

Tony Byles: excerpt from *101 Interesting Facts on the History of Horse Racing 2014*

“It seems an odd question, but one of racing’s great mysteries was: who won the 1880 Derby? The Racing Calendar- which is the official record – will tell you that the winner was the Duke of Westminster’s Bend Or, who narrowly defeated Robert the Devil. This seems perfectly clear – so why the mystery?

The problem would appear to have originated at the Duke of Westminster’s stud, at Eaton, Cheshire, during 1877. There were two chestnut colt foals, both by Doncaster: one out of the Thormanby mare Rouge Rose, and the other out of the Newminister mare Clemence. It should not have been difficult to distinguish the two as far as their appearance were concerned: one was a golden chestnut with black spots on his hindquarters, and the other, a red chestnut with one black sport on his offside hindquarters, and lop ears.

But after the running of the Derby there were questions regarding the identity of the winner: was it Bend Or, or was it Tadcaster? Charles Brewer and his trainer Charlie Blanton, joint owners of Robert the Devil, who had come second, believed it was the latter. They lodged an objection with the Epsom Stewards, claiming that the horse that ran as Bend Or (the golden chestnut) was not the horse he was represented to be, either in the entry or at the time of the race, and claimed payment of the stakes.

Their evidence was based on information provided by the stud groom at Eaton, Richard Arnull, who claimed that when the two colts were sent to Robert Peck at Russley, for training, they were inadvertently switched – probably owing to the Duke of Westminster’s stud book being maintained in such a haphazard way, with no markings against the colt’s names, that the information contained in it was virtually worthless as evidence – so that the one that raced in the name of Bend Or was in fact Tadcaster.

Arnull was under notice to quit, so it is not surprising that at the hearing, which took place about seven weeks after the Derby, their objection was overruled; although Arnull maintained, almost to his dying day that his statement was the truth. And James Lowther, one of the Epsom Stewards, declared additional facts that came to his attention at a later date gave him some doubt whether he and his fellow stewards had come to the right decision.

In between the Derby and the hearing Robert the Devil had won the Grand Prix de Paris, and Bend Or, the St. James Palace Stakes, but failed to stay on the heavy going when odds-on favourite for the St. Leger; Robert the Devil gaining revenge for his Derby defeat, winning by three lengths from Lord Roseberry’s filly, Cipolata. He again beat Bend Or – or rather the horse that ran in that name - in the Great Foal Stakes, Across the Flat at Newmarket, by a head. Robert the Devil then proved what an outstanding racehorse he was by winning the Cesarewitch under 8 st. 6 lb; and two days later he again beat Bend Or by a crushing ten lengths in the Champion Stakes, again run Across the Flat at Newmarket.

The following year Bend Or won the City and Suburban Handicap at Epsom, under nine stone, giving 35 pounds to the very good American horse Foxhall; and the Epsom Gold Cup (now Coronation Cup) beating Robert the Devil by a neck.

A couple of weeks later, Robert the Devil won the Ascot Gold Cup and the Queen Alexandra Stakes.

Having beaten Bend Or three times out of their five meetings, twice by substantial margins, it is arguable he was the better racehorse – certainly the better stayer. Unlike Bend Or, however, he was a failure at stud.

But back to the controversy, which having lain dormant for over thirty years was for some unknown reason revisited in the columns of Horse and Hound and the Bloodstock Breeder's Review.

There was circumstantial evidence that supported the claims of the Epsom Stewards decision. According to Somerville Tattersall, when Bend Or and Tadcaster left Eaton, they first went to Mr. Barrow's paddocks at Newmarket, where all their markings were noted, which were checked on arrival at Russley. Also Bend Or never gave the blacksmith any trouble, whereas Tadcaster and other foals of Clemence were bad tempered and would not have feet touched. On the other hand, Clemence had produced a numbers of good winners, including Sandiway, who had won the Liverpool Cup and Coronation Stakes, whereas Rouge Rose had produced little of note. In fact John Porter, one of the great trainers of the nineteenth century, was of the opinion that Sandiway bore a strong resemblance to Bend Or, whereas Mr. Tattersall believed there was no resemblance.

What was dismissed from this debate was the fact that in 1882 Clemence was covered by Bend Or. If Clemence had been the dam of Bend Or, it is difficult to imagine the Duke of Westminster would have approved such an incestuous mating.

So, right or wrong, there is no real evidence that the original decision of the Epsom Stewards should be questioned.

Unfortunately the benefits of modern-day science were not available to our antecedents. Had they been so, this problem of identity would have been nipped in the bud.

One of the advances in the science of genetics – discovered by the Augustine friar, Gregor Mendel – was the detection of mitochondrial DNA, which in recent times was established to be transferred solely in the maternal line. When techniques were developed to enable its extraction, it was a way to authenticate one's maternal heritage.

Fortunately, a number of skeletons of famous horses had been preserved in the vaults of the Natural History Museum. One of these was Bend Or's.

A team of Cambridge University scientists extracted the mitochondrial DNA from the skeleton to discover if it came from the family to which Rouge Rose belonged, or from the family of Clemence. It proved to be the latter, proving that the horse that ran in the name of Bend Or was the son of Clemence and not Rouge Rose.

As Messrs. Brewer and Blanton claimed, the horse who passed the winning post first, was Tadcaster and therefore not the horse he was claimed to be. An unfortunate case of mistaken identity. However, rules are rules and although the record books will, of course, not be changed, it should now be recognized

that Robert the Devil, a winner of the Grand Prix de Paris, the St. Leger and Champion Stakes, who still resides in Gibson's saddler in Newmarket, a tribute to the art of the taxidermist, should also have been awarded the Derby.