

BEHIND THE SCENES EDGCOTE



Facing the back straight at Edgcote
Photo: Caroline Exelby

The South Midlands area welcomes a new course in 2018 – following the sad closure of Whitfield – with the introduction of racing at Edgcote, north east of Banbury, on the Wills Estates. Three Point-to-Points will be held in 2018 on the historic gallops, where renowned horses such as Royal Relief, Spanish Steps and Tiberetta were trained by Edward Courage, and local Point-to-Point trainer Simon Gilmore – who is also head lad to Edgcote-based Alex Hales – offered me a sneak preview and course walk before Christmas *writes Jake Exelby*.

First indications that the new course was in the pipeline came last June, as Simon explains. “I saw (Grafton stalwarts) Charles Dixey and Jeff Tredwell outside the Red Lion in Culworth with (course inspector) Nicky Carlisle at 10.30 one morning and thought, ‘Well, they haven’t come for lunch’. “It’s ironic that Whitfield was closed due to HS2,” continues Simon, “given how close it will come to the course here.”



Simon pointing to the car park
Photo: Caroline Exelby

Turning Edgcote into a racecourse is the result of efforts from a number of people, including Charles Dixey, Nicky Carlisle, John O’Neill (Bicester with Whaddon Chase), Clerk of the Course Graham Tawell and Estate Manager Hamish Gairdner whose brainchild it was. “It’s been a gallops for years,” confirms Simon, “so it’s lovely, springy turf with lush grass and – unlike some new courses – no

grass has needed to be put down.” The instigators of the new course have also been fortunate enough to be able to borrow assets from Whitfield, including renovated fences and running rails.

Edgcote, which is wide enough for fresh ground at each meeting, is a tight right-handed nine furlongs, with seven fences. The back straight is undulating and there is a noticeable climb up to the finish. Access is past the yards of Ben Case and Alex Hales (with a possible alternative exit back to the Thorpe Mandeville-Wardington road) and cars will be parked alongside the home straight, with the paddock and tents at the top of the course, which is likely to be the best spot for viewing, albeit head-on to the finish. It certainly looks sharp enough from the hill overlooking the track, and Simon agrees. “I think you’d have to be quick – it’s not dissimilar to Cottenham or Higham.”

“The hunts are delighted with it,” confirms Simon, a long-standing Grafton committee member. “Each meeting will do something different for racegoers and at the Grafton, we have our own jamboree – and I’m hoping that Racing UK’s David Fitzgerald will do post-race interviews.” It’s no secret that Simon has always wanted to win his own Members’ race, and he confesses that it’s the end-of-season aim for his consistent Come On Harriet.

The Edgcote estate is owned by the Allen family, and around 100 horses are trained here – over 70 by Rules handlers Ben Case and Alex Hales, and the rest by the Point-to-Point yards of Pauline Harkin and Jamie Goss – while previous incumbents have included Mark Wilkinson, who trained the useful Smart Tar for Edward Courage’s widow, Hermione. Asked what the late Edward would have thought about racing taking place here, Simon doesn’t even pause for breath. “I think he’d be thrilled.”

The three meetings at Edgcote in 2018 are the Bicester with Whaddon Chase on Sunday 8th April, the Farmers Bloodhounds on Saturday 28th April, and the Grafton on Sunday 20th May. There also will be an Open Day at the course on Sunday 4th March, with gates opening at 11 o’clock and drinks and nibbles from 1pm – all welcome.