

Dark day that gave birth to 150 years of Listowel Races



Far from the glories witnessed throughout its 150 year history the story of the Listowel Races was born on a brutal and dark day, one on which 20 lives were lost on the banks of the Cashen writes **John O'Flaherty**

WHILE the Listowel Races, as we know them, began officially on October, 5 and 6 1858, the story of the race meeting from which it is descended stretches back into the late 18th century at least.

This story began with the Ballyeigh Races, which were run annually on the beach at Ballyeigh in mid June. Ballyeigh is a townland near the mouth of the Cashen, where the River Feale enters the sea just south of Ballybunion.

Each year thousands converged on this picturesque setting to enjoy the festivities associated with this event, i.e. a variety of games, horse-racing and a pre-arranged faction fight which concluded the event. The protagonists in the faction fight were the Cooleens and the Iraght O'Connors (Lawlors and Mulvihills) and these two groups had fought each other, over the years, at fairs, patterns, matches and the Ballyeigh Races.

In 1834 they engaged in a particularly vicious confrontation which resulted in the deaths of twenty people and in which many others received serious

injuries. This savage fight also set in train the events which ultimately led to the abandonment of Ballyeigh as a race venue and which brought Ballyeigh Races to Listowel to become the great racing festival we have today.

On that fateful day in June 1834, 1,200 men of the Cooleen faction crossed the Cashen to engage the Iraghts in battle.

Having discovered that they were outnumbered, 2,000 to 1,200, they decided to launch a pre-emptive strike in the hope of catching the Iraghts unprepared.

Instead of waiting until after the last race, as was the custom, they marched across the beach before the last race and launched themselves against the Iraghts who were trying to get themselves into proper battle array. A fierce battle ensued but, despite their early advantage, the Cooleens could not break the Iraght's battline, they failed to prevent the main body of the Iraghts reaching the strand and, from this position, the writing was on the wall.

Gradually the Cooleens were driven back. During the retreat

they were divided and the smaller section was driven towards the Cashen where they attempted to gain the other side by swimming or in boats. The contingent who were pursuing them had lost all reason in the heat of battle and pursued them into the water. One boat was caught and upended and the occupants who could not escape by swimming were battered under the water until they drowned. The official estimate of the dead was twenty but dozens more were seriously injured in the fight.

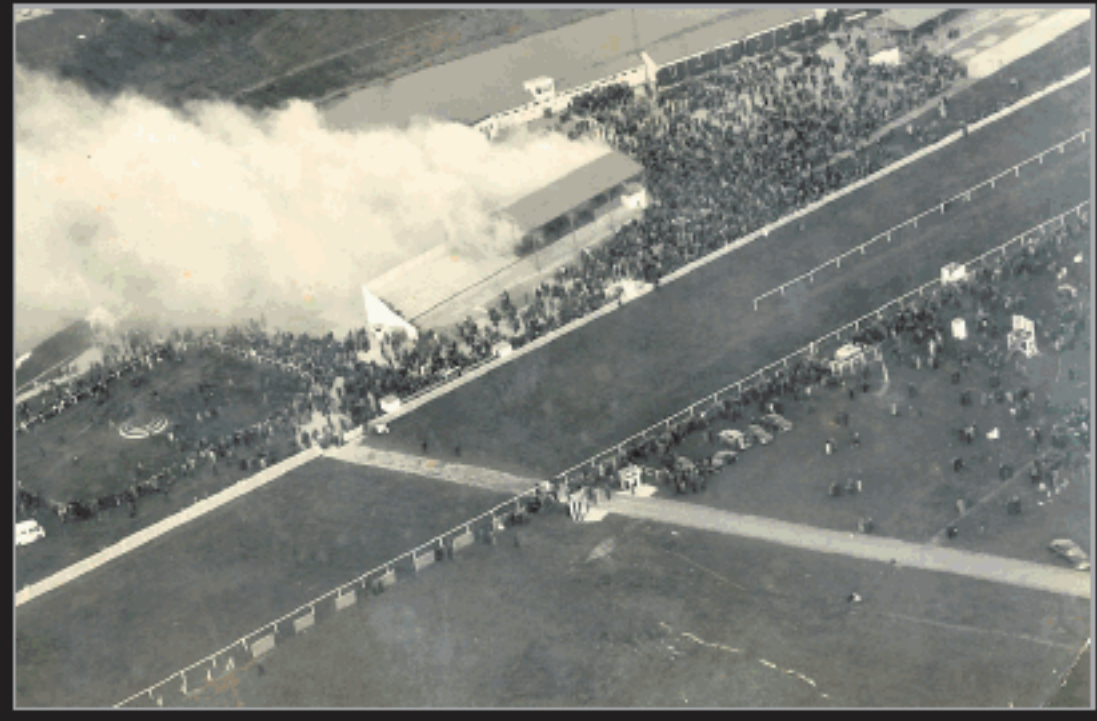
Faction fighting in North Kerry declined rapidly after this savage affair but, more significantly, from the point of view of Listowel Races, it was the beginning of the end of Ballyeigh Races which were barred by the authorities for five years and were living on borrowed time after that, as the authorities laid down very stringent rules for the revival of Ballyeigh Races.

The meeting was transferred to a date in September and the stewards would be responsible for keeping order and would be held liable for any breaches of the peace. In 1856 violence

Listowel Races: Tradition & Tragedy



Children of the Travelling Community in a long standing Races tradition of 'Throw Me Down Something' in the River Feale. Photo by Healy Racing



The Listowel Racecourse stand on fire during the 1959 race meeting. As the stand burned a race was won by the appropriately named 'Gunsmoke.'

erupted after the County Members Cup on the second day and, as a result, Ballyeigh lost its race meeting. That race was won by Johnny O'Connell on May Morning defeating Timekeeper, owned by George Sandes. Sandes and some of his supporters tried to deprive

O'Connell of the race by accusing him of not covering the complete course; a heated argument followed during which Sandes struck O'Connell who retaliated. Others joined in the fracas after which O'Connell was arrested and taken to the barracks in Ballybunion,

followed by a crowd who protested outside the jail until he was released that evening. While this minor row did not compare with the 1834 faction fight, it did raise again the spectre of violence and bloodshed at Ballyeigh and so the authorities decided that the wisest

course of action was to abandon racing at Ballyeigh. In 1857 an attempt was made to run this meeting at Newtownsandess (Moyvane) but it met with little success and in October 1858 the meeting moved to the Island and Listowel Races were born.

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