*, and continue more or less regularly until 1718. The earliest runs, 'A Plate of above 60 l Value to be run for by any Horse, &c. in Port Meadow, near the City of Oxford on the 12th of September next: every Horse, &c. to carry 12 Stone weight, with Bridle and Saddle; no Gentlemen to ride: Every Horse, &c. that runs to be sold for so much Money as the

³ The years for which there is evidence of a race meeting on Port Meadow are 1630, 1680, 1695, 1706-18, 1720-22, 1725, 1727-29, 1731-44, 1746, 1748, 1749, 1753-1841, 1848, 1849, 1859-1880. No races were held in 1756 and 1879 owing to floods. The meetings were usually held in August (occasionally in July or September), and prior to 1819 lasted for three days. From that year onwards their duration was two days.

⁴ *The diary of Thomas Crosfield*, ed. by F. S. Boas (1935), p. 45.

⁵ *Letters of H. Prideaux*, p. 99. (Camden Society), 1875.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁷ *The Flemings in Oxford*, by J. R. Magrath (O.H.S. LXXIX), p. 230.

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Plate shall be worth, and to be entred with the Steward 7 days (the day of entring to be one) before he runs, and to be shewed at the same time at Carfax in Oxford, and to stand in the said City 7 days before the Race.⁸

The earlier races were run over a two-mile pear-shaped course, which is clearly shown on the map of the meadow made c. 1720 by Benjamin Cole (PL. VI). The races were for the best of three heats, the horses making the circuit twice in each heat : if different horses won the heats, the winners ran a deciding race. It is interesting to compare the length of the course then with modern standards. Nowadays most of the races are run over a distance of less than two miles ; only a small minority have courses extending over three miles. Up to the middle of the 18th century, three heats of four miles each was the general rule.

The most detailed account of the races in the 18th century is found in the *Merkwürdige Reisen durch . . . Engelland* by Z. C. Von Uffenbach. Under 16 September, 1710, he writes (in translation), 'In the afternoon the annual Oxfordshire races were held here, only a mile and a half from the city. We went by boat up the Thames, which flows by the meadow where the races were held. It is a meadow two and half English miles round and much more suited for racing than the place at Epsom, although it is rather swampy. There were many booths set up where beer was sold, and each one had its sign, a hat, or glove, or some such matter. Nearly everybody from the city was there and very many visitors, some on horse-back, some in coaches, some in boats. The horses that had to run were six in number. They had to run twice round the meadow, five English miles,⁹ which was done within ten minutes. A horse of the Duke of Beaufort won twice in succession, though the second time another horse would have distanced him, had he not put out his thigh in jumping over a woman who ran on to the course.' On 18 September he continues, 'We wanted to go in the afternoon to the Ashmolean Library, but the Sub-Librarian went to the races, which took place to-day for the third and last time. We did not want to go again, as our time, especially here, was precious. When you have seen it twice, you get no more enjoyment out of it, unless you are an Englishman, fond of torturing horses, and take pleasure in overdoing the poor animals. Still we would have gone out again, if there had been this time, as is usual on the third day, a "Smoak-race" [smock race] where the womenfolk run for a prize in petticoats and low-necked shifts, and the menfolk in breeches without shirts. This time, however, it did not take place.'¹⁰

⁸ *London Gazette*, 8-12 August, 1706.

⁹ Probably an error. See Cole's Map.

¹⁰ This translation is that of Mr. P. Manning in *Sport and Pastime in Stuart Oxford* (O.H.S. LXXV), p. 99.

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The earliest known copy of the regulations governing a race is preserved in the Record Room of the Oxford University Press. They are as follows :

Orders to be observed by all Persons who shall ride for A Twelve Stone Plate in Port Meadow in or near the City of Oxford on the first Tuesday in September Anno Dni 1712.—

- 1 That no Man shall put any Horse Mare or Gelding in to run for this Plate that shall not carry twelve Stone weight with Bridle & Saddle of fourteen pounds to the Stone
- 2 That every Horse Mare or Gelding shall run three Heats as they shall be set out by Flaggs or Posts leaving every Post or Flagg on the right hand.
- 3 That if any Horse Mare or Gelding shall run on the contrary side of any Flagg or Post then such Horse Mare or Gelding shall be obliged to returne to that Flagg or Post and ride as before menconed or else not share in the Plate.
- 4 That if any Horse Mare or Gelding shall be run short by any other Horse Mare or Gelding in any one of the three Heats to the Distance as shall be there set out by Post or Flagg by Tryers then such Horse Mare or Gelding shall run no more to have any share in the Plate
- 5 That every Rider at the end of each Heat shall at alighting weigh And if he be found wanting more then one Pound & an halfe of the weight of twelve Stone before menconed he shall then have no share in the Plate.
- 6 That if any Horse Mare or Gelding wins two Heats & keeps within his distance assigned by the Judges the last Heat then such Horse Mare or Gelding shall win the Plate
- 7 That if any Horse Mare or Gelding in any of the three Heats shall distance all the rest then such Horse Mare or Gelding shall win the Plate without more runing.
- 8 That notwithstanding any Horse Mare or Gelding win the two Heats & be distanced the last Heat such Horse Mare or Gelding shall loose the Plate to the wining Horse Mare or Gelding that Heat
- 9 That if three severall Horses Mares or Geldings win the three first Heats those three Horses Mares or Geldings & none other shall run again & that Horse Mare or Gelding which wins the fourth Heat shall win the Plate
- 10 That every Horse Mare or Gelding shall be brought to the starting Post or Flagg there to start between the hours of one & three in the afternoon.

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- 11 That there be allowed between every Heat halfe an hour & no more to rub & refresh each Horse Mare & Gelding.
- 12 That every Man that puts in any Horse Mare or Gelding to run for the Plate may (if he pleaseth) choose A Tryer not betting on either side to judge which comes first to the ending Post or Flag or saves his distance.
- 13 That whosoever wins the Plate shall be obliged to pay Twenty Shillings for Flags & Scales And to the Clerke three Guineas And for mending the Course ten Shillings
- 14 That every Horse Mare or Gelding that runs who is not A Contributor or not owned by A Contributor shall pay down for every Ten Pounds the Plate shall be worth one Guinea at the time of entering & before he be enter'd And that mony to go to the second best Horse Mare or Gelding for the Plate
- 15 That no Contributor shall put in more then one Horse Mare or Gelding to run for the Plate Except he pay down as before for each Horse Mare or Gelding more then the said one Horse Mare or Gelding at the time of entering & before such Horse Mare or Gelding be enter'd And that mony to go to the second best Horse Mare or Gelding.
- 16 That if any difference shall arise concerning the Plate it shall be decided by the major part of the Gentlemen contributing that shall be then present in the Field.
- 17 That the Contributors present at the Race or any of them as shall dine at that days Ordinary or shall send so much mony as the Gentlemen dineing there shall pay shall have liberty before nine of the Clock in the evening the same day the Race shall be run to buy all or any of the Horses Mares or Geldings that run for so many Guineas as the Subscripcōn mony comes to in manner following (vizt) if but one such Contributor be desirous to buy any of the said Horses Mares or Geldings that run he shall have such Horses Mares or Geldings or any of them paying the Owner as before for each Horse Mare or Gelding any time the same day the Plate is run for but if more of the said Contributors be desirous to buy any or either of the said Horses Mares or Geldings that run then he who throws most at three throws with two Dice shall have one Horse Mare or Gelding paying as before And so to throw on in the same [way] for the rest (if the said Contributors think fitt) paying for each Horse Mare or Gelding as / / /

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shall attend at the Kings head Tavern in Oxford till
nine of the Clock after the Race shall be / / /

r'd seaven days (whereof the day that he is enter'd may be
one) before he runs with the Steward / / /

of the City of Oxford & that doth not stand seaven days
in the Liberties of the said City before / / /

/ / / ast to A Town Plate. / / /
subscribes these Orders.

/ / / Anno Dni 1712.

/ / / towards the said Plate the severall sumes of mony against
our names severally set

1	6	p ^d	J:W.	:	Lindsey / /	2	Guineas	A
	6	A			Oxford	8	- 7 - 6	A
		A			Rutland	2	- Guin	A
	1	- 6			H. Rochester	1.	1. 6.	A
	1	- 1 - 6	A		Cardigan	1.	1. 6.	A
					Fran : Hawley	1.	1. 6	A

In dorso : S^r John Walters a bay gealding Cald Scut
Tho: Rowney Esq^r a Chesnut Stone hors Cald Posset

Francis Hall A Grey Gelding called Derby

Mr Gr / / / A Grey Gelding

M^r King A bright Bay Mare called Kicking Jenny

Mr. (?) Gross

An advertisement of another race in the same year is printed in the
London Gazette of 12-16 August, 'A Plate of about 20 l value to be run for
in Port Mead, near the City of Oxon, on the 4th of September next, by any
Horse &c. carrying 10 Stone Weight, with Bridle and Saddle. The winning
Horse, &c., to be Sold for 20 Guineas : every Horse, &c., to be enter'd with
the Steward, the Friday before the Race and to be shew'd at the same time
at the place of Entering, and to be kept in the Liberties of the said City, at
the House of a Person contributing 10s. at least towards the said Plate.'

There are many references to the races and their amenities in the diaries
of Thomas Hearne. In his entry for 31 August, 1732, he writes, 'On Tuesday
the 22nd inst. began the Oxford Horse Races in Port-Meadow, and ended
last Tuesday night. Booths and vicious living were there for about seven weeks,
to the no small scandal of virtuous people, as 'tis also abominable, that Poppet
shews and Rope dancing should have been this summer in Oxford for more
than two months, even just till the Races began, to the debauching and

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corrupting of youth and the impoverishing of the town &c.' The following year was marked by an accident, 'a scaffold in the meadow fell down, and had like to have killed several . . . It was put up by one Prickett a carpenter of Oxford, who 'tis observed had formerly put up two, that also fell'.¹¹

Jackson's Oxford Journal takes up the story in 1753, with a yearly report on the sport. It will be seen that Oxford during the races was a scene of great gaiety. Public breakfasts alternated with balls and entertainments, while a less refined pastime could be enjoyed every morning at the Cockpit in Holywell. So important was the social round that hairdressers came especially from London to prepare the elaborate coiffeurs of the ladies who flocked to the city. The report of 25 August, 1753, observes that the races were 'attended, especially for the last two days, with a much greater Appearance of Nobility, and Gentry than hath ever been seen here, on the like occasion, within the Memory of man. The Ordinaries have, every day, been fill'd with the best Company: the Assemblies and Balls, which were held in our new Town Hall, have, from the great number of Gentlemen and Ladies of Distinction, been extremely brilliant; and the Subscription, for next year's Lady's Plate amounts to much more than was ever known from any former Collection. In short, the whole Meeting (which was conducted with the greatest Regularity) hath given the highest Satisfaction to all that were present at it.'¹²

The races, however, did not enjoy an unbroken run of success. The year 1767, for instance, was a failure from a racing point of view, but nevertheless there were compensations for the townsfolk. 'On Tuesday [August 18] the sports were continued by a foot race, Backsword playing, Wrestling and Leaping, for Five guineas, the Gift of Sir James Cotter, Bart. And on Thursday an Hog, given by the same Gentleman, was turned loose upon the Course, for the Person who should catch and hold him by the tail only; which after a long and crowded pursuit became the Prize of a Scotch Sadler resident here. There was also another Prize for men running in Sacks, which afforded great Diversion to a Multitude of Spectators. Upon the whole, though, the heavy Rains immediately preceding our races had done vast Injury to the Course, yet the Diversion has been great: And in order to encourage the Boothmen, &c. who had suffered by the badness of the Weather, his Grace the Duke of Marlborough was pleased to order upwards of Twenty Guineas to be given among them. We likewise hear, from good Authority that the Duchess of Marlborough has given directions for having the Entrance into the Meadow rendered hereafter safe and commodious, at her Grace's own Expence.'¹³

¹¹ *Hearne's Collections*, xi (O.H.S. LXXII), p. 252.

¹² *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 25 August, 1753.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22 August, 1767.

The 'good authority' proved to be entirely accurate, for in August, 1768, it was announced that 'the course, as well as the avenues leading to the meadow have been repaired at a prodigious expence, by order of her grace the duchess of Marlborough . . . The arches in the course are all turned thirty feet wide, and the rest of the ground, wherever it was found necessary, is raised to the same breadth; the whole expence of which is said to amount to upwards of four hundred pounds.'¹⁴

The arrangements for the meetings were entrusted to two stewards (often noblemen and invariably influential persons) who were elected for the following year at a meeting of the subscribers, held at the conclusion of each year's sport. The difficulty in keeping spectators off the course is to this day experienced by stewards. The officials met the situation in 1796 by enacting,¹⁵ 'Whereas several accidents have happened on the Race ground by the Foot people standing within the Cords during the time the horses are running, and to prevent the same in future, there is an additional number of Course keepers engaged for that purpose, as no person whatever will be suffered to be within the lines during that time, and it is hoped that every one will peaceably comply with this Regulation. Any person insulting the men upon their duty will be prosecuted. All dogs found upon the course will be destroyed.'¹⁶

The races, not to mention the shows and other subsidiary entertainments, must have been a great attraction to undergraduates, but it was not until 1772 that the University felt compelled to legislate. The Statute (in translation) runs, 'Furthermore, forasmuch as that bane of the present age, we mean the unbridled and deadly love of games for a monied stake, has in some measure made inroads upon the University itself whereby the fame and reputation of the University may be stained, from the hearts of the young men being set upon horse-racing and cock-fighting: It is enacted, that henceforth no member of the University shall engage as principal or partner in a horse-race, either by riding himself, or subscribing to a handicap for that purpose, or in any other manner whatever . . . under pain of rustication from the University; in the first instance for three months; in the second instance for six months; but in the third for ever.'¹⁷

The 19th century opened auspiciously with this enthusiastic report,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27 August, 1768.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9 July, 1796.

¹⁶ In 1860 an original method of keeping the course clear was adopted. The *Oxford Chronicle* of 18 August reports, 'Everybody seemed pleased at the alteration in keeping the course clear, which, instead of being confided to the County police, was intrusted to "Jem Hills" the celebrated huntsman of the Heythrop Hounds and his four principal whips, who, mounted and in their hunting dress, as they rode up the lines, had a regular sporting appearance . . . and everything passed off in the most agreeable and gentlemanly manner as far as their duties were concerned'.

¹⁷ *Oxford University Statutes*, tr. by G. R. M. Ward (1851), II, p. 14.

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'such a field of horses, particularly for the plate given by his grace the Duke of Marlborough, has not appeared for upwards of 30 years'.¹⁸ In 1819 a less optimistic note creeps into the *Oxford Journal*, 'We were sorry to observe a less assemblage of company than has been usual of late years, both on the Race course and at the Ordinaries and Balls. We can account for this falling off in no other way than from the injurious practice of many of our English Nobility and Gentry in squandering away their money in London, or on the Continent, instead of residing on their estates, where their presence would not only add a lustre, but would be highly beneficial at all provincial meetings.'¹⁹

An attempt to purify the sport is apparent in 1828 when 'the magistrates were determined to suppress, as much as possible, that nefarious system of gambling so generally practised at races, and by their direction the tables were ordered off the ground by the constables. Several pitched battles were likewise prevented, the principals being informed that they would be taken into custody the moment they began fighting. It must be mentioned as a remarkable circumstance, that not a single show, or exhibition of any kind was on the course, with the exception of poor Punch and Judy.'²⁰ Betting was not officially recognized until 1859, when space on the course was allotted for the use of bookmakers. So well did they flourish thereafter that in 1877 a regulation forbidding the use of 'extravagant costume' to attract punters, was introduced.

In 1829, an innovation is recorded. 'The ordinaries and balls were well attended . . . the plan recommended by Mr. Staning, the proprietor of the Star Inn, of the Ladies dining at the same table with the Gentlemen (instead of having a separate ordinary) gave general satisfaction.'²¹ Evidence of a desire to place the races on a more business-like footing is found in the same report, 'Several sporting gentlemen of the county held a meeting after the races . . . They propose to establish a Race Fund, for which purpose a liberal subscription was immediately commenced, which soon amounted to 90 l and a Committee was then appointed for the purpose of appropriating the money in such a manner as they shall think proper, and for the general regulating of the races . . . The committee have also judiciously altered the distance of running for the Cup, which instead of being 4 miles will in future be only two miles and a quarter; the weights to be the same as at Ascot.'

The long sequence of meetings was broken in 1842, and was not continued until 1848 when a new course 'somewhat in the shape of a balloon'²² was laid

¹⁸ *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 28 July, 1804.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7 August, 1819.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 August, 1828.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8 August, 1829.

²² *Ibid.*, 9 September, 1848.

out in the meadow proper, not on Wolvercote Common. The races were again held in 1849, and then, for another decade, lapsed. In 1859, the course was remade in the shape of a figure nine, the two-mile circuit being in the form of an oval extending towards the railway, and the 'straight' running down the centre of the meadow.²³ A grand stand, capable of holding eight hundred people was erected to the plans made by the Clerk of the course, Mr. T. Marshall.²⁴ A refreshment room ran under the whole length of the stand; the entrance fee to the latter was five shillings. Immediately in front was the 'Ring' with ample space for betting men. The resumption drew a crowd estimated at between fifteen and twenty thousand.

An improvement of the course was attempted in 1861. By the exertions of Sheriff Thompson, backed by public and private subscription, raised paths were built and drains were cut. For the first time too, the grand stand was divided—one part for women, and one for the stewards and their friends.

Four years later a grievance, which had long formed the subject of complaint by Freeman, almost caused the Race Committee to abandon the races. Port Meadow, as common land, was vested in the Freeman. For many years the right of erecting booths on the meadow during the races had been in dispute. Freeman maintained that this right was theirs alone, and they did not hesitate to pull down booths erected by non-freemen. In 1848 and 1849 the Race Committee adopted a plan by which the land was let in plots by public auction. The Freeman, however, insisted on their privileges and refused to pay. When the races were resumed in 1859, the Race Committee, supported by the Committee of Estates, succeeded in enforcing this scheme. Despite repeated protests from the Freeman, public auctions were regularly held, and all who leased land, paid for it. In 1864 one James Marsh bid for a plot, and after the races refused to pay on the grounds that he was a Freeman. The auctioneer sued Marsh for the sum of £27, but the Court decided that, although acting for the Race Committee, he had no legal evidence to establish his claim as its representative. On appeal his right was established, and the Judge ordered a new trial.²⁵ No further action, however, was taken. Before the appeal was presented the Race Committee issued a statement²⁶ declaring that in view of the expense to which it had been

²³ The 1876 edition of the 25-in. O.S. map shows the course as a straight run of some five-eighths of a mile down the centre of the meadow. There is no clear indication of any circular portion. Possibly this part of the course was of a less permanent character. In the second edition of the map, published in 1899, no indication of the course is given. Mr. H. Minn, whose help is here gratefully acknowledged, says that traces of the track were visible before the turf was mutilated by the aeroplanes stationed on the meadow during the 1914-18 war.

²⁴ No permanent structure was built on the course, the grand stand being erected and dismantled each year.

²⁵ *Fisher v. Marsh*. 6 B. & S. 411.

²⁶ *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 21 January, 1865.

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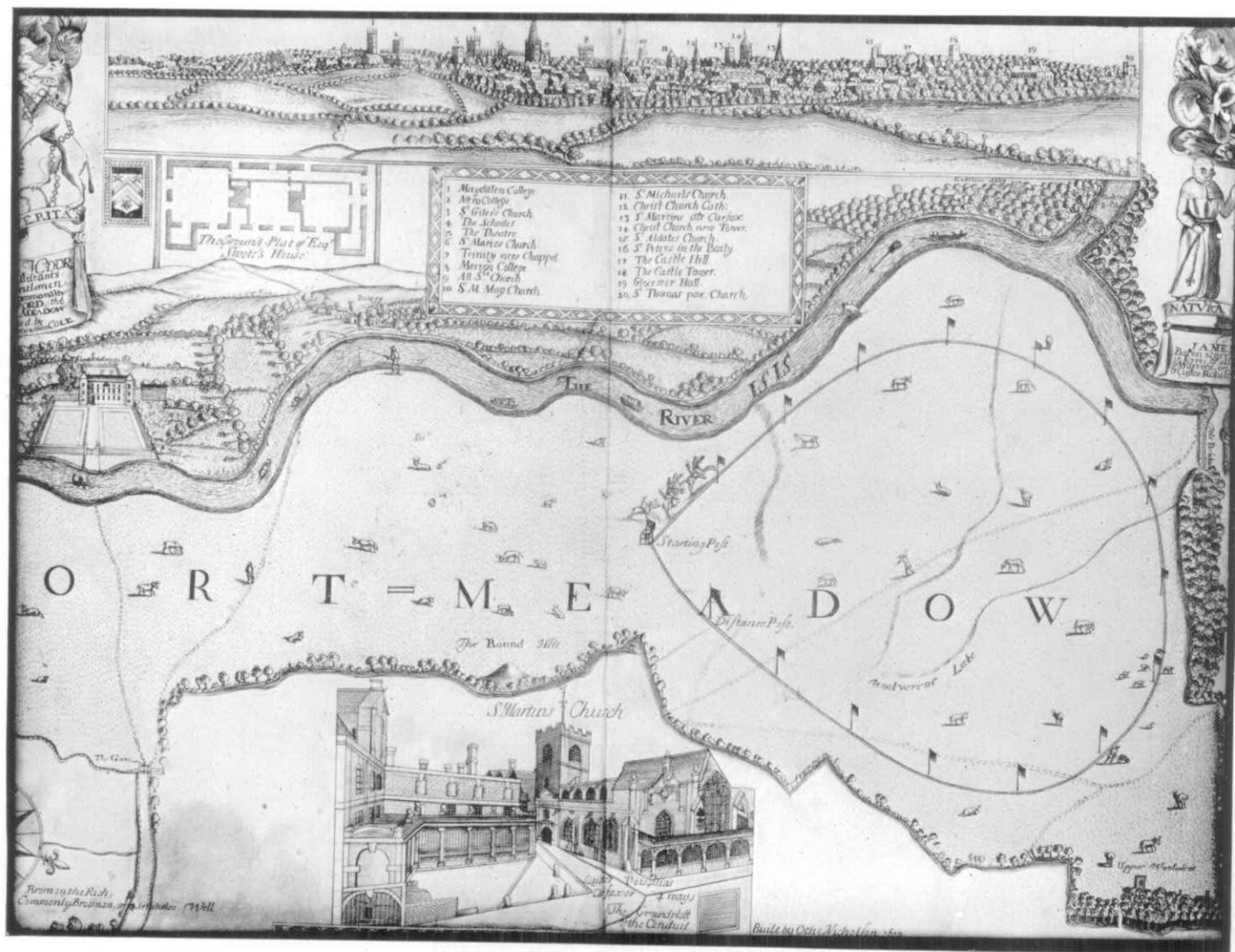
subjected, as well as the prospect of further litigation, the races would be abandoned. Nevertheless, the overwhelming public support for the Committee led to the races being held in the following year, and then, with the exception of 1879 when flooding of the meadow caused their cancellation, annually until 1880.

The history of racing at Oxford ends at present with a meeting of the Freemen on 5 October, 1910, when it was resolved 'that the consent of Common Hall should be given to let Port Meadow for a race meeting, assuming that a race meeting is desirable in Oxford'. The Town Clerk in commenting on the cessation of races offered as possible reasons that the public was tired of them, or that the races were not sufficiently attractive. A newspaper report ends with, 'A voice: "Two gentlemen died, who found the money"'.²⁷ Among the contributory causes were doubtless the financial loss in 1879, the opposition of the Freemen, inclement weather, and the tendency of the Meadow to flood. But the Voice, which had the last word, probably proclaimed, in its enigmatical way, the most decisive cause of all.

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²⁷ *Oxford Times*, 8 October, 1910.



THE RACE-COURSE ON PORT MEADOW
After the map engraved by Benjamin Cole, c. 1720