

ON WHITE HORSE HILL

WHAT JUDGE HUGHES SAW A HUNDRED YEARS AGO TO-DAY

FROM A CORRESPONDENT

On September 18, 1857, Judge Hughes, the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, toiled up the steep grassy slope of White Horse Hill, Berkshire. He was on his way to a unique sporting event which he described in *The Scouring of the White Horse*, published the next year. As the old Berkshire ballad put it:

“The owld white Harse wants zettin to rights,
And the Squire hev promised good cheer,
Zo we'll gee un a scrape to keep un in shape,
An all last for many a year.
There'll be backword play, and climmin the powl,
And a race for a pig and a cheese,
And us thinks as hisn's a dummell zowl
As dwont care for zich spwoorts as these”.

THE PASTIME

By September 18 the first part of the business had been attended to. Squads of men had scraped away the grass from the elongated body, the flying tail, the strange thin legs, and the curious head with its pointed ears. Now they had come to enjoy the "pastime" which followed the work. Hughes toiled up the Ridgeway "alive with folk, some walking, some in strange vehicles, such as I have ever seen before; but from one and all there rose up a hum of broad Berkshire and merry laughter."

Everyone he spoke to had some tale to tell of past scourings. One worthy removed his pipe from his mouth long enough to tell of the "abominable" competition in 1808 when a gallon of gin had been offered to the woman who could smoke most tobacco in half an hour. Another sat down on a green hummock to relate the tale of the 1843 pastime when Wombwell's Menagerie had come on purpose for the scouring. "I remember," the old lad said with a chuckle, "the to-do to get the elephants' caravan up the hill. I should think they put-to a matter of four-and-twenty horses, and then stuck fast four or five times."

At last Hughes reached the extensive flat top of the hill. Before him stretched a "double line of booths all decked out with nuts and apples, and gingerbread and all sorts of sucks and food, and children's toys, and cheap ribbons, knives, braces, straps, and all manner of gaudy-looking articles." Acrobats gyrated on tight ropes, strong men flexed their muscles for the coming contests, the publicans put the finishing touches to their gaily decorated booths, gypsies were everywhere selling toffee at "three sticks a penny".

ALL SORTS OF PEOPLE

"The whole space," he saw, "was filled with all sorts of people - from ladies who looked as though they had just come from Kensington Gardens to ragged gypsy children - all moving about and looking very much as though they were, enjoying themselves". As a background to this unwonted gaiety on the quiet hillside "every show had its own music - and all the musicians were playing as loud as they could play, and all different tunes."

Suddenly a gong sounded and the Wantage Town Crier loudly announced that the pastime was about to begin. It seemed to Hughes that everything began at once. Nearest to him was the race for cart-horses. In a rapidly cleared space the contestants thundered along. Alas, the favourite Dairymaid, was beaten at the post by a rank outsider, King of the Isle, whose jockey thus-won the coveted "thill harness".

Leaving the rest of the "field" to pound along to the cheers and jeers of the throng Hughes set off in search of other entertainment. He passed by the wrestling, but decided it was too crude to waste time on. The hubbub round the towering greasy pole told him that something exciting was happening there.

He was quite right. Five feet up the pole, surmounted by its leg of mutton, stood "a heavy looking fellow with one foot in a noose of cord depending from a gimlet. In his right hand was another gimlet which he was screwing into the pole to support another noose. "The crowd far from appreciating such enterprise, was threatening to lynch him so Hughes betook himself elsewhere.

He went in the direction of a burst of cheering, which heralded the race for the "prime coated Berkshire fives (as they call the cheeses)." At the top of the steep slope known as the "Manger" stood the umpire, resplendent in a "broad brimmed beaver and a waistcoat with brass buttons." With some difficulty, owing to wives who objected to their husbands risking their bones on the slippery run and to young ladies who insisted on wandering about the course, he at last started the wheel of cheeses on its swift descent.

Immediately runners, spectators, men, women, children, young and old, set off in pursuit. But one individual, kept his head, and his legs, by following a sheep track at an angle and so reached the foot in safety, unlike almost everybody else. The question arose, " Has he cheated? " So once more Hughes left the scene while "beaver-hat " sorted it out.

PIG TELLS HIS STORY

Squeals, yells, and a general melee attracted his attention to a slope near by - the scene of the celebrated pig race. But let the pig tell his own story:

I wur born at Kingston Lisle,
Wher I frolicked for a while,
Till some chaps with cussed spite
Aimed ov I to make a sight,
And to have a bit of fun,
Took I up to Uffington.
There a thousand chaps or nigh,
Runned and hollered after I
Ther, then, I, till I were blowed,
Runned and hollered all I knowed,
When, so zure as pegs is pegs,
Eight chaps ketched I by the legs.

Luckily at this point he was rescued by the squire, but he adds the moral:

Pegs bean't meant no race to win,
Be zhart of wind and tight of skin.

Wending his way once more between the crowded booths Hughes sadly reflected that, now the "owld White Harse" had been proclaimed an ancient monument, future scourings would be "prosaic affairs." So he determined to continue to enjoy to the full this last pastime on While Horse Hill near his beloved Uffington.

Source unknown