

The Epsom Derby

The oldest and perhaps the most famous horse-race in the world.



The Derby in 1821, by the French artist Géricault

Talk about sport in any language, and sooner or later you'll find yourself using English words. The British were the first people to write down standard rules for a lot of sports, even in sports like tennis which was invented by the French, or golf which was probably played in Holland, before becoming a national sport in Scotland.

As the rules of lots of different sports **spread** all over the world, so did the language of sport. In the world of horse-racing, words like **groom** and **lad** and **steeplechase** spread to other countries; so too did the word "Derby". The word came to mean an important **race**, usually between horses. One of the most famous horse races in Ireland is called the *Irish Sweepstakes Derby*, and one of the most famous American races is called the *Kentucky Derby*; and the word is used for other sports too, for important matches between two rival teams. In England, the "Manchester Derby" is a football match between Manchester United and Manchester City.

Death at the Derby

The Derby has figured more than once in British history. The most dramatic event took place in 1913, when a woman called Emily Davison ran out in front of the King's horse, and tried to **grab** it. The horse and rider and Emily all fell to the ground in the confusion, and Emily was killed. Emily was a "Suffragette", a militant campaigning for women's votes. In those days, only men were allowed to vote in elections in Britain, and Emily belonged to a group fighting with determination for women's rights.

Emily did not die completely in vain. Though the First World War delayed things by a few years, some women got the vote in 1921, and complete voting equality with men was achieved in 1928.

But where did this word come from? Why a "Derby"?

Just like "Rugby", "Derby" (pronounced "Darby") is the name of a town in the middle of England; it is also the name of England's most famous horse race, The Derby. But the Derby is not run in the town of Derby, of course! That would be too simple!

Today the Derby has the reputation of being the world's most famous classic horse race. It is certainly the oldest and one of the biggest. Some years, over 600 horses are entered for the race; however only about 25 of them will actually take part in the great race on Derby day at the beginning of June.

It is said that the Derby was born during a dinner party in the year 1779, at the house of a nobleman, the Earl of Derby, near Epsom, a quiet village about 20 miles to the west of London. Like most aristocrats of the day, the earl loved horse-racing, and the open hilltops near his house were an excellent place for his jockeys to test their skills and speed against challengers. At the dinner party, the earl's friends decided to organise a big race for three-year old horses, and in

respect for their **host**, they called it "the Derby".

Very soon, the Derby became the most popular horse **race** in England - even in Europe. People could easily drive out in their carriages from London to watch the big race. In 1788, the Prince of Wales came to watch the race for the first time, and by the year 1800, start of the 19th century, the Derby had become an important date in the annual social and sporting calendar.

It didn't just interest aristocrats, of course. Though most racehorses at the time were owned by aristocratic families, horse-racing was a very popular sport with ordinary people too, as it still is today. In 1847, the House of Commons decided that it should not work on Derby Day. By doing so, it virtually made the day into a national holiday, as other people followed the parliamentary example.

From then on, thousands of ordinary people from London would crowd onto the trains on Derby Day, to enjoy a day at the races, a bit of excitement, and a breath of fresh air.

The Derby was one of the first sporting events to be shown on television. In 1932, long before public TV **broadcasts** began, the race was shown on closed circuit television to a select audience in the Metropole Cinema, in London. Then, in 1946, it was one of the first sports events to be broadcast on BBC television.



The Derby in modern times

Today, the Derby is watched on TV by millions of people all over Britain, and in other countries too, thanks to satellite communications.

While some people just watch it for the thrill of the race, a lot more watch it for the money. Betting (putting money) on horses is a very popular activity in Britain, and the Derby is the second biggest race of the year, in terms of money. It's impossible to know how much money is bet on the Derby, but the figure is enormous. Betting starts months before the race actually takes place. Some people want to get in big bets on their personal favourites, before the **odds** are too low. Some professional **gamblers** bet sums of money greater than £10,000!

For most people though, bets are more likely to be in the range of a pound or two. On Derby Day last year, it was estimated that a total of over £35 million was gambled on this **single** race!



WORD GUIDE

spread: extend - **groom**: person who looks after a horse - **steeplechase**: race with jumps - **race**: competition of speed - - **skills**: abilities - **host**: person who invites other people - **grab**: seize - to **broadcast**: to transmit - **the odds**: the factor by which a bet is multiplied if the horse wins. **gambler**: a person who plays with money - **single** - one.

The Derby - Student worksheet

Replace the missing prepositions in the following extracts from the article

Here are the words you will need to use:

to to in in in in in in of of of of of of by for for for for for on on at at during

The British were the first people (_____) write down standard rules (_____) a lot (_____) sports, even (_____) sports like tennis which was invented (_____) the French, or golf which, before becoming a national sport (_____) Scotland was apparently played (_____) Holland.

Some years, over 600 horses are entered (_____) the race; however only about 25 (_____) them will actually take part (_____) the great race (_____) Derby day (_____) the beginning (_____) June.

It is said that the Derby was born (_____) a dinner party (_____) the year 1779, (_____) the house (_____) the Earl (_____) Derby, near Epsom, a quiet village about 20 miles (_____) the west (_____) London.

Comprehension questions

Answer these questions in your own words

1. Why is the Derby called "the Derby"?

2. What is the Derby?

3. Where does the Derby take place?

4. Why did Emily Davison try to stop the king's horse?