

COVER STORY

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# A Week at the Races

## Royal Ascot Is Celebrating 300 Years of Tradition

By WILLIAM LYONS

Every third week in June, shortly before 2 p.m., the race-goers standing in front of the Royal Enclosure at Ascot racecourse in southern England are treated to an intimate view of a little remnant of British pageantry.

Coming down the straight from the immaculate lawn that forms a green terrace in front of the Royal Enclosure, the first signs of the royal party's arrival are marked by the faint, rhythmic bobbing of shiny, black top hats emerging over a slight incline. Led by two postillions riding Windsor Grey horses, the procession of carriages carrying members of the royal family was described by the late English artist Sir Alfred Munnings as "a long glittering line of moving scarlet and gold."

Passing the Royal Enclosure, the procession turns into the Parade Ring, where it is surrounded by a sea of race-goers in flamboyant millinery. It is a scene that has been repeated annually, almost unbroken, since 1825, when King George IV first delighted the crowds by riding through the middle of the racecourse for Royal Ascot week.

This year, Ascot celebrates its tercentenary. It's been 300 years since Queen Anne first saw the potential of racing on Ascot Heath, a vast stretch of open land a short ride from Windsor Castle. While Royal Ascot week may not hold the place it once did at the heart of the British social calendar, it remains a unique gathering for aristocrats, politicians and celebrities, as well as general race-goers.

"It's still the one meeting of the year where everyone shows up," says Ralph Beckett, a trainer based at Kimpton Down Stables in Hampshire, who has trained horses for the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall and will have four horses running this year. "Although a racing enthusiast goes to Ascot and every large outfit who trains horses for flat racing around the world is there, so to train a winner at Ascot is very good for business."

Next week, almost 500 horses from Australia, America, Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan, as well as from all over Europe, will run in 30 races, watched by more than 300,000 people from the sidelines and by a global television audience of many millions. The social aspect of the race draws some viewers, evidenced by the nearly 1,400 lobster tails that will be consumed, washed down by 8,000 bottles of Pimm's and 50,000 bottles of Champagne, according to Royal Ascot. But with only the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe in Paris or the Melbourne Cup in Australia offering a similar scale, the racing is still the main attraction.

"The racing is very good and it is very hard to win," says Mr. Beckett. "It attracts the racing fraternity because, inevitably, you see people that you might not see for another 12 months. One of the great attractions is that the meeting itself and the race program hasn't changed much in hundreds of years."

That program began life in the 18th century, with the first race held on Aug. 11, 1711. The origins of the four-day royal meeting, or Ascot Week, evolved later in the mid 1760s. During that time, George Bryan "Beau" Brummell, a close friend of the Prince Regent, the future King George IV, suggested that gentlemen wear waisted black coats and white cravats with pantaloons, a custom that has evolved into today's strict dress code of top hat and morning suit for men and formal clothes for ladies, who are still required to wear hats in the Royal Enclosure.

Traditionally, one could only gain access to the Royal Enclosure by an invitation from a representative of the king or queen, who would put potential applicants into three categories: "certainly," "perhaps" and "certainly not." Those who were divorced or members of the acting profession, for example, fell into the latter.

The rules were relaxed around the mid-20th century. But the big change came with the £220 million refurbishment of the Ascot grandstand in 2006, when race-goers were allowed to buy their way into the Royal Enclosure. It was a move not welcomed by many traditionalists, who saw it as further evidence that the meeting was being swamped by the proliferation of rock, fashion and film stars and the modern trend of pushing the dress code to its limits.

If the dress code has seen better days, race officials are hoping that the main event, the horse racing, will be at its highest level.

"Although a lot of [Ascot] is very social, equally they do put on some of the world's top races," says Simon Bazalgette, chief executive of the Jockey Club, which owns and runs 14 racecourses in the U.K.

As for the horse set to win, among the favorites this year is Frankel, trained by Henry Cecil and ridden by Tom Queally. Winner of the 2000 Guineas flat horse race at Newmarket Racecourse, Frankel "led from start to finish, which is almost unheard of," says Mr. Bazalgette. "We think he may be one of the fastest horses ever."

This year, Royal Ascot will host races in the inaugural British Champions Series, a new initiative of 35 flat races held at 10 racecourses across the U.K., culminating in October with British Champions Day, held at Ascot. At £3 million in prize money, it will be the richest fixture in British racing history.



Clockwise from left page, Nic Fiddian-Green in his studio; the artist puts the final touches to his sculpture during its installation at Ascot; Mr. Fiddian-Green works on the fiberglass model of a piece that will be exhibited at London's Sladmor Gallery in June; the Ascot sculpture is readied for installation. Front cover: Nic Fiddian-Green, with 'Horse at Water,' which will feature at Royal Ascot.

# Magnificent Obsession

## British Sculptor Nic Fiddian-Green's 25-year fascination with the equine form

By ANDREW MCKIE

Hippomania may not be a common word, but it is not an uncommon phenomenon in the English countryside. Though not quite to the level evident at, say, Newmarket, the home of racing, there are ample indications of it near Guildford in Surrey, an area to which the dual adjectives "leafy" and "affluent" tend to be applied. They go together, since land and money are the basic requirements for keeping horses.

It is here, on a hilltop reached by roads that require the driver to back up or mount the verge to allow vehicles traveling in the opposite direction past (but which seem not to deter the locals from traveling at imprudent speeds), that the sculptor Nic Fiddian-Green lives and works.

Despite the surrounding fields and paddocks, there is not much of the bucolic in the approach to his studio, which resembles a light industrial unit surrounded by piles of rubble, Land Rovers and heavy machinery

in varying states of repair; a lot of noise and dust are billowing from the entrance. Their source is the artist, three meters above me on an improvised platform at the front of a fork-lift truck, using a handheld sander to smooth a colossal section of a fiberglass model. He looks like a welder who has bathed in flour.

He is working on an enormous horse's head, the subject to which Mr. Fiddian-Green has devoted himself obsessively, and almost exclusively, for more than a quarter of a century. He was responsible for the 10-meter tall, 18-ton bronze of a horse's head at Marble Arch in the center of London. Last summer, another of his monumental works, Artemis, was placed on the South Downs and then on the members' lawn at Goodwood for its racing festival; while Still Water, a piece similar to that at Marble Arch, was installed in front of the main grandstand for Royal Ascot, which starts next week.

It's a surprise, then, when he declares that he is not particularly interested in

horses. It is as if Andy Warhol had expressed his abhorrence of canned soup, or Claude Monet had admitted that water lilies left him cold.

"We do have horses, actually, but I'm not much of a horseman," Mr. Fiddian-Green explains, as he tries to get the kettle

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to work. "It's to do with this particular form. At art college in Chelsea, I had no thought of sculpting; I was trying to paint. But one day we were given this lump of clay; then we were told to go to the British Museum and copy something. That's been it ever since, really."

What seized his imagination was the

head of a horse of Selene, the Moon goddess, carved in the fifth century B.C. It is one of the most celebrated of the Elgin Marbles, fragments from the east pediment of the Parthenon, and in it the artist seems to have found a connection with the classical tradition.

This devotion to the Platonic ideal of the horse's head, rather than to representations of, for example, individual racehorses, readily distinguishes his sculptures from the rather pedestrian, often slightly kitsch, bronzes so often found decorating the houses of "horsey" people. And although Mr. Fiddian-Green's work is collected by a number of those connected with the world of racing, as well as the rich and famous from other spheres, he has eschewed an obvious, and potentially highly lucrative, line of work.

"I've quite often been asked to do portraits of particular horses, but I tend to resist that," he says, wandering around the back room of his studio, which is littered with maquettes, plaster casts, photographs

and catalogues, all under a fine patina of dust. "Technically, I can do it, I suppose, but I don't find it very satisfactory. The thing is that for me it's not about the horse, it's about the shape, the form, the finish..." He tails off. "I don't know what it's about, really."

He finds what he has been looking for, a photograph of Selene's horse. Mr. Fiddian-Green, who seems always in motion and has a remarkably wide range of enthusiasms, flits from subject to subject. In a couple of hours we touch on, amongst much else, the iconography of the Netherlandish Renaissance, Spitfires, the curves of the human torso, the advantages and disadvantages of different media, the finishes that can be obtained from various methods by chemical treatment, numerous theories of art, self-portraiture and Rudolph Nureyev's foot. But all are connected, in one way or another, with the idea of the horse's head.

As we talk, Mr. Fiddian-Green continues to make adjustments, nailing blocks of

foam to extend the base of the neck of his giant sculpture. It will later be clad in lead, dismantled and, next week, reassembled at the Sladmor Gallery in Jermyn Street in central London. Smaller works will be exhibited at the gallery's other site at Bruton Street nearby.

His insistence on using the techniques of antiquity—he still scales up from small clay models and, when his work is cast, the foundry uses the *cire perdue* method—result in work that is completely contemporary, yet also somehow fragments that could have come from any point in the history of Western art. "Jay Jopling [the dealer who represents many contemporary British artists] recently encouraged me to try something different," says Mr. Fiddian-Green. "But I always find something different in this."

If not hippomania, this verges on monomania. But the more one looks at the curves, the multitude of facets and angles in these pieces, the more one begins to think he has a point, and to see how one subject has kept him enthralled for so long.



Queen Elizabeth II arrives by horse-drawn carriage in the Royal Enclosure.