

RACECOURSES IN SUTTON PARK

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Horse-racing in the Birmingham area is most often associated with the racecourse at Bromford Bridge, where a final meeting was held on Monday 21st June 1965. It may surprise you to learn that, almost two hundred years ago, the 'sport of kings' was popular in Sutton and local race meetings were organised on a regular basis.

Sutton Park's First Racecourse(s)

The Observer for 20th November 1843 reported that public races had been held in the Park from the 1830s. They 'dragged on a miserable existence' due to the restrictions under which such amusements had been placed by the Sutton Coldfield Corporation. In the 1840s, 'a more liberal spirit' was shown towards racing in general throughout the neighbourhood (1). Newspaper reports describe a two-day flat fixture which was staged on 19th and 20th June 1844 at a course situated near Wyndley Pool. The leading light in this enterprise was Mr John Wiggan, a retired gunmaker who lived near the Park. The main event was the 'Windley' Pool Handicap with £50 prize money. A further one-day meeting was held on 22nd October of that year.



Most often regarded as Sutton's first, was the racecourse constructed on land lying between Holly Knoll and Blackroot quarry. The course was 1764 yards long and oval in shape, the first half mile being flat, followed by an awkward descent, then a gentle rise leading to a level finish. Remains can still be found at a point where it curves through a cutting in the north part of Holly Knoll, and by the motor road in the direction of the railway bridge (2).

There is conflicting evidence as to the number of years that meetings were held at Holly Knoll. A newspaper article dated 1905 (3), states that the race for the Birmingham Stakes was held there on one occasion only, in 1847. Thereafter, the local 'nonconformist conscience' was too strong and 'the popular voice' vetoed any more racing. However, other records show that racing was held in the Park on: 15th and 16th June 1845; 15th and 16th 1846 (when the programme included a race for the Sutton Park Race Cup); 12th and 13th June 1848; 16th and 17th July 1849, and 18th and 19th June 1850 (see Figure 2).

In 1850, the Birmingham Stakes were won by 'Wild Rose'. The prize money was £100 and jockey William Sharpe was presented with a gold-mounted whip, given by Mr W W Ashford, valued at six guineas [£6.60]. Many booths were set up near the course in order to provide sumptuous hospitality. For example, Robert Tisdale of the Cross Keys, Queen Street, Birmingham respectfully informed racegoers that he:

'will occupy No 12 Booth, where he will have a Store of all the Comforts and Refreshments necessary to pass the time joyously. The Spirits, Ale and Porter will be first rate, and the Viands of the very best quality.' (4)

Notwithstanding, this was the last racing fixture to be held at Holly Knoll. At 11 o'clock on Tuesday 6th August 1850, auctioneer Samuel Kempson sold the timbers of the Grand Stand by public auction:

' the above STRUCTURE being eighty-five feet long by fifteen feet wide and comprising excellent



SUTTON PARK RACES,

TUESDAY and WEDNESDAY, 18th and 19th of JUNE next.
TUESDAY, JUNE 18.

THE BIRMINGHAM STAKES, with £100 added by the
Town of Birmingham. Twenty-six Subscribers.

*. A gold-mounted Whip, of the value of Six Guineas, to be given by W. W. Ashford, Esq., to the Jockey who rides the Winner of this stake.

THE STAND STAKES,

A Free Handicap; 140 Entries, with £30 given by Mr. John Wiggan.

THE BIRMINGHAM LICENSED VICTUALLERS' STAKES;

Fifteen Entries, with £40 added.

THE SUTTON INNKEEPERS' STAKES,

To name on Monday Evening, the 17th, at Eight o'Clock. With £25 added.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 19.

THE SUTTON PARK STAKES,

A Free Handicap; 120 Subscribers, with £20 added by Mr. John Wiggan.

THE WINDLEY POOL STAKES;

Fifteen Subscribers, with £50 added by Mr. John Wiggan, and £30 by his Friends.

A Silver-mounted Whip to be given by Mr. Dase, to the Jockey who rides the Winner of this Stake.

THE EDGBASTON PLATE.

To close at Eight o'Clock in the Evening of the first Race-day, with £40 added by the Gentlemen of Edgbaston.

THE WEST BROMWICH STAKES,

To close at Eight o'Clock on the Evening of the first Race-day, with £20 added.

Gentlemen desirous of supporting these Races are requested to send their Subscriptions to Mr. J. B. WILKINSON, Clerk of the Course, Sutton Coldfield, or to Mr. JOHN WYSON, Whitall Street, Birmingham.

Figure 2

well-seasoned Deal, five Yards of OAK PALING, five feet high, and Three OAK GATES and POSTS, being the paddock in front of the Stand'. (5)

Steeplechasing in Sutton

For several years, racing events were organised at other locations in the Midlands including: New Oscott (near the College); Bickenhill (close to where the NEC now stands); Knowle and in Aston Park (6). An attempt to hold the 1852 chases in Sutton Park was frustrated by the Sutton Corporation's refusal to approve the meeting.

By 1857, a group of local racing enthusiasts had leased a piece of farm land near the top of Sutton town. The course was over several fields of pasture and arable land, beginning in a wheat field near Tamworth Lane:

'... to leave which a bank and stump hedge had to be topped; after which the competitors bore to the right, and had a long run of some 300 yards through a turnip field, where the going was very good, and a laid fence (with a gap or two, however) brought them to another turning flag, when a direction straight for the Grand Stand was taken ...' (7)

The course then ran parallel to the Lichfield Turnpike Road, thence back to the Tamworth Road and the starting point; the competitors going on to complete a second circuit before crossing the finishing line. In 1859, the course was extended to be more than a mile and a half long, running through Moor Hall Park. The venue was convenient for racegoers as it was less than ten minutes walk from the railway station. Crowds of at least 25,000 were not unusual.

At the meeting held on 21st March 1858, the second race was The Birmingham Grand Annual Steeple Chase. This race grew to be such an important fixture that it became second only to the Grand National at Aintree. In 1863, 'Emblem', a horse owned by Lord Coventry and ridden by George Stevens, came first in The Birmingham Grand Annual and shortly after went on to win the Grand National. Steeplechase meetings continued at Moor Hall until 1873, when the land was acquired for building.

A New Racecourse in Longmoor Valley

Described by some as one of the finest flat race tracks in England (and by others as 'the morass'), another new racecourse opened in Sutton Park in 1868, adjacent to Westwood Coppice. Willey's Penny Guide (8) tells us that:

'The course has been formed at very great expense. In form, it is an elongated oval of about one mile and a quarter in extent. A capital run in of seven furlongs, nearly straight, is obtained by adding a 'tongue'. The whole course thus presents the appearance of a figure 6. From the top of the same, the distance is one mile and three quarters. The Stand, though a temporary erection is substantially built, under the superintendance of the Corporation Surveyor, and will hold about 800 persons'.

The stand was located near Westwood Coppice and the visitors' entrance to the course was at Royal Oak Gate (almost opposite The Parson and Clark which, for a time, was called The Royal Oak). Little visual evidence of the course remains although, while preparing a field walk for the Local History Research Group in 1995, Dennis Hurley and the present author located an overgrown ditch which curves with a similar sweep to the course described above, and which might mark its south-eastern boundary.

The Longmoor Valley course staged mainly flat racing with the occasional hurdle event. For each day, the organisers undertook to pay the Sutton Corporation a sum of money equal to the latter's takings on the best day in the year 'and thus it was a source of profit for all' (9).

The first two day meeting was held on Thursday 9th and Friday 10th July 1868 when the jockey Walter White won the first race on 'Ben Block' and completed a double on 'Startle' in the Welter Plate. Apparently, it was not uncommon for crowds of up to 20, 000 to attend and the meetings were particularly popular with sportsmen from the Black Country.

At the meeting on 21st September 1870, Harry Taylor the jockey, was thrown and seriously injured whilst riding in the Hurdle Race. After swerving and colliding with another horse at the first hurdle, Taylor was thrown upon his back and his mount, an ill-tempered animal named 'Duke of York', fell on top of him. Taylor was taken to Bannersgate Cottage where he lingered in great agony until 7.30 the following morning, when he died (10).

It appears that, eventually, local opposition to racing prevailed once more and a final flat meeting was held at Longmoor on 19th and 20th August 1879.

Four Oaks Park

With the closure of the Longmoor Valley course, the focus of local horseracing moved to Olton where a National Hunt course had been set out in 1875. The Clerk of the Course was Mr John Sheldon. However, in the early 1880s, yet another racecourse was constructed in Sutton, this time adjacent to the Park (see [Figure 3](#)). The Four Oaks Company was incorporated on 9th December 1879 with a share capital of £100,000. It confidently believed that its new enterprise would become one of the most fashionable racecourses in the country.

The Company secured the services of Mr Sheldon who negotiated for the freehold of the 246 acre estate of Sir John William Craddock Hartopp. This cost £60,000. An additional £5000 was paid to Mr Sheldon's for his rights and interests under the purchase agreement and for the construction of roads. A further £40,000 was spent in constructing the racecourse and building the stands, paddocks and stables. The five stands, which held 5,000, were built of red brick with stone facings by Surman and Son of Great Colmore Street, Birmingham. The grandstand stood on the site of the Four Oaks Tennis Club. The Club Stand was exclusively for members.

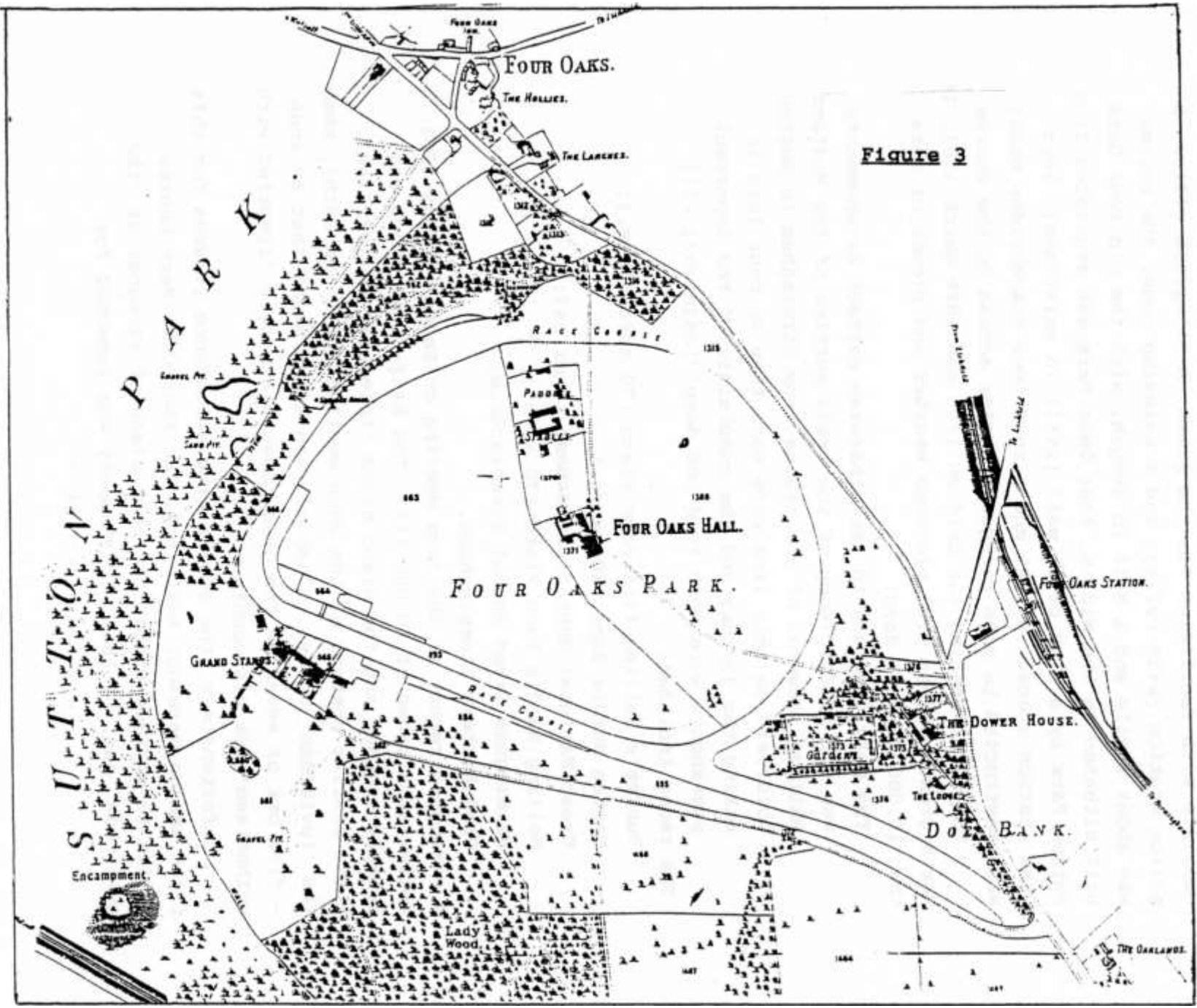


Figure 3

The Paddock Stand was complete with facilities for the press, a telegraph office, a police station (with cells), and a weighing room. The course was about a mile and a half in length, with the old Four Oaks Hall situated in the middle. Four Oaks Park was separated from Sutton Park by a high brick wall (still in existence). Four Oaks station opened in 1885 and a road (now Bracebridge Road) was constructed to give racegoers easier access to the course.

The first meeting was held on 17th and 18th March 1881. It was a great success with glorious weather and crowds of more than 15,000 on both days:

'The only drawback to the otherwise perfect arrangements was the inefficiency of the train service of the Midland Railway. Several of the trains from Birmingham to Sutton Coldfield on this line were more than an hour late in making the journey and the complaints of the important passengers were both loud and deep' [Déja vu?] (11)

The races included:

Hunter's Selling Flat Race Plate (70 sovereigns.);
Maiden Hurdle Race (100 sovs.);
Great National Hunt Steeplechase (4 miles);
Selling Hurdle Race Plate (70 sovs.);
Birmingham Grand Annual Steeplechase;
Open Hunters Steeplechase.

A newspaper report of the race meeting on Easter Monday 1881 estimated a crowd of 20,000 (12). The Half-Crown Stand was densely crowded and the Grand Stand 'tolerably well-filled'. There similar numbers at the June meeting (28th and 29th), when the 'leviathan jockey', F Archer, won every event that he rode - five out of seven on the card. Spectators were 'frenzied with enthusiasm' for his mounts.

Unfortunately, the encouraging attendance figures for this first season were not sustained. The Four Oaks Park course failed to attract either the best class of racegoer or 'the multitude' and, by 1889, the Company was summoned for non-payment of rates.

The accounts for the meeting held on 22nd and 23rd August had not been settled in accordance with the Rules of Racing (13). Unable to hold further race meetings until the money was paid, the Company was wound up. On 28th August 1890, the estate was offered for sale by public auction at the Colmore Estate Sale Room, Birmingham. The auctioneer was Mr John Margetts of Warwick (see Figure 4). A summary on the back of the sale brochure (14) shows that the bidding commenced at £15,000 and proceeded by degrees to £35,300, at which point the auctioneer withdrew the property from sale as a whole lot.

The estate was then offered for sale as two lots:

Lot 1 – The park, hall, dower house and race stands, including more than 148 acres of land.

Lot 2 – Lady Wood [formerly part of Sutton Park] and 93 acres of building land.

There were no bids for either lot on that occasion but the estate was eventually sold for building land. Four Oaks Hall was left empty and derelict before being demolished in 1908.

Racing into the 20th Century

By 1895, John and Stanley Ford had constructed a race course at Bromford Bridge on land leased from the Earl of Bradford's estate. It was on flat river meadows bordered to the north and west by the River Tame. At the time, it was regarded as a model course and, for 70 years, was very popular with Midland racegoers.

In July 1963, it was rumoured that meetings at both the Birmingham and Wolverhampton racecourses might soon be abandoned. Lord Willoughby de Broke, Chairman of the Birmingham and Wolverhampton Racecourse Companies announced that a new Midlands racecourse costing £2 million was being planned as a replacement. The directors were energetically seeking a suitable location.

Interest was rekindled in using Sutton Park as a possible site. In August 1963, Sutton's Town Clerk received a letter from Lord Willoughby in which he unfolded the Racecourse

WARWICKSHIRE.

PLAN AND PARTICULARS

OF A MOST CHARMINGLY SITUATE

FREEHOLD

RESIDENTIAL OR BUILDING ESTATE

CALLED AND KNOWN AS

“FOUR OAKS PARK,”

SITUATE IN THE

Royal Borough of Sutton Coldfield, in the County of Warwick,

AND CONTAINING

246 ACRES,

OR THEREABOUTS, TOGETHER WITH THE

“Dower House,” Cottages, Race Stands, Stabling,
etc.

To be Sold by Auction, by

JOHN MARGETTS & SON

(By direction of the Mortgagees).

AT THE ESTATE SALE ROOM, COLMORE CHAMBERS, 1, NEWHALL STREET, BIRMINGHAM,

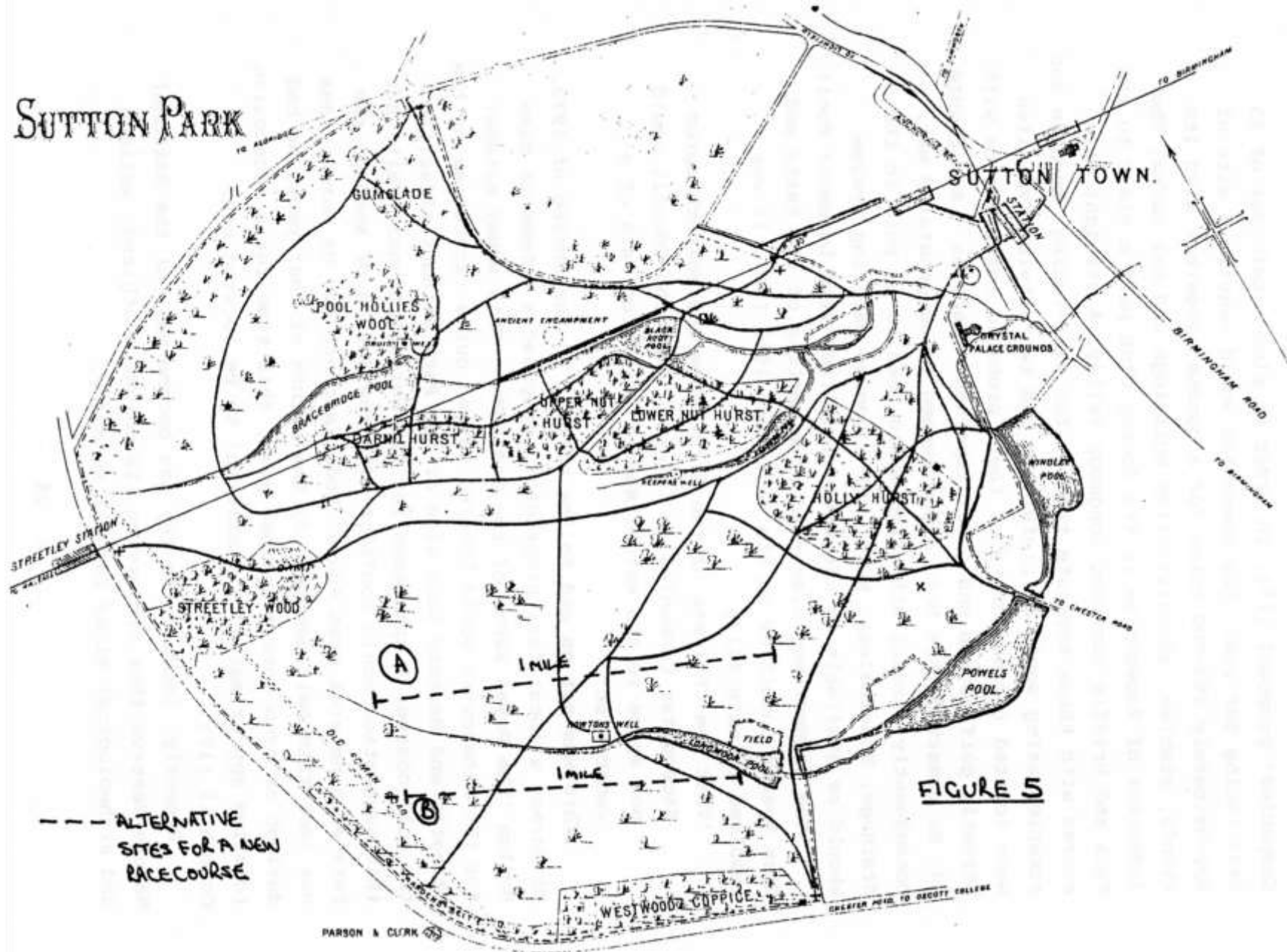
On THURSDAY, AUGUST the 28th, 1890,

AT 2 FOR 3 O'CLOCK TO A MINUTE.

Subject to such Conditions and in such Lots as may be agreed upon at the time of Sale.

Figure 4..

SUTTON PARK



Companies' proposal (15). In order to plan a calendar of 25 days racing per year, the companies would require a site of approximately 150-200 acres for a course, together with its stands, stables, administrative buildings and car parks. The Inspector of Racecourse to the Jockey Club paid a visit to the Park and briefly surveyed Longmoor Valley. A straight mile course with three separate tracks, for flat-racing, hurdles and steeplechasing would be preferable and two alternative sites were located (irrespective of their probable interference with Streetly golf-course and other important features - see Figure 5). He observed that both areas seemed to be generally wet, consequently careful attention would need to be paid to the drainage. Nonetheless, water for a course watering system should be available in adequate quantities from Longmoor Pool! The request was discussed at a meeting of the Parks and Open Spaces Committee on 9th September 1963 (16). It was resolved (Minute 421):

'That the Chairman of the Birmingham and Wolverhampton Racecourse Companies be informed that the Council would not agree to the establishment in Sutton Park of a racecourse'.

This was not an end to the matter. In the Spring of 1973, Mr Burns, a local taxi proprietor, proposed a scheme to make Sutton 'the Royal Ascot of the Midlands'. This money spinner for the ratepayers would involve laying out a racecourse on the Streetly and Banners Gate side of the Park without affecting the golf course. A spokesman for the Borough Council felt that this suggestion would conflict with the desire of keeping the Park as a natural open space. Local support for Mr Burn's idea was less than half-hearted. By the autumn of that year, he had devised an even more grandiose plan, this time for a racecourse (costing approximately £10 million) to be located near Coleshill (17).

Recently, Longmoor Valley has become part of the National Nature Reserve thus preserving its unique heathland, wetland and archeological sites for all to enjoy.

References

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8. Peers, A (1896) Willey's Penny Guides: A History and Guide to Sutton Park, William Willey.
9. 4, op cit.
10. Sutton Coldfield and Erdington Times, 26th July 1890.
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12. Sutton Coldfield and Erdington News, 23rd April 1881.
13. Pitt, p. 320, op cit.
14. Sale Brochure for the sale by public auction of Four Oaks Park on 28th August 1890, The Jewel Baillie Col lection, Item 236, B'ham DRO.
15. Correspondence relevant to application from Birmingham and Wolverhampton Racecourse Companies, 1963, File 421, Sutton Library, Local History Section.
16. Borough of Sutton Coldfield, Parks and Open Spaces Committee, Minute for 9th September 1963, Ref: SH 34.3
17. Frank Burns File, Ref: QSH 78.1.

Acknowledgement

Apart from (14), all of the reference material for this article can be found in the Local History Section of Sutton Reference Library. The author wishes to thank Marian Baxter, Local History Librarian, for her help in assembling this information.