

At the Races

It's a beautiful summer's day and you've decided to go to Brighton Races – the only racecourse in the UK where you can watch the horses against the backdrop of the sea.

You make a bet on a horse with a name that reminds you of your brother and, to your amazement, it wins. Of course, you have to have a few drinks to celebrate, and when the celebration is over you find a chair in the sun. You close your eyes and suddenly you've slipped back ninety million years.

The polar ice caps have melted and you're swimming in a warm Cretaceous sea covering much of the world. What you don't know yet is that the only part of what will become Britain above water are the mountain peaks in what will become Scotland. What you do know is that swimming above you is the biggest creature you have ever seen. It's the size of a double-decker bus and a lot scarier.



AI generated image of Mosasaur (diver to show scale)

The two of you are far from alone. There are billions upon billions of microscopic algae, coccolithophores, whose tiny calcium carbonate plates will rain down onto the ocean floor for millions of years to build up a pure white chalk bed hundreds of meters deep



Coccolithophore

You stir in your deckchair and about 30 million years ago massive sheets of solid rock, tectonic plates making up the outer shell of the Earth, rather like the cracked shell of a soft-boiled egg, move. Africa pushes northwards into Eurasia, helping raise the Alps and folding the rocks beneath southern England into a great dome.

You snore in your deckchair through the Ice Ages as freezing conditions erode the centre of the chalk dome to expose the clay of the weald mould the chalk North and South downs and cut long dry valleys, or coombes into the hills.. After the last Ice Age woodland spreads across the Downs –birch willow and pine with hazel and juniper and then eventually elm and oak.



AI indicative image of White Hawk Hill post Ice Age c 8000 BC

The coombes form natural pathways onto the high ridges and, as the first farming communities begin clearing the woodland, you follow one of them upwards. On the high ground where the ridges between the coombes meet, Whitehawk Camp is revealed.

It was built about 3650 BC.



AI generated indicative image of Whitehawk Camp

You stand and watch people gathering. It isn't a fort. It's a place for scattered groups to meet, party and act out the rituals of life and death that bind communities together.

Over the next thousands of years, you see more farming. The significance of the camp fades and the trees are gradually stripped from the Downs until there is little left but a ruin and a lot of sheep.



1890 – Shepherd on Downs

You grumble in your sleep. Then you see Hussars galloping across the springy, close-cropped turf. This looks exciting.



Hussars on Brighton Downs – 1788 – Francis Wheatley

Soldiers have been garrisoned in Brighton since the sixteenth century to defend the coast against invasion, and the cavalry soon discovered that the turf was ideal for manoeuvres and then for fun, which started about 1713.

On 5 March 1770 you watch the first documented race on Brighton's course: a four-mile contest between a horse belonging to Samuel Shergold and a mare belonging to Dr Kipping, 'for ten guineas a-side, which was won by the latter. Mr Shergold's rider was a stranger to the course, and rode out of it some distance, which some think was the cause of his losing.'



Horse Racing Alken Henry Thomas 1785-1851

To be honest it was a bit of a shambles, but you enjoyed it. As did the local gentry, including the Duke of Cumberland the uncle of the Prince of Wales, who decided to organise regular race meetings. The first official meeting was held on 26–27 August 1783, with one race won by a horse called Puff.

Then in 1784 the Prince of Wales turned up with an entourage of fashionable friends, and Brighton Races acquired the one thing every Georgian resort needed – royal patronage.

In 1788 the first stand was built.



Brighton Races by T. Rowlandson. 'An excursion to Brighton' (1791)

White Hawk Fair became another attraction, held on the Downs as part of the race festivities, bringing stalls, drinking, dancing and fortune-tellers to the hill. According to local legend, it was after visiting the fair that a young Woodingdean woman called Editha Elmore disappeared. Afterwards, a mysterious figure known as the “White Hawk Lady” was supposedly regularly seen haunting the hill leaving behind a cloven footprint.

In 1805 the Prince of Wales donated a trophy for the winner of the Brighton Gold Cup.



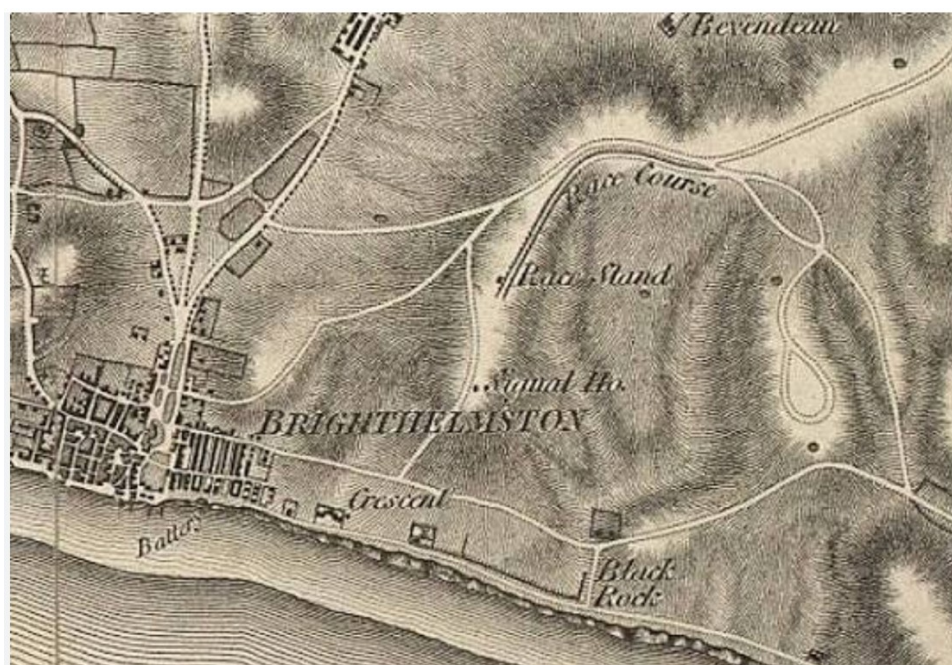
Brighton Gold Cup



Orville (Prince of Wales's horse)

His own horse, Orville, won it.

Things were going great.



Ordnance Survey map 1813 showing Whitehawk hill and race course.

And you were very happy in your chair on Whitehawk Hill. But in 1816 the Prince lost interest, preferring to concentrate on the rebuilding of the Royal Pavilion, and without royal patronage the crowds dwindled.

Was it time to fold up your deckchair and go home?

No. In 1841 the railway reached Brighton, bringing London within easy reach, and the crowds returned.

In 1850 a new race stand was built



Race Stand 1850

BRIGHTON

RACES

AUTUMN

1851.

STEWARDS--SIR C. C. RUSHOUT. MAJOR BRINGHURST. CAPT. THOROTON
CLERK OF THE COURSE, MR. J. MANNINGTON. SECRETARY, MR. LEWIS SLIGHT, JUN.

SECOND DAY, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 10th.

1 THE FEATHER PLATE of 25 Sovs, added to a Sweepstakes of 3 Sovs each.
For two yrs old, 6st; three, 6st 11lb; four, 6st 12lb; five, 10st 2lb; six and aged, 10st 4lb; Maidens allowed 4lb. The Winner to be sold for £100; if entered, for 47s, allowed 7lb; if for £20, 14lb. New Course.

No.	Owner.	Name of Horse.	Age. Wt.	Jockey's Colors.	Trainer. Jockey.
1.	Mr. Munn's b. m.	GRASSHOPPER	(250) 5. 9 12.	crimson and blue cap	Messrs. Sherwood.
2.	Mr. Pugh's b. f.	WESTBURY	(270) 4. 9 2.	blue body, white sleeves and cap	Atkins. Atkins.
3.	Mr. S. Lee's	PETTINGAR	(250) 4. 8 9.	blue body, white cap	Starwood.
4.	Mr. J. L. Doughton's ch. f.	JANE	(250) 3. 5 8.	sky blue, black cap	Dewitt.
5.	Mr. E. Doughton's ch. f.	HANFORD	(250) 3. 5 0.	scarlet and gullot sleeves, black cap	Dewitt. Furdham.
6.	Mr. Stoughton's b. f.	My Venus, out of Imp. Waverley	(250) 3. 4 7.	buff, blue sleeves, black cap	Y. King. J. Brady.
7.	Sir J. A. McKean's b. m.	BALMORAL, by Anckum	(250) 3. 4 10.	scarlet, black cap	Goodwin. Sherwood.

1:30 THE SELLING RACE of 3 Sovs, with £20 added.
For 3 yrs old, 6st 4lb; four, 10st 7lb; five, 11st; six and aged, 11st 2lb; Maidens, 3 yrs old, allowed 4lb; four, 6lb; five and upwards, 12lb. Winners once this year, up to the time of starting, to carry 4lb; twice, 7lb; thrice, 10lb extra. The Winner to be sold for £100; if entered to be sold for 47s, allowed 7lb; if for £50, 14lb; if for £20, 21lb. Hosts; Bristol Mile. Gentlemen Riders allowed 4lb.

No.	Owner.	Name of Horse.	Age. Wt.	Jockey's Colors.	Trainer. Jockey.
1.	Mr. Drew's b. f.	BALLET GILL	(250) 3. 11 0.	black	Harbottle.
2.	Mr. A. Arden's b. f.	TIMOTHY	(250) 3. 10 8.	blue, white sleeves and cap	Harbottle.
3.	Mr. Stoughton's ch. f.	BLISS SCATH	(250) 3. 11.	purple and white stripes, black cap	Atkins. Atkins.
4.	Mr. Stoughton's	ELF TRAP	(250) 3. 11.	purple body, white sleeves and cap	Atkins. Atkins.
5.	Mr. White's ch. g.	Maiden by Ballinacree	(250) 3. 11.	purple body, white sleeves and cap	Atkins. Atkins.
6.	Mr. O'Neill's ch. m.	CHARLES JANE	(250) 3. 8 9.	white, orange sleeves and white cap	
7.	Capt. Thompson's ch. m.	MAYFAIR BEVEL	(250) 3. 8 8.	white, green sleeves, black cap	
8.	Mr. O'Neill's ch. f.	My Venus, out of Imp. Waverley	(250) 3. 5 6.	red	
9.	Mr. O'Neill's ch. f.	My Venus, out of Imp. Waverley	(250) 3. 5 6.	red	

THE RAILWAY HANDICAP HURDLE RACE of 5 Sovs each, 2 ft, with £50 added.
Ten to enter, six to accept, and three to start, or the Public Money will not be given; the 2 Sovs forfeit to go to the Race Fund, and the second Horse to receive 10 Sovs out of the Stakes. The Winner of any Handicap Flat Race or Hurdle Race, after the weights are declared, to carry 7lb extra. New Course, over six flights of Hurdles.

No.	Owner.	Name of Horse.	Age. Wt.	Jockey's Colors.	Trainer. Jockey.
1.	Mr. Williams	THE BARBERS	(250) 3. 11 0.	blue, white cap	Brown. T. Brown.
2.	Mr. Mott's	CORLEIGH	(250) 3. 11 8.	white, crimson cap	G. Drew. T. Brown.
3.	Mr. T. Brown's	CHILL, b. h.	(250) 3. 10 10.	pink, black cap and sleeves	Reeves.
4.	Mr. T. Brown's	THE ROVER	(250) 3. 10 7.	blue, white sleeves and black cap	Reeves.
5.	Mr. H. Drew's	MARTINGALL	(250) 3. 10 6.	blue	Harbottle.
6.	Mr. Stoughton's	ANASTY	(250) 3. 10 5.	blue, blue sleeves, black cap	Y. King.
7.	Mr. Johnson's	SUPERIOR, b. h.	(250) 3. 10 0.		Maiden.
8.	Capt. Thompson's	MAYFAIR BEVEL	(250) 3. 10 0.	scarlet	Dewitt.
9.	Mr. Pugh's	PERFECT, late Pender	(250) 3. 9 8.	red and white stripes, red cap	Dewitt.

THE SELLING HURDLE RACE of 3 Sovs each, with £20 added.
For 3 yrs old, 10st 4lb; four, 11st 12lb; five, 12st 6lb; six and aged, 12st 6lb. The Winner to be sold for £100; if entered to be sold for £100, allowed 6lb; if for £50, 14lb; if for £20, 14lb; if for £20, 14lb. The Winner of any Flat Race, Hurdle Race, or Steeple Chase, in 1850 or 1851, to carry 4lb extra, over and above other penalties. Hosts; New Course, over four flights of Hurdles. Gentlemen Riders allowed 4lb.

No.	Owner.	Name of Horse.	Age. Wt.	Jockey's Colors.	Trainer. Jockey.
1.	Mr. Ash's b. f.	JACK IN THE GUN	(250) 3. 12 8.	red jacket, black cap	Brown. Brown.
2.	Mr. Pugh's b. f.	THE ROVER	(250) 3. 11 7.	black, red sleeves and cap	Brown. Brown.
3.	Mr. Pugh's b. f.	BUGGABOY	(250) 3. 10 12.	blue, and white cap	Brown. Brown.

THE CONSOLATION SCRAMBLE HANDICAP of 1 Sov each, with £15 added.
For Horses which have run and not won at this Meeting. To close within a quarter of an hour after the Selling Race. Half-a-mile.

Z. F. KYLE, PRINTER, 20, WESTERN ROAD.

Race Card 1851

In 1851 Admission to the betting ring and stand was four shillings; a ticket for three days cost 10s 6d. Racing began at 1.30pm, with seven races at half-hourly intervals.

In 1860 the Race stand was improved and enlarged.



Race stand 1860

What a change from the deserted woodland and the floor of a warm ocean populated by gigantic creatures.

Crowds rose steadily until the First World War, when racing stopped and the main stands were used for storing munitions. Racing returned in 1920 and continued until 1936.

There was a bit of trouble. You had to keep a weather eye open for pickpockets, tricksters, razor gangs and protection racketeers.



Race course gangsters photographed some time in the 1920's; Charles Sabini is second from the right.

In particular, you didn't want to get on the wrong side of Charles Sabini, godfather of London's Little Italy and the so-called "king of the racecourse gangs". But his empire was weakened when violent clashes between rival gangs in the 1930's brought increasing police attention. During the Second World War Sabini was interned as an enemy alien and never regained his former power. He died in 1950.

But despite, and perhaps in some ways because of the trouble, race crowds rose steadily.

1934 to 1938 three New Art Deco stands were built and the Victorian stands demolished.

Immediately after the Second World war crowds of 20,000 were regularly achieved.



Race Stands 1938

You weren't at all sure about all this change, and even less so when in 1965 they were pulled down and a new stand was built for £400,000.



Race Stand 1965

Seemed a bit soulless.

The crowds declined as cheap foreign holidays drew visitors away from the traditional British seaside resort. The racecourse was no longer the haunt of titled Georgian gentry, but people were still doing what they had been doing on this hill for thousands of years – gathering together.

Eventually a security guard kicks your deck chair and tells you it's time to go.

You reluctantly get up and look back across the racecourse. Beneath it lies the chalk made in that ancient sea; beside it is the protected remains of the place where people gathered more than 5,000 years ago.

You wonder what will happen here next.

And whether, when everyone has gone home, the White Hawk Lady still walks the hill.