

Andy Medhurst enjoys spending a day at the races

# Horseplay

The Grand National, to be run this year on April 7, is one of those sporting landmarks by which we measure out the year. Even more than the Derby, it's the occasion when people who ignore racing for the rest of the time take some kind of interest. It's the one horse race of which everyone gets to know the result. Television has a crucial role in this - Grand National Day, like the corresponding occasions of the Cup Final and the Boat Race, is one of those rare Saturdays when BBC's *Grandstand* comes from the location of a sporting event. For that day and that day only, horse racing sets the sporting agenda.

Is it just an excuse for an annual outbreak of national gambling? Partly yes, but it's also a display of public commitment to one of the oldest of organised sports, one which boasts an unusually rich and fascinating culture, of which gambling is only one aspect.

Along with drinking to excess and sex beyond the grim necessities of procreation, gambling forms the traditional trio of pleasures frowned upon by the puritans of this world. It's never had a very good press, it's always been one of the things that evangelicals have tried, in the name of salvation, to deny to working people. 'This crime,' thundered the Reverend T DeWitt Talmage in a Victorian tract entitled *The Abominations Of Modern Society*, 'is no newborn sprite but a haggard transaction that comes staggering down under a mantle of curses through many centuries.' I'd hate to minimise the financial and emotional problems that excessive gambling can bring, but it's the 'excessive' that matters here. Over-indulgence in any pleasurable activity can cause difficulties, but only the sourest zealot would use the addiction of an unfortunate few as the reason for closing those activities down.

So what exactly are the pleasures of gambling? They're elusive, for one thing, because most flutters end in loss. But all those losses miraculously evaporate in the blissful mo-

ment of a substantial win, that wholly illusory but deeply satisfying feeling that you've put one over on the bookies. There's a palpably masochistic delight in entrusting your money to a very small man on a very big horse and then settling down to watch the outcome on television. If only he can get past the grey and close in on the filly I could win... But nine times and more out of 10, the grey accelerates, the filly holds her ground, and all you're left with is a torn-in-half betting slip. Maybe next time - and it's the seductions of 'maybe' that keep taking you back.

There are those dedicated or wealthy enough to have credit accounts and flutter by phone, but for the rest of us the betting shop is a key site of this culture. Stereotypically, these are thought of as back-street, smoke-filled, male-only enclaves, mysterious and forbidding, a space for transactions that may no longer be illegal but which still evoke a shady world of gangsters, cigars and whispered tips. Not any more. The big companies who control the industry have glamorised the shops, putting in bright lights, banks of tv screens, even tea and coffee in some bigger branches. Women work there, but the punters are still overwhelmingly male. The Grand National is one of the rare instances where women do bet in large numbers. Every year one horse, usually by virtue of its name, is dubbed, patronisingly, the 'housewives' favourite'.

I once spent a summer working in a betting shop. Over the three months that I was there, I became gradually, impressively integrated into a community. Betting shops offer the kind of freemasonry that soaps like *EastEnders* mistakenly locate in pubs. You go to a pub for a variety of reasons, drink is often incidental, but nobody enters a bookie's unless they want to bet.

So the customers I met every day, whatever their social background, were all, like the staff, hooked into the serious business of the day's



racing, bound into the narratives of expectation, despair, redemption and triumph that made up the afternoon. From the old woman in fluffy slippers and quilted housecoat who'd shuffle in for her 'through-the-card reverse-forecast doubles' at Crayford dogs (there's a real rough poetry in betting terminology) to the camel-overcoat brigade slapping down their wads to follow

Carson at Newbury, we were as one, if only for a few hours.

Going to the races is a different experience entirely. Each course has its own flavour, according to its location and the types of racing it offers. London orbital courses like Kempton and Sandown possess a sort of tatty suburban flash, despite repeated attempts to hoist them up-market. You can imagine, some time ago, Diana Dors



tically phallogocentric - a horse is said to be 'by' its male parent, 'out of' the female. The problem with the four-legged superstars of the flat is that their careers are so brief. The stud fees commanded by proven winners are enormous, so the financial incentives of turning them from running machines into breeding machines confine their racing days to three seasons at most. They appear, dazzle and vanish like so much equine lightning.

Over the jumps, however, careers last much longer, so it's here that the real characters emerge, the horses which acquire massive reservoirs of public devotion. Season after season they turn out, risking injury and even death. The 60s had Arkle, the 70s Red Rum and today the nation's favourite horse is the beautiful, almost-white Desert Orchid, whose front-running tactics show a contemptuous disregard for the fences in his way. He's a true star, and his appearance at a racecourse is guaranteed to double or treble the attendance figures.

National hunt, as the name implies, is part of a whole range of rural equestrian activities, most of which I shudder to describe. Point-to-point, eventing, show-jumping (with its blood-red hunting coats), hunting itself - all these are strongly linked to the racing world. There are also aristocratic connections (Lord Oaksey must be the only peer with a regular job in television) which reach their peak with the involvement of the royal family. The queen mother is usually regarded, with distressing sycophancy, as the patron saint of national hunt racing, and both she and her elder daughter own a number of successful horses. Royal Ascot is the annual celebration of these links, and it's also the only time women are allowed into the television commentary box - not, heaven forbid, to talk about the sport, but to pass judgment on the queen's new navy-and-white number or Fergie's latest crepe belltent.

Despite all this, one of the

most potent myths of racing is that its devotees are made up of a unique social mix. It's the 'sport of kings' but commands a huge working-class following. There's a kind of Edwardian fantasy at work here, in which top-hatted toffs and gawd-bless-you-guv pearlies rub shoulders, while only the vinegar-faced middlebrow methodist stays aloof and disapproving. A caricature, but one founded on a tiny grain of truth, since it does seem to be the middle stratum of society which is least touched by the joys of the turf, the self-employed whose grasping care of finances makes betting seem like a diversion sent from hell. All the same, the racecourse, unlike the betting shop, is organised into a hierarchy based on entrance prices. Like the theatre, the more you can pay, the better your view. Racing has also become an important venue for displays of corporate hospitality by companies with clients to impress.

The hierarchy of racing is most marked in its employment practices. Its labour relations would make William Wilberforce blush. Stable lads are kept on virtual starvation wages, few jockeys ever get rich, but trainers thrive as part of the squirearchy. Everyone in racing wears some form of headgear, thus facilitating the raising or doffing which symbolise the rigidly patrolled social boundaries.

So, horse racing is class-bound, misogynistic, royalist and couldn't even exist in a culture which took animal rights seriously. Yet I wouldn't be parted from it. The fantasies unleashed by betting, the possibility of instant gain without hard work, are also fed by the football pools, but what I really love about racing is summed up by the sheer thrill of the start of the Grand National, the sights and sounds of horses in motion. The buzz I get at that moment derives, perhaps, from echoes of the rural past we all, however distantly, share. Those are roots that generations of urban living have still not managed to eradicate.

or Barbara Windsor posing here for photographers. Seaside courses like Brighton and Yarmouth open only during the summer months, and are part of the wider atmosphere of the fish-and-chips day trip, while much of the winter national hunt season takes place in venues like Uttoxeter and Kelso. This is real wellington-boot country, and a trip to a course of that kind is a great excuse to go

rural. A day at the races is the only time I can wear my tweed cap with any degree of semiotic confidence.

Flat racing has become a multi-million-pound international industry, based on the supposed science of breeding. There's no place here for the nature-versus-nurture debate: sprinters breed sprinters, stayers breed stayers, and the language of inheritance is unapologe-