

The Paper Chase

From the Garton Archive: Item of Interest No 24

Many of you will recall the scene from that splendid film 'The Railway Children' in which the boys from a local school were on a 'paper chase'. The three 'Railway Children' watched the boys dropping pieces of paper as they entered a railway tunnel, and then went over the top of the tunnel to the opposite end to see them emerge. Realising that one of the boys was missing, the children went back into the tunnel to find that he had injured his ankle and had the 'misfortune' to be nursed back to good health by the young actress Jenny Agutter!

Tom Brown's Schooldays also contains a reference to a Paper Chase. The pupils tore up old newspapers, books and magazines into small pieces and filled bags with the paper 'scent'. Two good runners were chosen to set off on a cross-country run, laying a trail with the pieces of torn-up paper. The rest of the field set off after the runners had been given a good start, and attempted to locate the 'scent', and ultimately catch up with their prey.

In researching the history of paper chases I found that a game known as 'Hunt the Hare', or 'Hunt the Fox' has been played in English Public and grammar schools since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. It is generally thought that it was formalised into a sport at Shrewsbury School, where it was called 'The Hunt' or 'The Hounds', and was intended to prepare the young gentlemen for the adult pastime of fox hunting.

The game involved two runners known as the 'foxes' who set out on a course of their own choosing in the surrounding countryside, and laid a paper trail for the chasing group of 'hounds'. If the foxes made their way back to the school they were the winners, of course, whilst it was the objective of the hounds to go in for the 'kill' by catching their prey.

There are several books on the histories of both Public and grammar schools in Charles Garton's ex-libris collection in the Garton archive. In the History of the Perse School (Mitchell, 1976), it is recorded that paper chases were very much in vogue in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The runs usually started from private houses on the Hills Road or the Huntingdon Road, where parents provided changing accommodation. The most exciting outing saw the capture of the hares by an irate gamekeeper before the hounds could catch up with them! The School magazine, *The Pelican*, recorded that the hares 'met a pitchfork, a retriever and a keeper who proved deaf to all blandishments.' There were also runs where the trail was confused with other trails laid by the Cambridge University club. However, like so many initiatives, interest in that particular sport waned with the departure of Second Master R Conway, who had been a cross-country 'Blue' and President of the Cambridge University Hare and Hounds. This caused the *Pelican* to enquire in 1904, 'Why is it that the School no longer delights in paper-chases?'

The History of Bristol Grammar School (Hill, 1988) describes a similar decline in interest at a time when many of the School's institutions were experiencing problems in the 1890s. The School magazine reported that football practices were never attended, gymnasium attendance decreased by a half, sports entries dwindled in numbers and paper chases (once a regular feature of the School's year in 1884) were allowed to fall through.

Of course the boys' grammar schools saw their more prestigious cousins in the independent sector as their models not only for the curriculum, but also for the sports and games which they espoused. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that Lincoln Grammar School, with its pretensions to be classed as a minor public school, introduced the sport of paper chasing. The first reference to a paper chase is to be found in February 1888 in the first edition 8 of the 'Organ of the Lincoln Grammar School', the forerunner of *The Lincolnian* magazine, which saw its first edition in February 1897. In the Sports Notes on page 2, under the heading 'Things we want to know', is the question, 'Are we going to have a Paper Chase this year?' Clearly the inference is that such an event had been part of the School's sporting calendar, but was possibly suffering a similar fate to the event at Shrewsbury and Bristol.

There may well have been paper chases in the intervening years, but the next reference is to be found in the April 1888 edition of *The Lincolnian*. The article 'Paperchase' described the first paper chase of the season, which took place on 14th March, with Hicks and Hughes starting out as hares at 2.30 pm. A dozen juniors followed after ten minutes, and about eight seniors seven minutes later. The track was laid through the iron mines, across the railway, and through the small wood opposite Washingborough, where the juniors were overtaken by the seniors. Here the track was lost, but was discovered after a few minutes' delay by Edwards. A good run over two ploughed fields then 'winded not a few', but they stuck gamely to the task, and after crossing a road and the railway line, a little assistance was afforded by some who had gone round on bicycles. (Were they cheating, I wonder?)

The track then lay through Cherry Willingham towards Reepham, but re-crossed the line, where the scent was again lost in a long field, the hares having taken advantage of a strong wind. However the track was discovered in the next field, and lay in the direction of Fiskerton. A farmer came to the aid of the hounds during a later delay, and pointed the hounds in the direction of Barlings across two more ploughed fields. The track from that point 'wended homewards', and at every point the hares appeared to be fifteen minutes ahead, so the task for the hounds began to look helpless.

At this stage the scent now lay on the road for about two miles to Reepham, the hound being divided into two parties. On passing through the village, the first party left the trail which went round by Wragby Road and followed the railway line homewards, whilst the second remained in the village to obtain refreshments!

The hares arrived at the School (the site was then on Upper Lindum Street), followed by the hounds at 5.50 and 6.20 respectively, 'after an enjoyable run of about 18 miles'! The distance travelled is quite remarkable, especially when we Lincoln School pupils of the 1950s seemed hard done by when we were required to run the Junior Cross-country Race over 3 miles, the Intermediate over 4 miles and the Senior over 5 miles! By coincidence all those races began by crossing the 'iron mines', or 'ironstones' as they were later known (The 'Ironie!'), and returning to the School via Greetwell Road.

The next recorded paper chase took place in November, 1902, in which the younger hounds were described as the 'puppies'. The trail lay down Greetwell Road, past Lincoln Prison, and over the 'Ironstones' towards Nettleham. The hardiness of the earlier long distance runners was not matched by this particular pair of hares, who could manage only twelve miles!

Paper chases probably continued intermittently during the next few years, although *The Lincolnian* magazine was discontinued between 1908 and 1911 at the time when the School moved to the Wragby Road site. The October 1913 edition makes brief reference to a Paper Chase held on 15th October, where 'there were a few, but not many, chicken hearts who discovered early symptoms of stones in boots and pains in sides'! However a 'breathless correspondent' in 1914 wrote that the hares set off at 2.00 pm following a course over the inevitable Ironstone Mines and, encouraged by a signalman but hampered by too many kissing-gates, proceeded through Cherry Willingham and Reepham, and eventually returned in a blistered and exhausted state to the cloisters of the new building on the Wragby Road site. A few months later, the Great War broke out of course, and Lincoln Grammar School was evacuated, and the buildings were taken over by the 4th Northern General Hospital.

The July 1923 edition of *The Lincolnian* reported that, since a paper chase had not been held for some time, the event was welcomed with great enthusiasm. The course laid by the hares on this occasion followed a more westerly route, taking in Nettleham and Riseholme, and returning to the School down the Brigg Road. Apparently the cries of the hounds gradually lessened in the distance, and the hares were able to settle down to a steady trot, only breaking into a final sprint as the hounds sensed the kill. Further reports in 1923 and 1925 suggested that the hares were rarely if ever caught by the hounds, who toiled in vain to reach their quarry. The hares also had the advantage of being able to lay false trails, which often held up the pursuit for several minutes.

At this stage in the history of Lincoln Grammar School, since re-named Lincoln School, both the literal and the metaphoric trail seems to have gone cold, and the more romantic 'paper chases' were high-jacked by the more prosaic and predictable 'cross-country' runs. However this brief look back at a time into the history of the School reminds us of the inevitability of change, and gives us another glimpse into the pastimes and traditions of a bygone age.

In researching this article, I did wonder why it was that this one-time popular pastime lost its appeal. Why is it that schools ‘...no longer delight in paper chases’? Perhaps it became too difficult to supervise or monitor, or possibly health and safety reasons intervened? I also wondered who, if anyone, took the responsibility for clearing up the litter!

Unfortunately we have no photographs of paper chases, but the following photograph of a cross-county event in the 1950s is of historical interest.



Mike Hall (second) and Geoff Eastgate (third) in a photo finish in the 1955 3-mile race
Les Wilkinson romped home as the winner in a creditable time of 22 minutes and 22 seconds
House placings were 1st School, 2nd Minster, 3rd Bluecoat, 4th Greyfriars, and 5th Lindum

References

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