

'Derby Days' at Deadwood: Highlights of Horse-racing at St Helena - Part 1

by Trevor W. Hearl

To pursue the 'sport of kings' against all the odds for over a century on a tiny, rugged, volcanic island, without aristocratic patronage or thoroughbred stock, and scarcely enough level greensward for a cricket pitch let alone a racecourse, must surely be a feat worth recording. Yet the story of the Deadwood Races at St Helena has yet to be told, though they were among the legacies of Napoleon's much-studied exile in that lonely outpost of the East India Company. It was, moreover, a legacy of more than local significance, for this unlikely sporting tradition owed its early success, though not its origins, to the efforts of the most famous authority in the long history of English horse-racing, Henry John Rous - 'Admiral Rous' - giving it a claim for a place in the annals of the English Turf.

The Maiden Meeting of the St Helena Turf Club was, fortunately for prosperity, reported in Calcutta by *The Asiatic Journal* for January 1818 from a copy of the Club's *Racing Calendar* for 1817. This hitherto unknown publication, printed at Jamestown by J. Boyd, revealed that it was a two-day event, held on 7 and 10 April 1817, consisting of eight races, four two-horse matches and four plates, including a handicap and a sweepstake. The origins of the project were not reported, however, leaving one to ponder who selected the site and designed the "excellent mile-and-a-half course", as Lt. Basil Jackson, Orderly Officer at Longwood, later described it. Clearly, to plan and conduct such a novel venture, the founding fathers must have included not only enterprising enthusiasts, but practical experts. So who was the architect of the Deadwood Races?

The Stewards at this first meeting named in *The Racing Calendar* were Sir George Bingham and Sir Pulteney Malcolm, the military and naval commanders of the St Helena Station, and Major Fehrzen, Commanding Officer of the 53rd Regiment. This formality ensured that all decisions involving wagers carried unquestioned authority, lest

the races foment an epidemic of duels among the Regency punters. The only other official to be identified was the Clerk of the Course, "Lt. Leeson". But no such officer is recorded among the garrison, either in the Army, the Royal Navy, or the East India Company's St Helena Regiment. There was, however, a cavalry officer, Lt. Joseph Leeson, serving at the Cape of Good Hope as ADC to Major-General Joseph Baird, who, after the General's death in April 1816, became Clerk of the Course at Simonstown and Secretary of the Cape Turf Club. Moreover he was attached to the 21st Light Dragoons, whose troopers provided a Dispatch Rider service on St Helena, giving him opportunity to visit the Island to bring reinforcement of men and horses. It would seem that Sir Hudson Lowe, as Governor of St Helena, recruited him to enhance the few, restricted, polite amusements - riding, shooting, visiting, dinner parties and amateur theatricals - then on offer at the Island where boredom was a notorious peril of garrison life. Leeson laid firm foundations for the future of the Races by establishing the formalities and providing a course of character, the length of the latest Derby course at Epsom, "traced for a mile and a half along a semi-circular sweep at top of our elevated plateau [...] covered with coarse grass and wild gooseberry bushes", as Surgeon Walter Henry of the 66th Regiment camped at Deadwood, described it. Before returning to the Cape, Leeson initiated a successor as Clerk of the Course, 27-year-old Lt. Gabriel Mathias of the Royal Artillery who, with his wife, had come out on HMS *Northumberland* with Napoleon and his entourage. This appointment no doubt settled his posting for a few years and they became the longest serving couple in the royal garrison, remaining until after the September meeting of 1821, holding a place among the fashionable élite of Island society, even on Madame Bertrand's Visiting List at Napoleonic Longwood.

Meetings of 'the Turf' are social, as well as sporting, occasions, and those of the St Helena Turf Club were to be no exception. "[They were] anticipated by the inhabitants of the island as a kind of jubilee", wrote Mrs Abell, recalling the days when, as Betsy Balcombo, she was famed for her teenage antics with Napoleon. Such fashionable spectacles alfresco, giving the people a chance to view 'their betters' at leisure, were virtually unknown on St Helena, yet there at Deadwood on 7 April 1817, were gathered all the Island notables with the ladies

in their finery: members of St Helena Government, from Sir Hudson Lowe down; the naval and military officers of the station; the Commissioners of the Allied Powers and their staffs; members of Napoleon's entourage from Longwood; the elite of the Island's professionals and planters, and apparently no shortage of the rank and file of Island society, though how far this included slaves and the soldiery, memoirs do not record. The tropic sunshine tempered by the cooling Trade Wind, the fluttering flags and bunting, tents and picnics, people and horses, made a colourful and animated scene, enlivened by the music of the regimental band. All was set for another 'jubilee' on the following Thursday but that was not to be for, with lowering clouds above and mud underfoot, the ladies and many other would-be spectators stayed at home and racing that day went off with little pomp and ceremony.



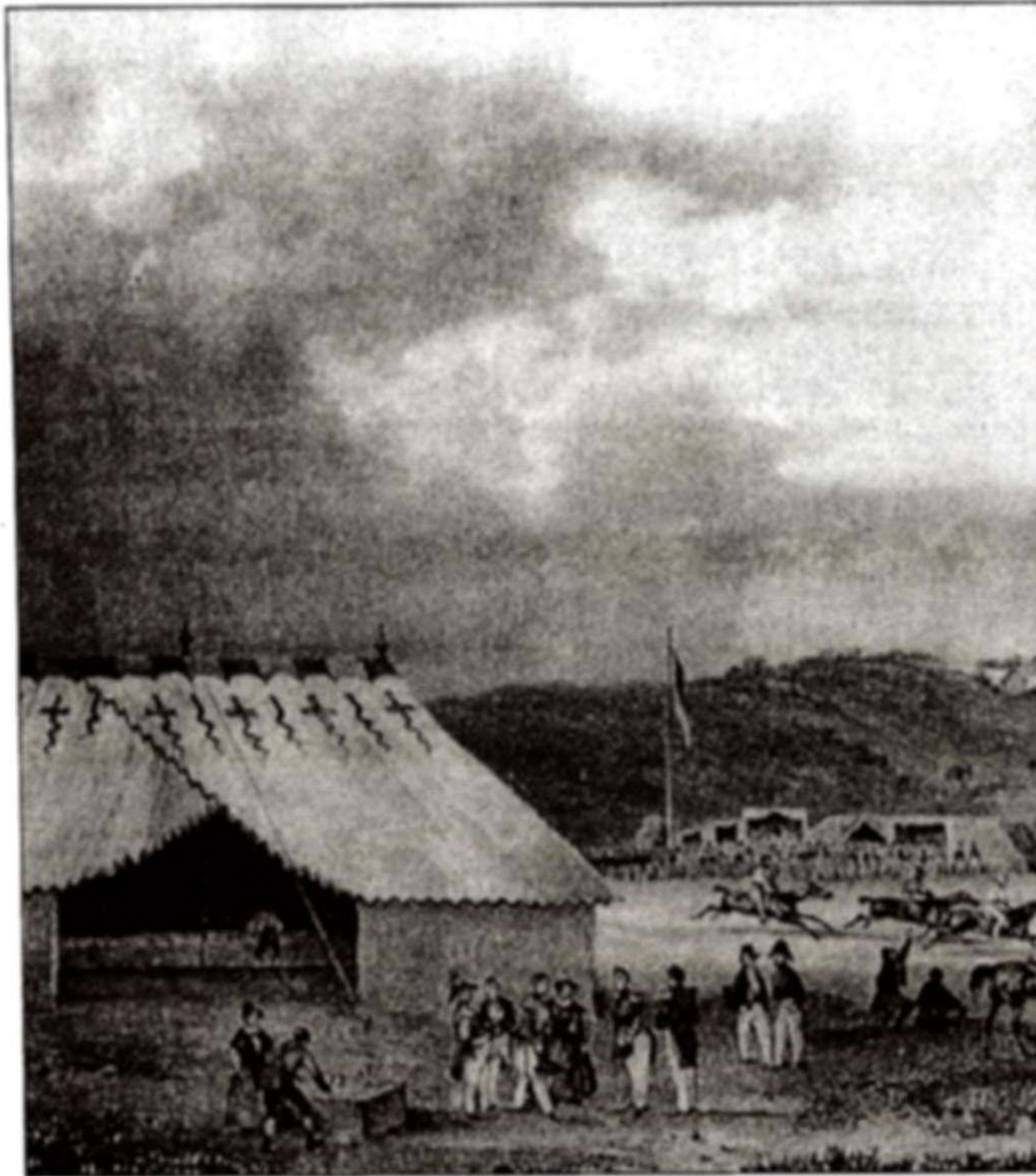
The Turf Club's second meeting, held on the 9 and 10 September 1817, set the pattern for the future of having two two-day events annually, in the second weeks of April and September. These were styled, Surgeon Henry explained, as "our Spring and Autumn Meetings; but being South of the Equator the Spring Races took place in September, and the Autumn in April." The card at the second meeting offered five plates, one a handicap, a sweepstake, and two matches. Four Stewards were listed, Sir Thomas Reade the Adjutant-General, Lt.Col. Daniel Dodgin commanding the 66th Regiment, Colonel John Wright commending the St Helena Infantry Regiment, and last, but by no means least, Capt. the Hon. Henry John Rous,

commanding HMS *Podargus*. Though Rous's name was not to appear again among the Stewards - Admiral Robert Pamplin, Col. Charles Nicol of the 66th, and Major Charles Hodson of the St Helena Regiment, were named for the third meeting in April 1818 - memoirs of the time recall only Rous's name in connection with racing at St Helena. Indeed Mrs Abel asserted that the races "had been instituted by the Honourable Henry John Rous", so styled as the second son of the Earl of Stradbroke.

Rous at the Races

Rous had arrived at St Helena in June 1817 aboard Admiral Pamplin's flag ship HMS *Conqueror* as a Lieutenant. In August he was promoted Captain, commanding first HMS *Podargus*, and then, from January 1818, HMS *Mosquito*. By the time he left St Helena in July 1819 he had attended four meetings: that of October 1817 as Steward; two in 1818; and the 'Autumn' meeting in April 1819. Although still in his early twenties - he was born in 1795 - he dominated the racing scene by his extrovert personality, his physique - over six feet tall and powerfully built - and his expertise. His schooling at Westminster and Dr Burney's Naval Academy had made him a Midshipman at 13, but the education which was to make his name a household word in Victorian England was gained in his father's stables at Henham Hall and on nearby Newmarket Heath. Wartime service at sea, where he had several narrow escapes, gave him little chance to indulge his youthful passion until peace brought him to St Helena. There the Deadwood Races provided an 'apprenticeship' in race management which extended his experience and confirmed his commitment to the sport. Soon after his return to England he was, in 1821, elected to the Jockey Club, though it was not until he had left the sea in 1836 that the career began which made him, as Admiral Rous from 1852, "the dictator of the English Turf". Readers of St Helena history will not be surprised to learn that neither in his biography by T.H. Bird, nor in his entry in *The Dictionary of National Biography* by the sporting Journalist Francis Charles Lawley, is any mention made of his two years on the Island.

Among recollection of Rous at the Deadwood Races, the most intimate is that given by Lieut. Basil Jackson of the Staff Corps at St Helena, who had supervised the building of Longwood New House and Bertrand's Villa, and was to be the last survivor of 'the captivity'





'COURSES DE CHEVAUX A LONG-WOOD (Ile S^{te} Hélène)'

16 January 1829

Louis de Saison

when he died in 1889 at the age of 94. In *Notes and Reminiscences* published in 1877 he recalled how Rous ruled over “our St Helena racing [...] with all the authority he so long exercised at Newmarket”. The two men were of the same age and struck up a friendship when, as Jackson described, “[he] infected me with his racing taste and found me an apt pupil”. But Rous’s cordiality soon cooled after “he proposed a match between an animal of mine and a strong English horse which a friend lent him for the purpose, he and I to be the jockeys”.

He turned out faultless in dress from top to toe. As we rode together to the starting-point, I found he had misgivings as to the result of the race, and he said he hoped I would bring him in handsomely - that is, not win by too great a distance.

When Jackson won, “afraid of making it a close thing, [...] he bore me a grudge ever after for not bringing him in handsomely enough”. On another occasion, Rous entered one of Admiral Pamplin’s horses, Slamby, in a handicap, when it came in with another and everyone thought it a dead heat.

Not so Rous; he rushed towards the stand of the stewards, vociferating, ‘Slamby has won, I’ll bet a thousand pounds.’ This took effect with the stewards, who announced Slamby as winner; Rous then said aside to me, ‘If that was not a dead-heat, I never saw one.’ So much for the excitement of racing, coupled with anxiety to gratify his Admiral.

Rous’s reputation for sportsmanship was not, apparently, gained at Deadwood. News of the Races occasionally reached the London papers. In 1819, *The Courier* for 31 August featured on its front page one of the matches run the previous September as “a novelty such as perhaps is not to be found recorded in the annals of horse-racing.” The *Lady Carrington* East Indiaman had brought out a London dray-horse for use on the Wharf at Jamestown when, as a joke, one of its officers wagered twenty guineas that he could trot that horse over a mile of the Deadwood course against any ‘Island nag’. The challenge was at once taken up and, in the words of *The Courier*,

excited “considerable curiosity.”

At the appointed time the gentleman who rode the ‘daisy-cutter’ was upon the ground waiting for his opponent, the knight of the dray-horse, who soon made his appearance over the top of the last hill on his way from town to Deadwood [...] accoutred with a large white frock coat, a white hat with slouching brim, large top boots and his dexter hand flourishing a long whip. *As they rose over the brow of the mountain the horse and the rider had more the appearance of one of those gigantic shapes which the mists often assume in a mountainous region than animals of blood and bone.

They started, and bets ran high against poor Dobbin; but his opponent, perhaps scorning such a competitor, [...] soon broke off into his accustomed two up and two down, and was consequently obliged to return and start anew. He did so, but with no better success, yet still bets were in his favour. A third time he started [...] and a third time obliged to return. The tide now turned in Dobbin’s favour, who all this while kept on the even tenor of his trot [...] [until] he came in winner of the race amidst the loud laughter and acclamation of almost the whole population of the island.

Such frivolous events were clearly popular with the punters as betting between them was brisk. Some writers have imagined ‘bookies’ on the course, one, G.L. de St. M. Watson, suggesting that “doubtless the Solomons ‘did a bit on the sly,’” but enterprising as they were, they cannot be credited with making the first ‘book’.

The Island’s Horses

The calibre of the available horses was a major factor determining the nature of racing at St Helena, of course. Little is known about the mounts on the Island prior to the arrival of Napoleon and the accompanying troops, but it seems that they were not highly regarded. Oxen were the main draught animals; they even drew Governor Patton’s family carriage, “the only animals adapted to ascend and descend Ladder hill”, as Viscount Valentia observed in August 1802. They were seldom ridden, but a notable exception was the leading

lady landowner, Miss Polly Mason of Orange Grove. Visitors touring the "cabbage-tree lands" were often carried in tonjons, a kind of sedan chair borne by four slaves. Yet keen horse-riders were not unknown if the striking example of Emma Wrangham of Rosemary Hall is any guide for, when she went to India in 1786 at the age of 16 or 17, she was soon recognized as the most accomplished rider in Bengal. It may be significant that she did not ride sidesaddle but, as William Hickey observed, "like a man astride."

[She] would leap over any hedge or ditch that even the most zealous sportsmen were dubious of attempting. She rode several matches and succeeded against the best and most experienced jockeys.

Evidence of horses at St Helena in the island's *Records* is confusing. There is no mention prior to 1733, though there are references to two places named Horse Pasture! A French visitor in 1666 reported wild horses, believed to have been left by the Dutch, which would leap off the cliffs rather than be caught. Governor Janisch noted that "a young black horse" in 1734 behaved so frantically when taken that "we may suppose he came from the old stock". Yet the *Records* quote regulations in 1757 restricting Planters to a maximum of three horses each, according to the size of their estates, to cut "the present number by about 22", adding incongruously:

Horses are of infinite value and contribute much to the ease of the Inhabitants in this hilly place as well as for the convenience of gentlemen that call here in shipping.

Breeding improvements were eventually begun at the end of the century. In 1795 Governor Brooks bought "an Arabian Horse" for £400, and in 1809 Governor Beatson established a stud-farm at Longwood housing "high-pedigree mares" selected by the East India Company's agent at the Cape, John Pringle, to develop stock suited to the Island's rugged terrain. Horses were still not considered important enough, however, to be included in the livestock census taken that year. It seems to have taken the arrival of Napoleon and the accompanying royal garrison to bestow on the horse at St Helena

the social prestige that it enjoyed in European society. The results were not to everyone's liking, however. Thomas Henry Brooke, the Government Secretary and St Helena's first historian, wrote disapprovingly to his mother in Ireland that "several carriages have been introduced, which as well as the horses, harness, postillions, &c, are all in a style that would be reckoned respectable even in England, but although some of their owners are of inferior rank to myself, their example has had no effect on me, nor is it likely to have." Brooke stuck to his oxen!

The main influence on Island stock came from developments at the Cape. Governors there since 1792 had pursued a programme of breeding improvements using thoroughbred stallions from England crossed with sturdy Cape ponies and it was the import of those during the Napoleonic period, many sent by horse-dealers "on private speculation", which provided most of the mounts at Deadwood, "not of high quality", said Basil Jackson, "but they afforded quite as much amusement as if they had been thoroughbred." This is confirmed by the recollections of Surgeon Henry:

There was scarcely an English horse in the Island at first, but the Cape breed, with a cross of the Arab, were showy and compact, though small animals, possessing much speed for a short distance, but of course, destitute of the more game qualities of the high-bred English Racer.

Some superior stock was brought in by senior officers of the royal regiments drafted in from Britain and India to supplement the East India Company's St Helena Regiment guarding Napoleon, while the Governor had his own English horses which were, according to Jackson, "the best in the island".

The *Racing Calendar* for 1817 names thirty-two mounts, a few of which - Blucher, Dolly, Prime of Life, Regent and Whiskey - are mentioned in memoirs, while the name of one, 'Pringle', betrays its origin at the Cape. Blucher was described as "that celebrated English horse" on an auction poster of 1829 destined to bring him posthumous notoriety, for he was advertised with a number of slaves for sale "under the trees" in Jamestown, and the poster, presumably discovered by some compiler of English schoolbooks, became, after

the Second World War, a common textbook illustration showing the inhumanity of slavery - in the context of the American deep south! Whiskey was Surgeon Henry's horse on which he lost his first match against Prime of Life in September 1817, but on which he was more successful when he had learned to exploit the undulations of the Deadwood course:

I had at this time a very pretty chestnut horse, mixed Cape and Arab, named Whiskey, very quiet and active, and who could beat anything for the centre half mile of the Course, which was down hill; but failed at both ends. Nevertheless, he won me several matches down the steep part when I had discovered his forte.

The names of jockeys were not given as, unless as a wager stipulated 'Owner to ride', as was usual in the case of matches, the horses were ridden by volunteer 'light weights' from the army and navy, all turned out in proper racing gear.

The importation of horses to the Island, which probably triggered the idea of racing, unfortunately created a problem which threatened to jeopardise the sport. St Helena's survival depended on imports, including forage. In April 1817, at the time of the Maiden Meeting, all horses, except those in Napoleon's stables at Longwood, were on half rations, as the Royal Navy had not laid on enough store ships to supply the Island, and there was never enough storage space to maintain reserves. With poor harvests creating shortages at the Cape, exports were banned and fodder prices quadrupled. Hudson Lowe begged Governor Somerset to send some oats and barley for seed, meanwhile seeking emergency supplies from Bombay and Rio. Some Jamestown merchants always managed to import forage - and other supplies - illicitly at exorbitant prices, but for most owners it was a thin time until harvests at the Cape recovered in 1820 when imports of fodder soared to 84,000 lbs a month, but with Napoleon's death in May 1821 and the subsequent departure of the King's troops, the trade collapsed.

Napoleon's horses were maintained on full rations throughout by orders of Sir Hudson Lowe, whatever the cost. Being among the finest on the Island they were obviously not ignored in that tight little

community. The Longwood stables, managed by General Gaspard Gourgaud, 'Master of the Horse', contained between twelve and sixteen horses, two of which, Frengant and Vizir, had come with Napoleon from France. Ten were ordered from the Cape for carriage and staff use, and as other purchases were made there must also have been sales. Members of his entourage sometimes bought their own and stabled them at Longwood; Count Montholon, for example, paid as much as 100 gns. in May 1820 for a horse belonging to Major Hamlet Obins of the 20th Regiment. At the height of the forage crisis in 1818, Hudson Lowe asked Lord Somerset to select seven of his new breed of Cape saddle horses for 'the Longwood Establishment' for which he paid £25 each, and the following year he ordered another six.

Somerset actually visited Longwood with his family to see them in January 1820 while on his way home on leave, and though Napoleon would not deign to see them, he spied on their arrival and so envied the horse "Miss Somerset" was riding (which she must have brought ashore from HMS *Sappho* for exercise) that he sent Gourgaud out to buy it - which she took as a compliment. Gourgaud kept his horses in the peak of condition while constantly complaining of shortages, according to the Longwood policy of harrying their 'hosts', but as the published letters of Captain Engelbert Lutyens show, with indents for brooms, curry combs, halters, scissors, soap, blacking and so on, they had whatever was available on the Island, even to the detriment - and chagrin - of the military. Gourgaud's complaint about the stable-boys from the St Helena Regiment had some justification, however, as, takings advantage of the wine flowing freely at Longwood, they were often drunk, even when riding as postillions to Napoleon's carriage, "driving the leaders" so recklessly at times that rides had to be curtailed. But Napoleon always expected the British to be drunk. ☹

[Part 2 of this article will appear in *Wirebird*, No.30, Spring 2005]

