

AINTREE RACECOURSE

Ormskirk Road, Aintree, Merseyside

by

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AINTREE RACECOURSE, ORMSKIRK ROAD, AINTREE, MERSEYSIDE

An application has been lodged for the demolition of the north end of the listed County Stand. Frank Kelsall has asked for a note on its historical interest in order to assist in deciding whether to oppose the application.

Aintree Racecourse was opened in July 1829. It was located on land owned by the Earl of Sefton, who was encouraged in his promotion of racing by a Mr Lynn, proprietor of the Waterloo Hotel, Aintree. The two men were subsequently to encourage the growth of greyhound racing too. The stand in question, the County Stand, was first listed in 1968, and it is evident from the list description that the intimate associations with one of England's greatest races did contribute to the listing.

The Grand National and Steeplechasing

Steeplechasing was growing in popularity in the 1830s and spreading from its St Albans origins to the rest of the country: Cheltenham was the next meeting to adopt the sport, followed by Aintree. The combination of flat-out racing with the taking of varied and daunting jumps combined the centuries-old appeal of flat racing with the excitement of the chase: this was after all the golden age of sporting prints, celebrating absurd feats of equine valour. The Grand National was first held in 1839. It has been described as 'the severest test for a horse ever devised', and is regarded as the most famous race in the world for jumpers. The four mile course contains thirty jumps including the notorious Becher's Brook: horses must be six years or older, and carry between ten and twelve stones. The race's popularity remains enormous today, and Aintree possesses considerable emotive appeal for this reason.

Aintree Racecourse

Aintree Racecourse was described in 1852 as 'a new establishment... this important town has two race meetings in the year, which are every season more and more attended; and the spirit and enterprise with which everything connected with the sport is conducted, well deserves general turf patronage' (Delabere P. Blaine, An Encycloaedia of Rural Sports, 375). Aintree could boast of an impressive stand. 'The grand stand, from the summit of which there is an extensive prospect, was completed in 1830, and is a lofty and spacious fabric, of which the saloon is 90 feet by 22 feet' (Edward Baines, The History of the County Palatine and Duchy of Lancashire (rev. John Harland, 1870) II, 399). The architect of this was John Foster (c.1787-1846), architect to the Corporation of Liverpool and an associate of C.R. Cockerell's. According to the Buildings of England, this stand burnt down in 1892 and was replaced by the present 'large but unremarkable structure' (see copy). This was originally the Owners' and Trainers' Stand; their bar inside is a high-cielinged room apparently devoid of any architectural pretension.

Aintree racecourse belonged to the Earls of Sefton and passed by descent to a Mrs Topham in the 1940s. Around 1970 she sold the land to a property developer, and the fate of the course hung in the balance while closure and housing redevelopment was considered. The course was saved in the early 1980s. It is now owned by the Aintree Racecourse Company Ltd., part of Racecourse Holdings Trust, which ultimately is owned

by the Jockey Club. The Queen Mother Stand adjacent to the County Stand appears to be one of the new additions to this already thronged sequence of buildings.

Racecourse Stands

By 1850 there were some 120 established and recognised race courses in the country. Stands formed 'so attractive a feature on every race-course', according to Blaine; they were 'erected for the accommodation of the spectators' and 'generally placed on the right of the course. The under part may be conveniently arranged for the vending of refreshments, and should be built at a distance of from five and twenty to twenty yards in the rear of the rails' (op. cit., 372). The grandest of all stands, according to Blaine, was that at Epsom (copy attached). This was 'an object of universal admiration, and of itself presents a striking monument of the racing mania in this country. It is the largest in Europe, and is said to be assessed to the poor's rate at 500 l. per annum' (op. cit., 375); its architect was Edward Trendall (d.1852), and it was built in 1829-30. Gambling was and remains the fundamental *raison d'être* for racing: stands enabled far greater numbers to have a view of the all-important winning-post, as well as protecting them from the elements. At a number of race courses, the paddock (the enclosure where horses are walked before the race) was positioned directly behind the grandstand, so a good view of it might be had from the rear of the stand.

The Epsom stand, like most later stands, consisted of a variation on the loggia theme. The raised ground floor terrace was fronted with a procession of sturdy (and load-bearing) Doric columns, while the first floor terrace was shielded by a cast iron canopy carried on slender iron columns. Such columns were standard components at later grandstands, and were employed at the Aintree County Stand too. The most obvious comparisons are to be made with railway platform awnings. Very little discussion over the design of grandstands ever appeared in the architectural press. A stand at Knutsford was published in The Builder for October 14, 1865 (copy attached) which invites comparison with the kernel of the County Stand at Aintree. A general article on racecourse stands by Edward Bill appeared in the Architect's Journal for August 3, 1927. This spoke of the emergence of a new 'athletic' architecture which, 'instead of the fussy prettiness of the pre-war period' consisted of 'a bold and simple handling of well-considered masses' realised in reinforced concrete. I am unaware of any mention of the Aintree stand in the architectural press.

Racing played an important part in the social calendar. The Doncaster races, for instance, became one of the most important social gatherings for the North following their inception in 1703, with members of the most prominent families watching their four-legged stock on the turf and their two-legged stock in the enclosure and the grandiose Carr-designed grandstand of 1777-81, which the Corporation of Doncaster had erected to boost the prestige of the town. Extant early grandstands are few indeed. The saddest loss was the 1969 demolition of Carr's stand at Doncaster (see copy). His 1777 stand at Nottingham was demolished in 1910, and his original stand at the Knavesmire course outside York of 1755-56 survives but fragmentarily, the lower storey being re-erected in the paddock. Stands thus formed part of the social arena. In the main, however, they were buildings to watch races (and to a lesser extent, horses and people) from. With the exception of Carr's stands, they were buildings to look out from, rather than look at.

Racing as a Spectator Sport

Carr's virile classical stands of stone were among the most important sporting buildings ever erected in England. They were built at a time when the accepted way of watching a race for gentlemen was from horseback or carriage, and when races were generally too few to warrant major capital expenditure on costly buildings such as stands. Even as late as the 1920s, objections were directed against new stands at Newmarket on the grounds that these functional intrusions merely served to encourage the hoi polloi to frequent the turf. Stands by the later 19th century were becoming the requisite of a newly popular spectator sport.

Racecourse buildings expanded considerably in size during Victoria's reign. Racing itself underwent a profound shift in character during this period. It generally had a poor reputation in the early decades, owing to the amount of crooked betting and the rough nature of racing crowds. The raffish side tended to decline from the 1840s onwards as courses sought to attract larger crowds to the races. Sandown Park was the first course to charge entrance fees in 1875, but as early as 1838 special trains were being laid on to carry passengers to the Epsom Derby. Aintree also benefitted from this growth of racing as a spectator sport: hence the increase in the number of stands from the late 19th century onwards. Racing was becoming increasingly respectable, with women too attending in considerable numbers. Their presence reinforced the need for stands which, besides offering better views of the race, also provided shields from sun and rain, and platforms for promenading and social observation. The years around 1900 saw the largest programmes of rebuilding at race courses: £34,000 was spent at Haydock Park up to 1898 while a massive £80,000 was spent erecting the facilities at Newbury prior to its opening in 1905.

The Pressures on Stands

Sporting structures have been under particular pressure in recent years. The post-Hillsborough drive for improved safety has got rid of the terrace, while the 1985 Bradford fire disaster (in which 56 died) ended the days of the wooden stand. The pressures on race courses are slightly different. One problem is that of the occasional nature of race meetings. Generally, large meetings are only held a few times each year. Buildings such as grandstands have therefore to be used for other purposes than that of spectating: this tends to mean corporate entertainment and parties, which in turn requires an upgrading of facilities and a greater amount of enclosed space. Another pressure on older stands is the growth of corporate hospitality: this requires private boxes (as well as ancillary services) which are alien to the original design of stands. A further factor has been the monies made available by the Tote from revenue from betting for the upgrading of facilities. As a result, few of the older stands survive in anything closely resembling their original configuration. Ayr is said to possess one of the few extant examples, while the July Course at Newmarket retains its thatched grandstand which (according to Country Life's racing correspondent) is the best single race course building in the country.

As a result of these and other pressures, an enormous amount of rebuilding has gone on in recent years at race courses. Some of the new buildings are first rate, such as the Hopkins stand at Goodwood.

Assessment of the Aintree County Stand

Aintree racecourse has known hard times and the stand reflects this. Considerable recent additions and alterations have eroded much of the historic character of the stands, and (to judge from photographs) much of the cohesion of the structure has been lost. There are individual elements of interest remaining, such as the cast iron columns, the heavy turned balusters, the brick and red sandstone side elevation containing the entrance to the press and owners' bar, and the inscribed yellow sandstone rusticated piers. The later canopies in particular have had a damaging effect on the stand and seriously detract from its present appearance.

My personal view (made on the basis of photographs only, and with a less than thorough knowledge of the development of this building type, admittedly) is that the County Stand is mainly listed because of its associations with the Grand National, rather than for its architectural interest. In this it resembles one of the other listed racecourse stands, that at Doncaster of 1881 (see copy) that is 'listed partly for historic association, as racing has played an important role in the history of Doncaster, a C19 grandstand is also a rarity'. The interest of Aintree's County Stand has lessened considerably following recent alterations, as a photograph of the mid 1980s (copy attached) makes abundantly clear. Initial research suggests that pre-20th century stands are now few. Nonetheless, I would be hard pressed to prepare a cogent argument in defence of the County Stand at Aintree.

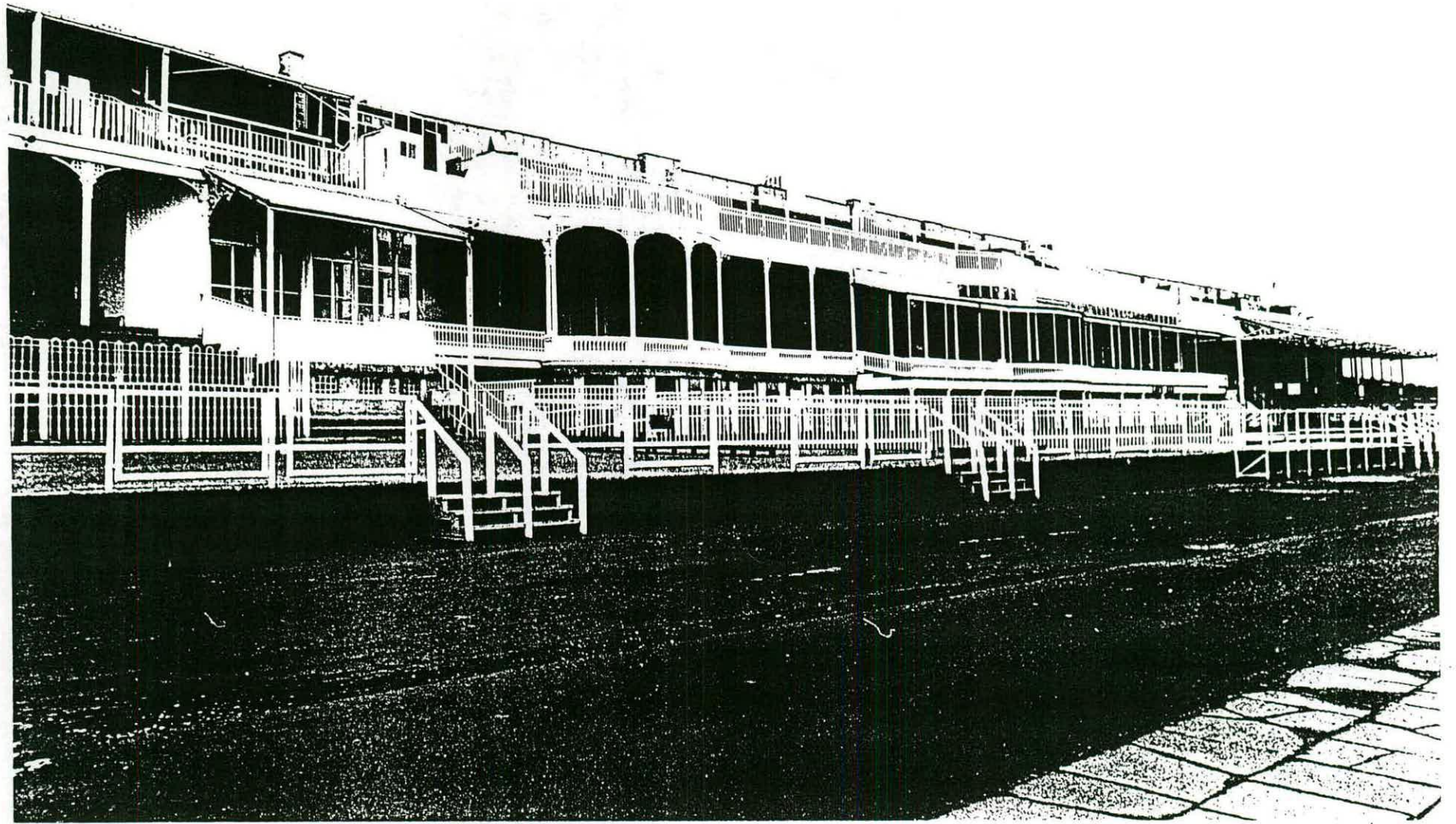
Roger Bowdler
Historical and Analytical Research Team
June 1996.

SOURCES

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Edward Baines, History of the County Palatine and Duchy of Lancashire rev. John Harland (1870).
Edward Bill, 'Racecourse Stands', Architects' Journal, 3 August 1927, 163-74.
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J.H. Walsh, British Rural Sports (1886).
Earl of Wilton, On Sports and Pursuits of the English (1868).

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 Aintree Racecourse: the County Stand, c.1985 photo (NMR)
- 2 Epsom Racecourse: new grandstand (dem.). c1830 lithograph.
- 3 Article on Knutsford Racecourse stand from The Builder, October 14, 1865.
- 4 Doncaster Racecourse: stand by John Carr (dem.). c1820 engraving.
- 5 Doncaster Racecourse: 1881 stand, 1960 photo (NMR).



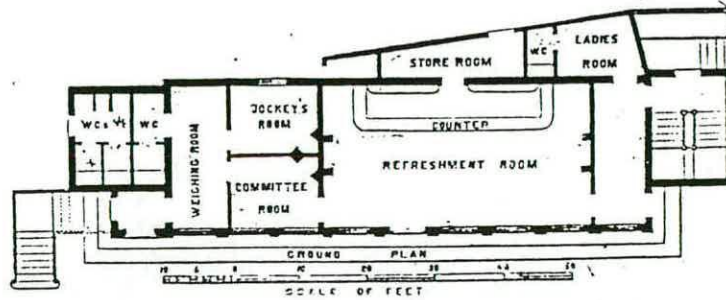
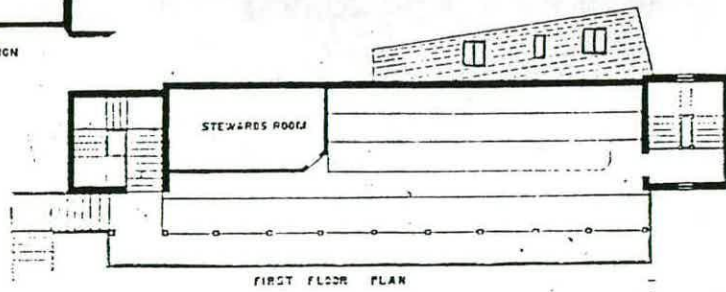
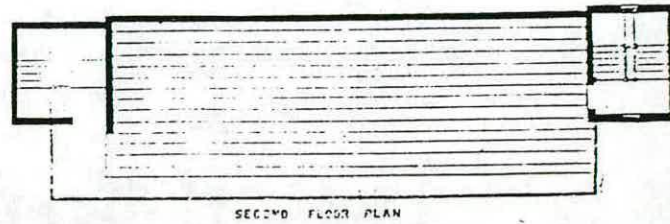
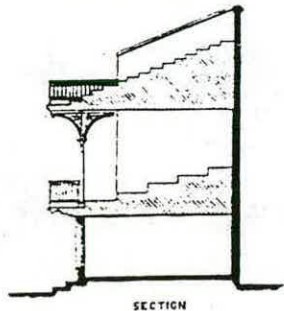
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Aintree

THE GRAND STAND, KNUTSFORD, CHESHIRE.—MR. RICHARD T. BELLHOUSE, ARCHITECT.



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THE FRENCH EXHIBITION PALACE
OF 1867.

We copy from a recent number of *Le Patrie*, on the reduced scale of 400 ft. to an inch, the ground plan of the French Exhibition building about to be erected in the Champ de Mars; and also reproduce, for the sake of comparison, the ground plan of the design for an exhibition building by Messrs. G. Maw, of Broseley, and E. J. Payne, of Birmingham, that was published in the *Builder*, of February 16th, 1861, and to which we have already referred as the apparent source from which the French Commissioners' design was derived.

Independently of the very peculiar and striking system of classification suggested by Messrs. Maw & Payne, which the Imperial Commissioners have adopted, their building appears to be a close reproduction of Messrs. Maw & Payne's plan; the only material deviations we observe being a slight elongation of the ellipse and the omission of some of the rectangular apartments external to the ellipse. Otherwise, the elliptical form, the central elliptical garden, the number of the avenues radiating from the central garden, and even the widening of four out of these sixteen avenues into intersecting transepts, and the external arcade surrounding the elliptical building, are common to both designs.

We would also point out that the arrangement of the concentric avenues and courts which in the French ground-plan appear to slightly differ from the engraved plan of Messrs. Maw & Payne's design, is actually described and suggested in Messrs. Maw & Payne's letter-press. They say, "If it is desired to divide the whole or any part of the space into courts, as in the Exhibition of 1851, the avenues can easily be converted into enclosed spaces without sacrificing the double system of classification;" and again, that "As some of the specific divisions might require wider exhibiting blocks than others, there would be no objection to vary the widths of the concentric rings to suit necessity;" both these suggestions are carried out in the French design.

It is a matter of surprise that without any definite data to work from, Messrs. Maw & Payne should have arranged a plan that can be at once applied to the requirements of a particular exhibition, with such trifling alterations as those made by the French Commissioners.

It is scarcely possible that the numerous points of identity of the two designs can be the result of a series of accidental coincidences, or of separate and independent invention. This is made more manifest by the disavowal by the official architect of the authorship of the plan, which had been adopted before he was appointed by the Commissioners. It is also worthy of remark, that in no great an undertaking no one should have been put forward as the author of the Commissioners' design.

The greatest length of the oval is 1,575 ft.; the greatest width, 1,215 ft.

A. The central garden is 56 metres wide, and 166 metres long.

B. Circular gallery, 7 metres wide, in which will be gathered together all objects belonging to the History of Labour.

C. Gallery of the Fine Arts, 15 metres wide.

D. Gallery reserved for the material and the application of the Liberal Arts.

E. Central road through Gallery D, 5 metres wide.

F. For furniture and connected industries; the part nearest the centre 17 metres wide, the other part 14 metres.

G. Pathway, 5 metres wide.

H. reserved for the industries connected with clothing; the first part, 7 metres wide; the second, 14 metres.

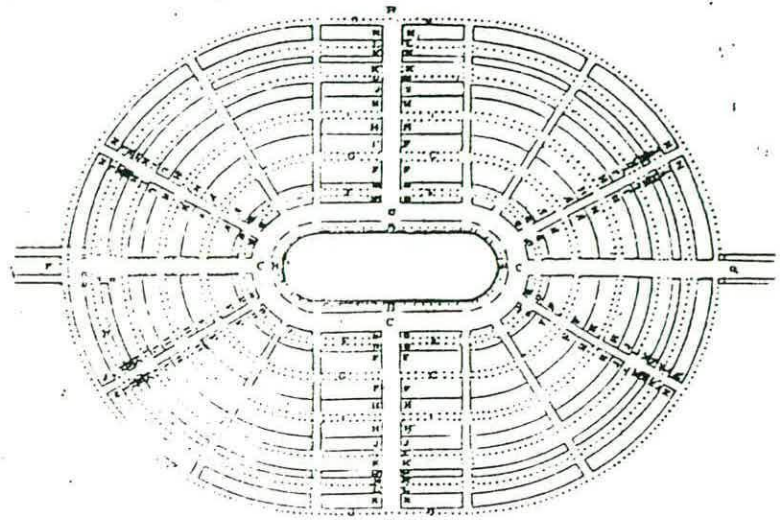
I. Pathway, 5 metres wide.

J. Gallery for raw materials, 9 metres wide.

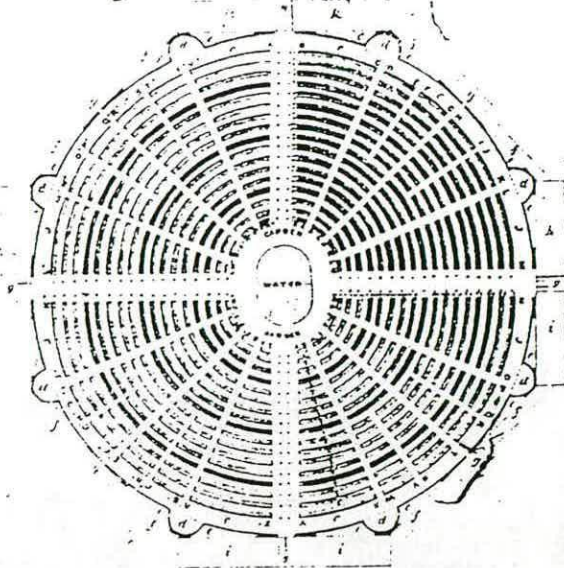
K. Gallery for machinery, with a total width of 35 metres, with a pathway, L, 6 metres wide, and a raised passage-way, M, 3 metres above the surface.

N. Gallery for products used as food, at the outer extremity of which will be placed the refreshment counters, with a covered promenade, 3 metres wide.

The entrance to the Exhibition Building will be at P, Q, R, and S: the first, P, next the Seine, being the only doorway of monumental character. The ground surrounding the building will be laid out as an English park, and will contain separate buildings for agricultural productions, models of workmen's houses, &c. &c.



PLAN OF THE PROPOSED BUILDING FOR THE PARIS EXHIBITION OF 1867.



REFERENCES.

5. Avenues.
c. Fine Arts Gallery.
d. Recesses for Sculpture.
e. Retiring and Lumber Rooms.
f. Arcades.

- g. Entrances.
A. Machinery in Motion.
i. Machinery at Rest.
k. Refreshment Rooms.
l. Newsroom and Exchange.
m. Rooms for Officials and Exhibitors.

PLAN FOR AN EXHIBITION BUILDING BY MESSRS. G. MAW & E. J. PAYNE, PUBLISHED IN "THE BUILDER," FEBRUARY, 1861.

NEW GRAND STAND AT KNUTSFORD,
CHESHIRE.

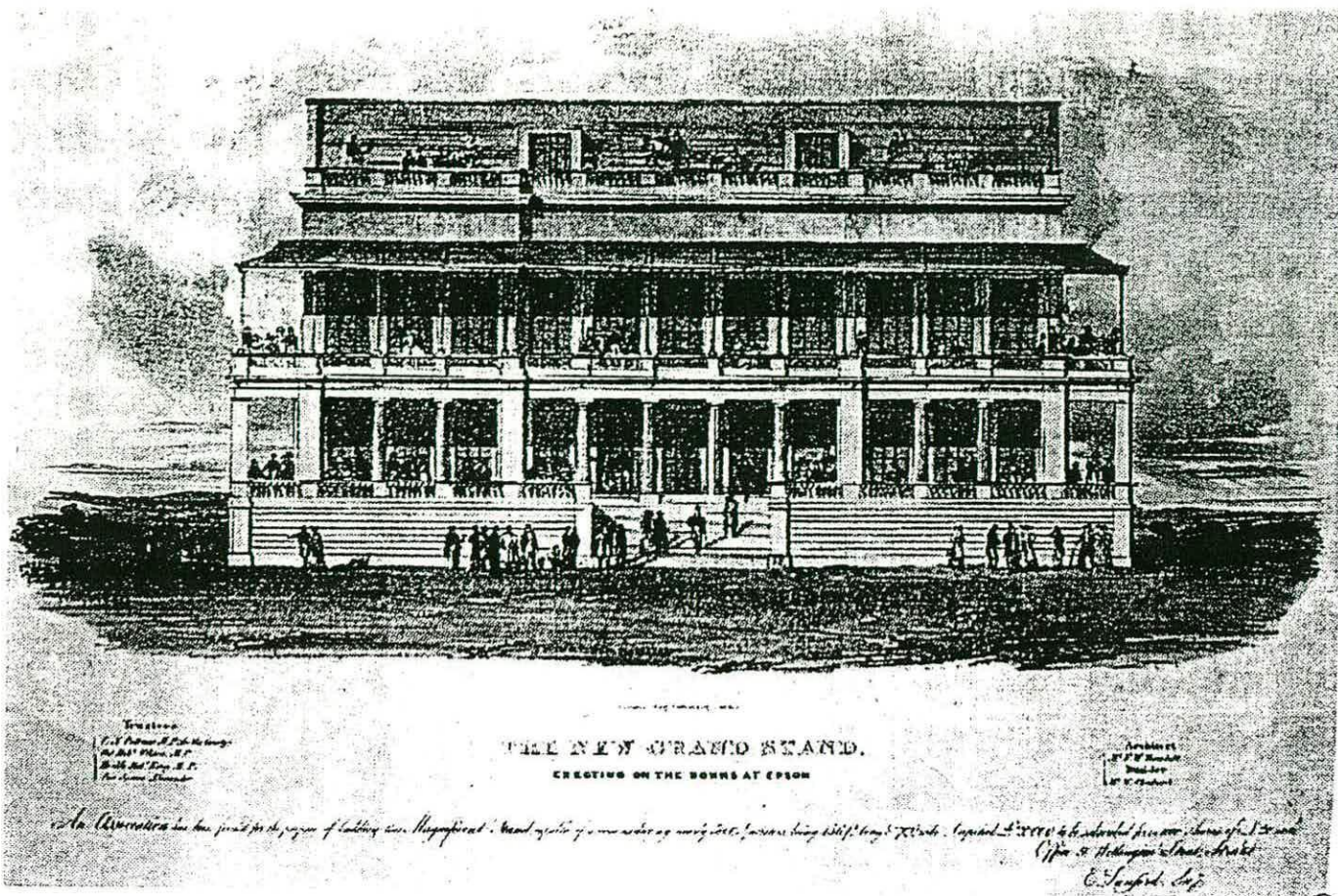
A VERY convenient Grand Stand has been provided for the Knutsford Race-course, through a company organised for the purpose. The ground floor is subdivided into a refreshment-room, 40 ft. by 20 ft.; a committee-room and a jockeys' room, each about 12 ft. square; and apartments for weighing and other purposes.

The first floor consists of a covered gallery, a steward's-room, and passages. The gallery is made to project forward from the lower front like a balcony, the front being open, and the roof supported by a range of ornamental iron columns, with brackets above, forming a series of arches, and projecting forwards so as to support the higher balcony on the roof level. Raised tiers of seats are provided in the covered gal-

lery for the accommodation of 600 persons. The slated roof and the projecting balcony are furnished with planks affording standing-places for about 900 people. At the south end there is a brick tower, wherein is a spacious and convenient oak staircase. At the north end is situated an outside staircase of ironwork leading to the covered gallery, and a set of enclosed stone steps conducts to the stand upon the roof.

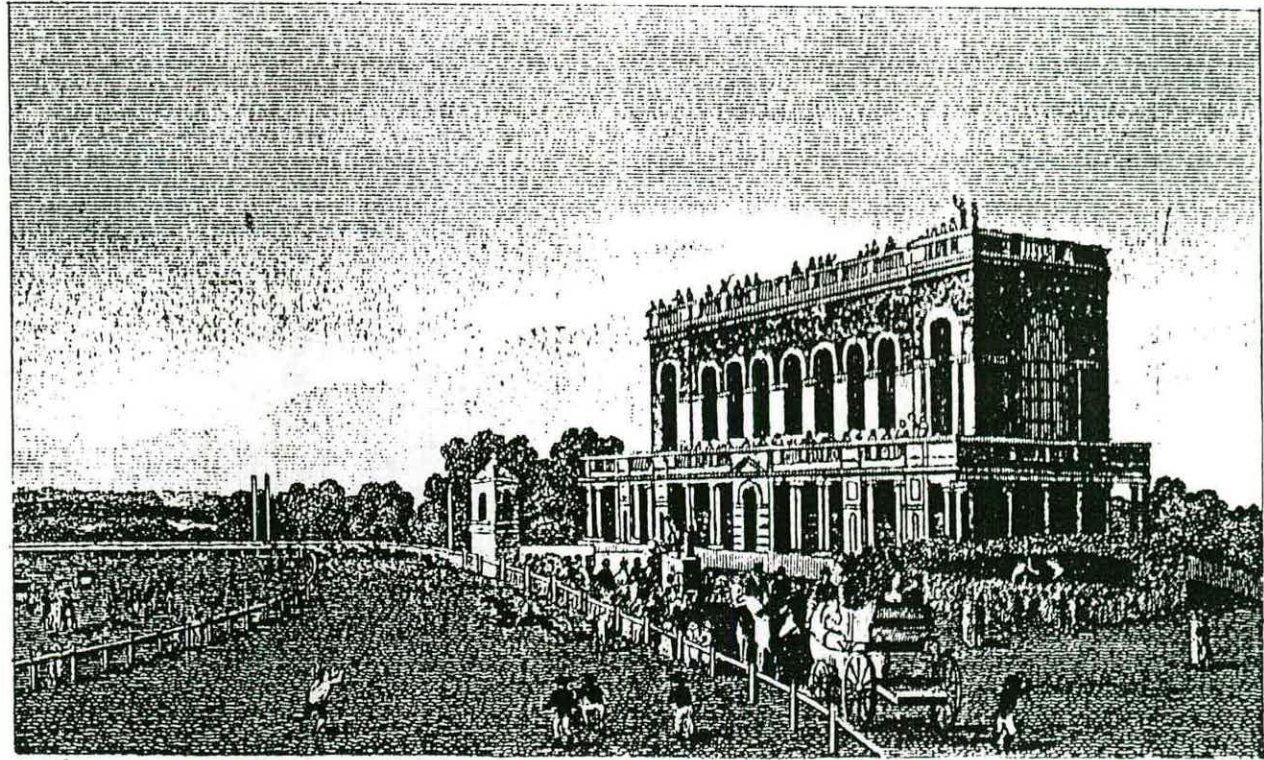
The entire works have been executed by Mr. Paul, builder, of Knutsford, from a design by Mr. Richard T. Bellhouse, architect, Knutsford, at a cost of about 1,700*l.* The ornamental ironwork in front of the covered gallery forms an important feature in the design.

The length of the building is divided into ten bays, with iron columns, spandrels, brackets, &c.; Messrs. E. T. Bellhouse & Co., of Manchester, supplied this portion of the work.



4—A lithograph of the new grandstand, Epsom

1829-30

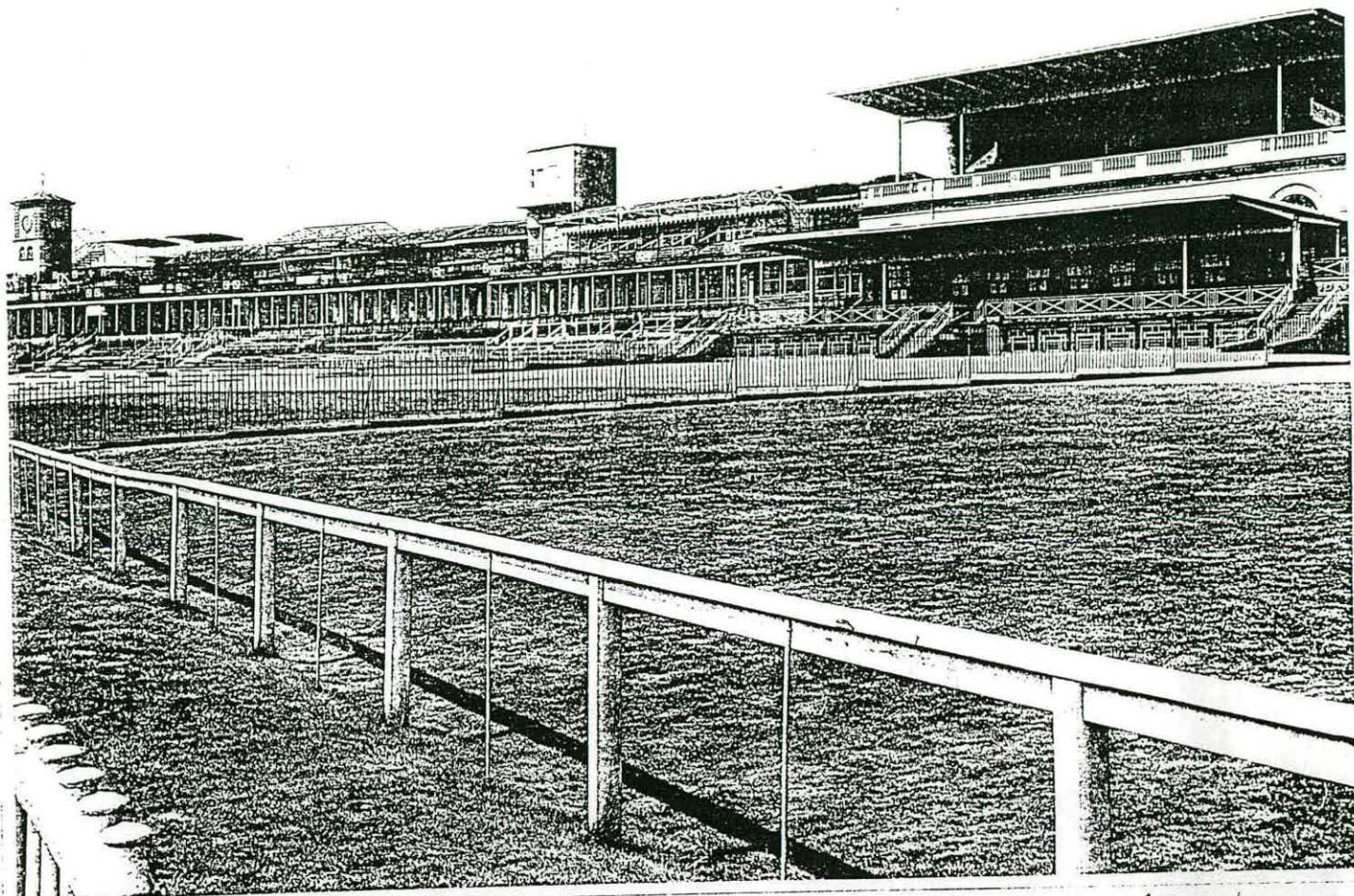


Pub^d by S. Leigh Strand.

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THE GRAND STAND DONCASTER.

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1960

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DONCASTER.