



# EQUESTRIAN HISTORY IN LEITRIM



By Millie Kennington



# INTRODUCTION

For my Young Historian Project I decided to dive deep into the equestrian history of County Leitrim. I did research on races, breeding and different events as well as different important figures to do with equestrian history in Leitrim. I found it very interesting and I hope you will too.

My family has been involved with horses for many many years, since before I was born so this was interesting for me to research. Leitrim has more equine history than I think many people realise.



THE LAMB

## Horse breeding in Leitrim



# TIMELINE

## THE EVOLUTION OF EQUESTRIAN HISTORY



1844

Mohill Agricultural show is the first recorded main event for horses. It was put on yearly and a joy for all, especially those with horses. It is still a big event in Leitrim today.



1878

The Mohill Traders had sponsored a horse in a local race who went on to win. These races were a common event for locals and they enjoyed watching them immensely.



1903-1922

"The White Knight" went on to win 10 races and save the Kirkwood family from debt for a second time. He was very celebrated at many local races and Mohill Horse Fair.



1620

Mohill horse fair was first created as a charter fair in the early 1700s. It was created as a central hub for trading livestock



1871

"The Doe" won the Irish grand national, who would later on go to breed the first savour of the Kirkwood family and Woodbrook Estate.



19th Century

Racing over the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was very different to how it is today. It used to be in heats instead of one lining. Horses would cover a longer distance.



1983

In 1983 a large scandal happened, a famous horse known as Shergar was kidnapped. His remains are said to be in Leitrim.



# Mohill Horse Fair

Mohill horse fair first originated in the 1700s dating back as far as 1620. It first began as a Charter Fair which is a large market or event established by a legal document from the monarch. This document is known as a Royal Charter.

The fair's start is tied to the Plantation of Leitrim when the Manor of Mohill was created. A man named Henry Crofton received land from the last Gaelic Chieftan of the area, MacRaghnaill. As a new landlord, he was given a royal charter. This allowed him to legally hold markets and fairs. These markets and fairs were essential to Crofton as it allowed him to collect tolls on all the goods and livestock sold.



Mohill served as a great whereabouts for a fair as it allowed farmers from South Leitrim and North Longford to access to trading at the fair as well. There were even trains from Mullingar and Dublin to transport livestock sold and bought at the fair.

Although Mohill Horse Fair was originally created for collecting tolls and as a trading event it allowed for a great amount of socialising as well. Many people came from many different areas, especially those who were single hoping to find "matches" at the fair.

# “Mohill Agricultural Show”



The Mohill Agricultural Show was established in 1844 by William Sydney Clements, a local landlord interested in agricultural development. The show has acted as a showcase for local livestock and farming produce, continuing to be a key agricultural event in County Leitrim into the 21st century.

In 1926, a revival aimed to create a more structured and expansive event than the original 1844 version. The 1927 show was significantly larger, jumping from the 207 entries of 1844 to over 1,170 entries, including new categories like poultry and a popular "Donkey and trap" competition.

This revival was set in place by the new priest in 1927 known as Canon M.J Masterson. He wanted to bring back the local traditions as many, including Mohill Show had died down over the years. This brought the community together and relaunched the Agricultural Show Society.

Mohill Agricultural show has become an even larger event today. It's especially known for its horse shows, including the Leitrim Irish Draughts Breeders Championship

## 1881 Grand National

### Grand National



Woodbrook (from *Heroes and heroines of the Grand National*)

<b>Location</b>	Aintree
<b>Date</b>	25 March 1881
<b>Winning horse</b>	Woodbrook
<b>Starting price</b>	11/2 JF
<b>Jockey</b>	 Mr Tommy Beasley
<b>Trainer</b>	 Henry Linde
<b>Owner</b>	T. Kirkwood
<b>Conditions</b>	Heavy

The Kirkwood family, located in Carrick-On-Shannon, was heavily involved in breeding racehorses in Ireland, with a notable connection to majored steeplechase wins in the late 19th century. One of his major wins was at the Irish Grand National.

Tom Kirkwood lived in Carrick-On-Shannon. In the 1860s he famously saved a horse from a yard for just 5 shillings. This horse would later be known as 'The Doe'. He was trained by Tom Kirkwood and won the 1871 Irish Grand National. This was the second Irish Grand National. It was also known as the "Dubs Day Out" as many people from Dublin had attended the race that day.

Later on 'The Doe' went on to breed 'Woodbrook'. Another famous racehorse who would later go on to win the Aintree Grand National in 1881.

The Kirkwood family and the Woodbrook family estate had been suffering from severe debt since the 1850s. Woodbrook won a first place prize of £925 (an incredibly large sum in 1881). This money provided enough to ensure the future of Woodbrook house. The winnings were so significant that they reportedly saved the estates tenants from eviction. This victory began to become celebrated at Mohill horse fair annually.

Woodbrook was the first of two famous Leitrim bourses to "save" the Kirkwood. The family went bankrupt again between 1905 to 1908. This time they were saved by "The White Knight"

# "The Doe"



Equestrian History

# The Mohill Traders

The Mohill Traders were the local businesses in Mohill. So the race was sponsored and funded by many of the local businesses in the area. This brought together the community and also showed importance of the race to the locals.

There is information given in a recent book called "Racing Through the Midlands" that in 1878 a race was sponsored by the Mohill Traders in County Leitrim, Ireland, was indeed won by the horse Music, which was owned by J. Hind and ridden by the jockey Carty. This historical racing detail comes from records recalling Leitrim horse racing, which often took place at locations such as Boeshill and Coolabawn in Mohill, featuring events like the "Mohill Traders' Plate".

- Key Details of the 1878 Race and Context:

- Winner: Music (owned by J. Hind)
  - Jockey: Carty

- Sponsor: Mohill Traders

- Context: These races often involved three heats, with the winning horse covering roughly 6 miles in a single day.

- Location: Mohill, County Leitrim, which is renowned for having one of the oldest horse fairs in Ireland, dating back to 1620.

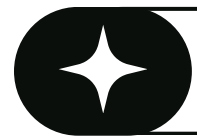
- Other notable mentions from that era of Mohill racing include H. Davis's horse Miss Steele, which won a race after a dead heat with P.N. Fitzgerald's Souvenir.

**RACING THROUGH THE  
MIDLANDS**

**WESTMEATH & OFFALY**



**Equestrian History**



# 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Horse racing in 19th-century Leitrim was a significant social and sporting event, deeply integrated into the local culture, particularly through annual race meetings in towns like Mohill. These events, which often occurred alongside agricultural fairs, drew large crowds and featured both flat racing and steeplechasing.

**Mohill Races:** Held annually in May, the races were a major highlight, with the "Mohill Traders' Plate" attracting a large amount of people. Spectators viewed the races from the hills of Boeshill and Coolabawn, which offered a large view of the course and surrounding countryside.

**Social Aspects:** Races were often accompanied by, and sometimes marred by, faction fights, but they were also places where police would join in the festivities.

**Race Day Atmosphere:** The meetings featured intense jumps and by the 1830s, were beginning to shift towards structured, artificial courses similar to the famous Kingstown Steeple Chase, which featured high-stakes, competitive racing.

**Venue Characteristics:** 19th-century Irish races often took place on hilly, uneven ground, often in the vicinity of rivers or towns, requiring, and producing, very hardy and tough horses. Jockeys had to be able to keep control under harsh conditions.

**The "Heat" System:** Races were often held in heats, requiring extreme stamina from the horses. One historic race in the area consisted of three, two-mile heats, forcing the winner to cover 6 miles in a single day

# Racing



# “The White Knight”

“The White Knight” was a legendary Irish-bred Thoroughbred stallion from Woodbrook stables. He is known as the second saviour for the Kirkwood family estate between 1903 and 1922. “The White Knight” was one of the most successful of his era. He recorded 10 wins with earnings of a total of £14,197 in prize money. After his racing career, The White Knight served as a stallion at Mondellihy Stud in Ireland (1909–1915) and Badby House Stud in England (1916–1921). He died on 20 May 1922.

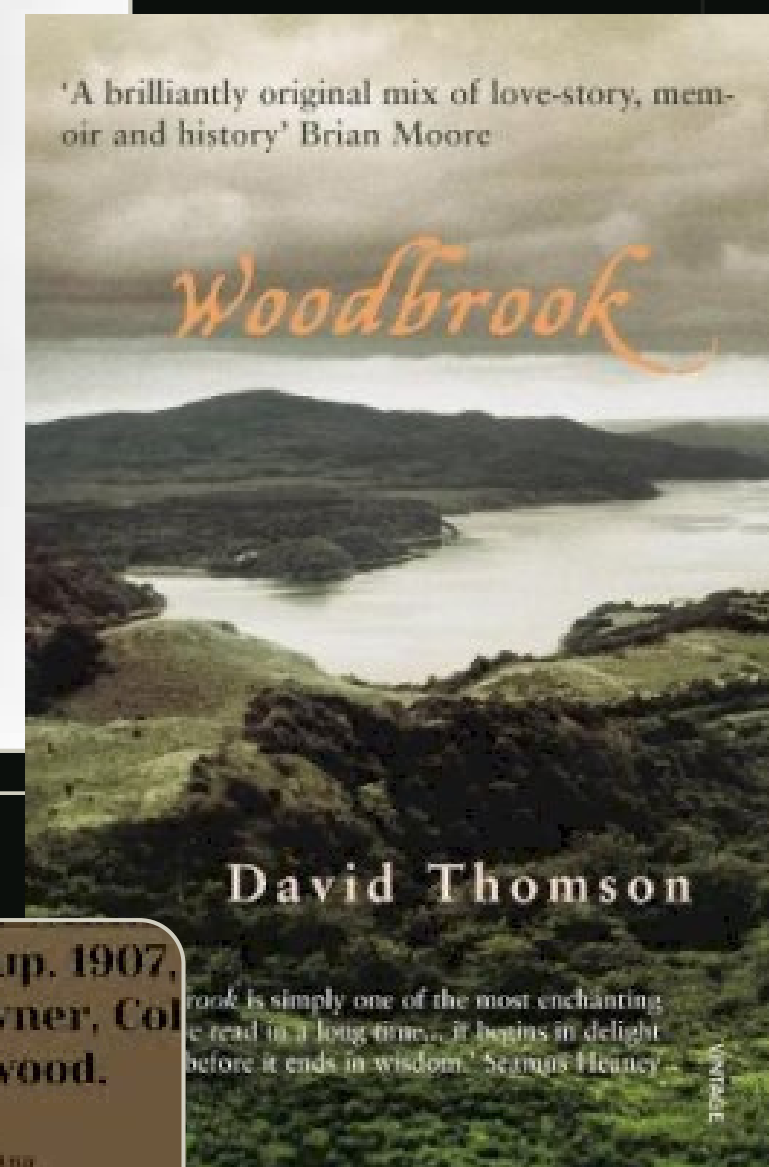
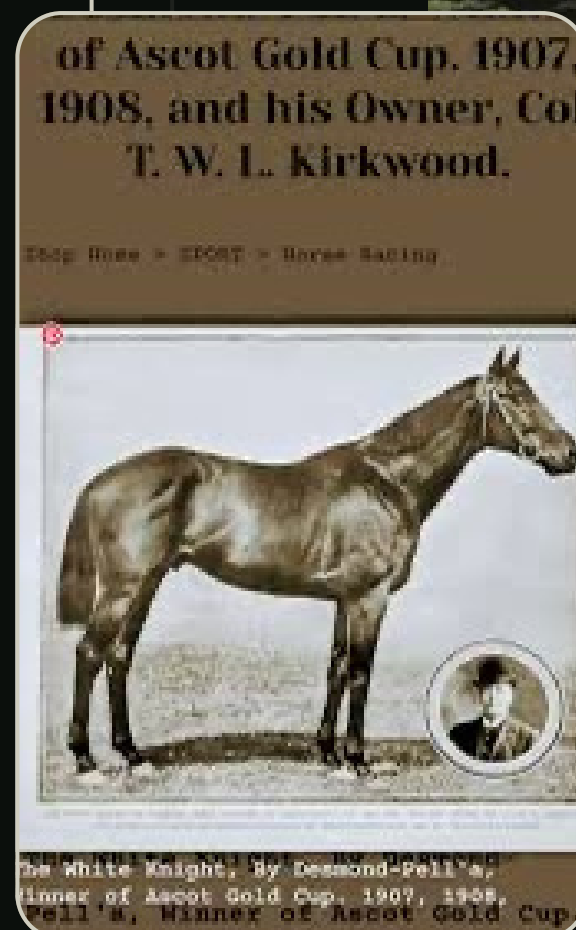
The story of “The White Knight and “Woodbrook” are followed as the main story of the book called “Woodbrook” by David Thomson in 1974



THE WHITE KNIGHT

## His most prestigious wins were:

- Ascot Gold Cup:** Won in back-to-back years (1907 and 1908).
- Coronation Cup:** Won twice at Epsom (1907 and 1908).
- Goodwood Cup:** Victory in 1907.
- Ascot Gold Vase:** Won in 1906.
- Curragh Grand Prize:** Won in 1905.





# “Shergar”

Shergar was bred in Ireland by his owner, HH Aga Khan IV. The horse was foaled on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1978 at a stud farm outside Curragh Racecourse in County Kildare. He was later sent to be trained in England in 1979 in Newmarket before settling in Mallymany Stud. The story of “Shergar” is one of the most famous and tragic mysteries in sports history.

Shergar was a champion thoroughbred. He is best remembered for his historic season in 1981. He won the Epsom Derby with a record breaking 10 lengths win. He dominated the Irish Derby and the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes. He was named European Horse of the year before retiring to Ballymany Stud being valued at £10 million.





# “The Kidnapping”

On a foggy Tuesday night, masked gunmen broke into Ballymany Stud. The gang held the groom, Jim Fitzgerald, and his family at gunpoint, forcing him to load Shergar into a trailer. The kidnappers demanded £2 million for the horses return. Due to threats against Fitzgeralds family, the police were not notified for roughly right hours, by which time the trail had gone cold.

Due to Shergar being owned by roughly 40 people negotiations were chaotic and ultimately unsuccessful. The owners refused to pay, fearing it would make every high-value horse a target for kidnappings. It is widely believed the Provisional IRA stole Shergar to fund their activists during the Troubles. IRA informer Sean O’Callaghan claimed in 1999 that the horse panicked shortly after the theft, injured a leg, and was shot and buried in a bog near Ballinamore, County Leitrim.

Shergar's body has never been found, and the case remains one of Ireland's most enduring mysteries. His legacy is honoured annually through the Shergar Cup at Ascot Racecourse.

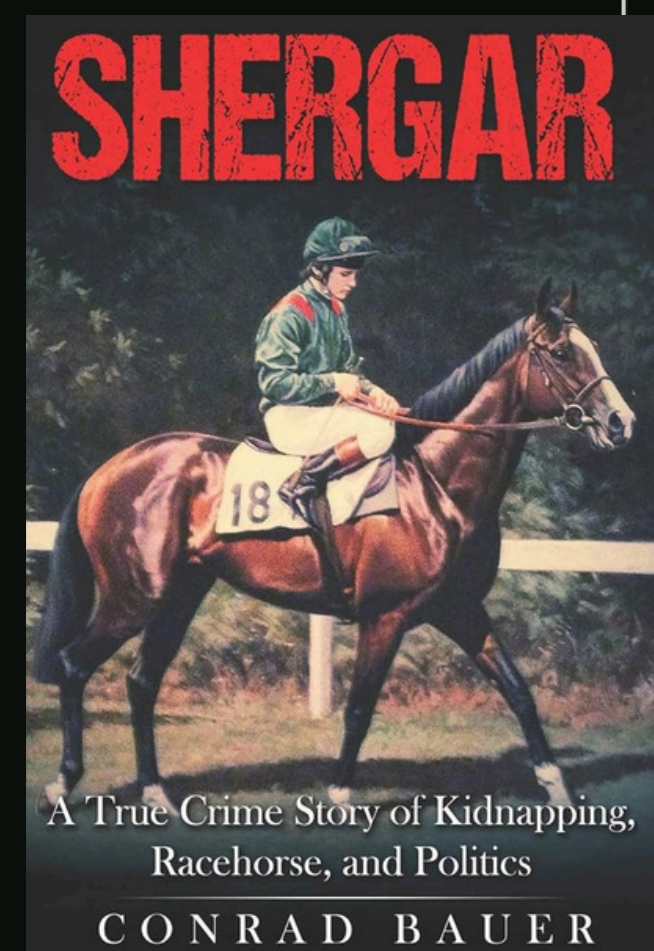


UPI photo  
Stallion Shergar mugs for camera after winning 1981 derby.

## Thieves make off with valued horse

Province News Services  
DUBLIN — At least five thieves stole one of the world's most valuable racehorses at gunpoint from the Aga Khan's stud farm and threatened to kill the five-year-old bay stallion Shergar unless they get a \$3.1 million ransom, Irish police said Wednesday. Police said five or six men, using the head groom as a hostage, took

tion who stole the horse or why. Police questioned the groom, John Fitzgerald, about the theft and the threat. "We want 2 million (pounds) if you want the horse back in one piece," Fitzgerald quoted one of thieves. Fitzgerald and his family were surprised by the gang at their home near the farm. Fitzgerald was forced to



•Lough Rynn Net:

<https://www.loughrynn.net/mohill-a-thriving-town>

•Leitrim Observer:

<https://www.leitrimobserver.ie/news/leitrim-sports/191435/Leitrim-horse-racing-recalled-in-new.html>

•Irish Shows Association:

<https://www.irishshows.org/championshipsponsors/leitrim-irish-draught-horse-breeders-association>

•Sportsbook Guardian:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20131227194402/http://www.sportsbookguardian.com/horse-racing/grand-national/winners/1881-woodbrook>

•Thoroughbred Heritage:

<https://www.tbheritage.com/TurfHallmarks/racecharts/Steeplechase/IrishGrandNational.html>

•Prints and Ephemera:

[https://www.printsandephemera.com/ourshop/product\\_6892564-The-White-Knight-By-DesmondPella-Winner-of-Ascot-Gold-Cup-1907-1908-and-his-Owner-Col-T-W-L-Kirkwood.html](https://www.printsandephemera.com/ourshop/product_6892564-The-White-Knight-By-DesmondPella-Winner-of-Ascot-Gold-Cup-1907-1908-and-his-Owner-Col-T-W-L-Kirkwood.html)

•Mohill Agricultural Show

[www.mohillagriculturalshow.com](http://www.mohillagriculturalshow.com)



# RESOURCES