



THE ALL ENGLAND JUMPING COURSE,
HICKSTEAD

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DOUGLAS BUNN WAS ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE WHO COULD HONESTLY SAY
THEY HAD A DREAM – AND MADE IT COME TRUE!

THE ALL ENGLAND JUMPING COURSE AT HICKSTEAD, SUSSEX, MADE HIS NAME
KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE EQUESTRIAN WORLD, WHILE THE SHOWGROUND
ITSELF, CARVED FROM VIRGIN ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE, BECAME THE
UNOFFICIAL HOME OF THE SPORT IN GREAT BRITAIN AND SET THE
INTERNATIONAL STANDARD FOR OUTDOOR EQUESTRIAN SITES. AND WHEN HE
DIED IN JUNE THIS YEAR, JUST 12 MONTHS SHORT OF HICKSTEAD'S 50TH
BIRTHDAY, THE TRIBUTES WERE WORLDWIDE.



It is a story that began nearly 80 years ago when a young, wide-eyed Douglas Bunn viewed a flickering piece of black and white film at his local cinema, watching horses negotiate a huge bank in a German arena. He was already riding, supported and encouraged by his father, but that flickering image and that bank found a place in his memory that was to surface many years later.

Although Mr. Bunn senior ensured that his son had ponies to ride, he was instrumental in bringing together Douglas and one of the leading owners of the day, Bill Gardner. That was in 1938, and Douglas had just a year of competition in ponies at the top level before World War II stopped everything.

Fortunately, Mr. Bunn and Mr. Gardner's love of horses and show jumping survived the war, and Douglas's professional life in law and ultimately as a Barrister progressed alongside his role as one of the country's leading show jumpers. It was not unusual for him to go into court with his white riding breeches beneath striped trousers and gown and later to leave his wig behind and go off to compete at a show or to his home in Sussex to exercise horses until it was dark.

Show jumping in Britain at the time was very much in its infancy. There was very little in the way of course design or even many variations in the jumps themselves, which were mostly uprights, sometimes still with flimsy lathes on the top pole that fell and incurred penalties almost with the movement of air as a horse passed over.

Douglas had made the national team and that meant jumping in Europe, where there was a lot more sophistication in course and jump design but even alongside great names such as Pat Smythe, Ted Edgar and Ted Williams they made little impression on the dominant European riders.

His commercial interests in the blossoming leisure industry had already forced Douglas to give up his life at the Bar and he knew that something had to be done to "educate" British horses and riders in the techniques of jumping big, solid fences.

There had to be a new, permanent show ground and it had to be in Sussex so that Douglas could run it! His long search ended when he found Hickstead Place, which was ideally situated between London and Brighton, and close to the then still-developing Gatwick airport. Importantly, it also had a river running through the grounds allowing irrigation of the arenas.

Having found the site he went about building it, doing a great deal of the work himself, aided by local forestry worker Ernie Fish. At the back of his mind the whole time was that piece of newsreel film. And while designing and building the fences - one post and rail obstacle is based on a roadside fence he saw while driving in Surrey - it nagged at him.

He made what he described as his first and only mistake when he opened the ground in May 1960, on the same day as Princess Margaret's marriage to Anthony Armstrong-Jones and with the second day clashing with the soccer cup final at Wembley. So there were counter attractions.

He also faced another problem - when entries closed a fortnight before the opening, there was only one! But defeat is not in his personal agenda, and hours on the telephone, cajoling, bullying and persuading riders resulted in a reasonable field.

▼ Longines King George V Gold Cup Trophy for the International Grand Prix



▼ Douglas Bunn at home





▲ Geoff Billington pushing off half way down the Derby Bank; the correct way to tackle this obstacle

By the end of that year, The All England Jumping Course – what other name was he likely to call it – was established and if not a roaring success, it was accepted.

Douglas, however, wanted a Derby and he wanted a Derby Bank and he wanted a class that was “the supreme test of horse and rider.” And if Douglas wanted it, Douglas would have it.

To test his memory, he went to Hamburg to measure their bank. To read all he said about it over the years, how he measured it in a snow storm and forgot there was six inches of snow, so his bank was bigger than any other, is history. But the twinkle in his eye when he told the story made you wonder. Did he really forget the depth of snow!

The British Jumping Derby – now the DFS Derby – launched in 1961, and that and The Bank have been the Hickstead bedrock on which his reputation and this show ground were formed.

None of it has been easy. For the last 49 years of his life – he was 81 when

he died - it was a constant drain on his finances. While other sports received official help in one form or another, Douglas soldiered on more or less alone, although he did over the years have superb sponsors, many of whom became personal friends.

And television; although the new medium had discovered show jumping, it was Douglas who really developed it hand in hand with the BBC. He realised then that it was taking the sport into thousands of homes, but a year before he died and watching from the balcony of his personal box, he admitted that he had never dreamed it would one day put his showground in front of a worldwide audience of millions.

There are two major shows each season. The four-day British Jumping Derby Meeting features the world-famous Derby class, which annually attracts a television audience of around one million. The five-day Royal International Horse Show, sponsored by Longines and rated five star, includes the 10-nation

Meydan FEI Nations Cup of Great Britain and the Longines King George V Gold Cup, an international Grand Prix which carries the richest prize fund in the UK of £162,500 with £50,000 to the winner. The winner also gets a gold trophy worth in excess of £250,000.

The British Jumping Derby, currently sponsored by furniture giant DFS, is world famous. Although the winner goes home with the Boomerang Trophy and a £40,000 share of the £120,000 prize fund, the real achievement is winning! The 1,195m course features 16 of the most demanding obstacles in the world and since the competition began in 1961, out of more than 1,700 rounds only 49 have been faultless, the last, this year from William Funnell was the first since 2004. The crowd's favourite obstacle is always the 10ft 6ins Derby Bank, but the one the riders respect most is the three elements of the Devil's Dyke, all with light rustic poles, the second element with a water ditch beneath and the third taken from rising ground. British riders have won 29 times, Ireland 13, Germany 4 and Brazil 3.
