

Henry Purcell- Priston's Peppermint Horse!

On 2nd January 1957 a complete outsider battled up Cheltenham's awesome hill, passed the fancied Polonius after the last jump, and outstayed all his rivals to win the 4-mile Fred Withington Handicap Chase by 2 lengths. His price was 25-1 with the bookmakers, and a staggering 116-1 on the Tote. The horse's name was Henry Purcell, and he was owned and trained by Mr E C Smith for his wife Carmen at Church Farm, Priston. The win was all the more amazing because 'Henry' had recently jumped so badly that his owners had decided to pay the forfeit and withdraw him from the Fred Withington. But they'd left it too late, and the horse had to run. They hadn't even got a jockey for him, and at short notice were lucky to find Ray Richards, a local farmer's son who had just turned professional. The Sporting Life of 3 January said "Henry Purcell had won a 3-mile chase at Taunton early in November but he had failed completely in his 3 subsequent races, and the measure of confidence reposed in this 25-1 chance can be gauged by the fact that Mr E C Smith, who trains him did not attend to see him run."

By winning the Fred Withington 'Henry' automatically qualified for that year's Grand National, but the press, and his owners, were all emphatically and equally dismissive: "Asked if Henry Purcell had been entered for the Grand National Mr Chivers, who was deputising for the trainer, replied: "Good gracious, no. He's merely a hurdler".

'Henry' may have been 'merely a hurdler', but he had also run seventeen 'chases, of which he had won three. He was well-bred, with bloodlines to the mighty Hyperion, winner of seven Classics. His maternal grandsire was Derby winner Spion Kop. He was also, in Priston, a much loved horse. People remember him as 'The Peppermint Horse', so passionately fond of them that he would shake hands, unasked, if he heard the sweetie bag rustle. He was reputed to have cost his owner a fortune in confectionery. All the village children knew and loved him, and they must have seen a lot of him, for he was trained on the 200-acre Church Farm, except in frosty weather when Mr Smith would take him down to the sands at Weston super Mare.

Henry Purcell started life as a point-to-pointer in Northumberland, and the Fred Withington was the peak of his career to date. However in the same year he was fifth in the Welsh Grand National at Chepstow – no mean feat in what is the longest steeplechase in Britain. The horse didn't race in 1958, after being injured at Wincanton, and had just 4 outings before the 1959 Grand National. 'Henry's' sweet tooth was by now common knowledge, and the press enjoyed themselves with headlines like "Villagers hope to make a mint on 200-1 Henry". The Racing Mirror was much taken with him:

'I can tell you the greatest danger to Grand National outsider Henry Purcell bringing off a 200-1 win at Aintree tomorrow. It is not any of the 30-odd runners. Nor any of the 30 fences. It's a bag of peppermints. One sniff of peppermints among the rail-side spectators and as likely as not Henry will stop running, walk over to the peppermint-flaunting onlooker and raise a hoof for him – or her – to shake. "He's such a pet – knows all the tricks" says

his owner, Mrs Carmen Smith. Henry may be the horse bookmakers consider the least likely to win the Grand National, but at home on the Smiths' farm at Priston, Somerset, in the shadow of the Mendip Hills, he is one of the family. Priston's 267 villagers are on him to a man (£10 to a bob), and the Smiths' 8-year old son Colin will be cheering the horse on from his Maidenhead prep. school. His mother wrote to the headmaster to ask permission for Colin to listen to the radio commentary. Mrs Smith is hoping for rain before the race because he is a mudlark. And if Henry doesn't win ...Mrs Smith is threatening to ration his peppermints'

Twelve-year-old Henry's young jockey for the National was Tony Keen, who, like his mount, had never been round the Aintree course. Connections however were still confident, because of Henry's stamina, and care over bigger jumps. Alas, "The Peppermint Horse" would never return to Priston. At the start of the race he was up with the leaders. He was lying sixth, and jumped the first five fences perfectly. At Becher's Brook disaster struck. He took off all right, but buckled over the jump and was the third of eight horses to fall there. Tony Keen was knocked out. 'Henry' did not get up. He had broken his back, and was shot where he lay.

"Tears for Henry" said the racing papers. Tributes flowed – "Such a pet"; "We shall miss the horse very much"; "The whole village is very upset about it" said George Kelson, Priston's sub-postmaster.

The Daily Express Photo News Extra headline perhaps said it best – "Priston Mourns its Horse".

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