

Gregalach **Ewelme News, Aug-Sep 2019**

Gregalach – the 1929 Grand National Hero

We have often justifiably given attention to Nancy Ewelme's WW1 warhorse, but another horse, buried at the junction of bridleway EW21 with EW29, just beyond Ewelme Down Farm, has his name inscribed in the record books of British Horse Racing.

Mrs Margaret Gemmell, of Ewelme Down House was at Aintree on 22nd March 1929 to watch her 7 year old steeplechaser Gregalach, ridden by Australian jockey Bob Everett, win the Grand National. Gregalach's very long odds of 100-1 reflected a fall at Sandown only 8 days previously. Another remarkable feature of the 1929 race, was that a record number of 66 horses started. Incredibly the cavalry charge to the first fence resulted in no fallers, and although only 9 horses finished the race, there was only one fatality. (For safety the race is now limited to 40 runners, and the fences modified to being less upright and reduced in thickness).

Gregalach was a lucky winner as the second horse, the favourite Easter Hero was carrying top weight and had 1 stone and 3 lbs more than Gregalach on his back. He had also wrenched a hind shoe which hampered his action, enabling Gregalach to pass him 2 fences out and win by 6 lengths. (The legendary Easter Hero won the Cheltenham Gold Cup in 1929 and 1930 and was considered the best horse never to win a National).



Grainy Newsreel footage shows a smiling Mrs Gemmell, in a fashionable cloche hat, greeting her winner. The prize money was £1,400. (Modern winnings are in excess of £1 million pounds).

Gregalach was named after the Clan MacGregor battle cry. A cigarette card shows him to be a handsome chestnut with three white socks and a large white star. He was bred by Mr M Finlay and foaled at a stud in Ireland in 1922 sired by My Prince (a successful jumping sire) and was the fourth foal of his dam, St Germaine. She had been a cheap bargain, being sold as a yearling for 45 guineas

and put into foal at the age of three. Gregalach was sold for £300 as an unbroken 2 yr old to Mr T Laidlaw of Dublin and was sent across to Staffordshire to be schooled. He was gelded and ran at age 3 and 4 in flat races but his serious chasing career began when he was 5 and he became useful over the fences at Cheltenham and Aintree - where he won the Stanley Chase over part of the Grand National course by 10 lengths. Laidlaw had to sell him shortly after that win and the horse was sold at Newmarket to Mr C Taylor for £4,000 who promptly resold him for £5,000 to Mrs Gemmell, heiress of the Donaldson Shipping Company. She put Gregalach into training at Newmarket with Tom Leader, a famous trainer of steeplechasers, who had won the 1927 Grand National with Sprig. Unfortunately, Gregalach went lame and was unable to run for a number of months, but in early 1929 became sound enough to be second at Manchester and Gatwick (both courses now defunct) before his fall at Sandown.

Gregalach won 5 more races after his Grand National triumph, and Mrs Gemmell entered him into the 1930 Grand National. Farmer Bill Edwards remembered the villagers 'put their shirt on him' and he started at 100-6 with jockey Bob Everett, but their money was lost when he fell.



Entered again as a 9 yr old in 1931 with new jockey John Maloney, he was second to Grackle (who gave his name to a cross noseband still in worldwide use today). The Prince of Wales watched his gallant effort as an unlucky loser this time, as Gregalach gave Grackle 7 lbs in weight and only lost by 1½ lengths. His starting price was 100-6 again.



Gregalach at Ewelme Down House with Brian Orpwood on right

Mrs Gemmell kept trying. In 1932 Gregalach carried amateur rider Mr Fred Thackray at 100-9, and in 1933 as an 11 yr old he started at 10-1 with jockey Billy Parvin. Both years he was unplaced.

Brian Orpwood's memoir has the most information about Gregalach. He remembered - "*Gregalach was a spiteful thing and it took two men to lead him to the paddock. They made inkwells of his hooves. Had a seat on his grave, now gone. Mrs Gemmell very particular about the stables - boxes in L shape with chalk outside. If there was a blade of hay or straw dropped, she went bananas. Also, if a horse dropped any grass from its mouth into the troughs, she reprimanded it!*"

Gregalach's name remains in the record books, but of his grave and his hooves there is no trace left.

Ewelme Village Archive