



A voice for our village

Video Interview with Jonathan Garratt

Jonathan Garratt, ('JG'), Manager of Cartmel Racecourse

Interviewer : Anna Maria Ashe ('AA')

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AA Jonathan, this is so bizarre sitting on a racecourse, and we're by the enclosure, it's just fabulous because it doesn't actually feel like a racecourse.

JG Well, of course, I sit on the racecourse every day, so it doesn't feel bizarre to me at all. [laughs] But I do think that racecourses have a very special atmosphere, and wherever I go, if I'm on holiday, or whatever I'm doing, I will regularly go and sit on a racecourse, even if there isn't any racing. I just love the feel of racecourses.

AA It's all the better without the racing actually, there's such a quality. How would you describe this place in particular ?

JG Ah, well, golly. Cartmel ... all the racecourses in Britain are different. They're all unique in their own way. But Cartmel is [1 min] totally at odds with almost every other racecourse in the country, and it is very strange in a lovely way. People use words like, quaint, bizarre. [both laugh] It's very unusual. One of the key differences about Cartmel is that at most racecourses you will arrive, you'll probably park in a big car park somewhere, you'll get out of your vehicle, you'll go through a turnstile into a large area where there are big buildings, grandstands, lots and lots of tarmac, and you will sit or stand in the grandstand area whilst you watch the horses race, somewhere out in the distance in front of you. There'll be a circuit laid out in front of the grandstands. And here at Cartmel, the crowd is all in the centre of the racecourse. So we're sat near the parade ring, very small grandstand [2 mins] behind us, and the horses run round and round the outside. And then on the final circuit, instead of running up one of the sides of the racecourse, the finishing straight, they cut straight across the middle of the circuit. So the finishing straight actually bisects the circuit, and that creates two public enclosures inside the racecourse. We're sat in the paddock enclosure, which has the parade ring. The horses parade in the parade ring before each race, and the winners come back to unsaddle there. And the other side is the course enclosure, which on race days has the big funfair and all sorts of things. And people like to bring picnics here, so they park their car, they open the boot, and very often have a very large picnic, in the car boot. And again, that's something that is not prevalent at most [3 mins] racecourses.

AA The great appeal for me is, knowing there's a racecourse here, it's in such close proximity, and normally what that holds in my mind is great busyness. But this morning coming here,

it's so tranquil, and obviously it's not a race day, and it's trying to imagine the feel of a race day which must be so completely different. And the excitement of it, but so close to the village. How does it work ?

JG Yes. Well the contrast is very significant. So my journey to work in the morning is about 10 minutes, and it's a relatively short drive, and it's lovely. Occasionally I pass a car on the way in, but it's not normally very busy. [AA : And race day ...] And race day, I'll be here before six in the morning, [4 mins] and I need to be here well before six because, actually some of the race goers arrive pretty early as well, and it's another key difference between us and lots of other racecourses in the country. Most racecourses will say, well, gates open at 11 o'clock, and they don't really expect anyone to arrive then. Here, we say entertainment starts from say 10 o'clock in the morning, to give people a hint that it might not be decent to turn up before then, but still we always have people waiting by the gates at 7 o'clock in the morning. And they'll be very keen to come in, set up, have their breakfast, set up gazebos and things. And a lot of people will barbeque breakfast lunch and tea, and they'll be on the racecourse here for a good sort of 12 or 14 hours, getting the whole day's entertainment. And so race day builds from then. And if you go for a walk [5 mins] out into the village, before racing in the morning, which is what a lot of people ... come, park up, buy a race card, have a little look, and then they'll stroll into the pub, and ... into the village, to perhaps visit one of the pubs, or coffee shop, or one of the other shops. And it's just thick with people, you know, lovely crowded market place really.

AA And how is it regarded by the villagers themselves, this huge influx on race day ? I suppose mixed feelings ?

JG Yes, I mean, I'm sure Cartmel is a place with, you know, with many individuals with individual views. So, we've certainly got lots of residents that love the races, and will not miss a meeting, and there are some who I'm sure will sort of see it as quite a sort of big distraction to normal daily life, and avoid it where possible. [6 mins] But it's a part of their local community, and on a daily basis, the racecourse is here for all sorts of purposes, for people who live and work in the village. So, the car park for example, is used by, you know, everybody on a daily basis. The main part of the park, that forms the course enclosure, has the football club, the cricket club, the scout hut, they're all .. you know the sports clubs and scouts all use that area quite intensively. And of course people come and they walk their dogs, and all sorts of things, so ...

AA So there's always access for the general public to use it as a park ?

JG Exactly, so over a large part of the racecourse, it's pretty much open [7 mins] all the time for people to walk across and enjoy. And then of course in November, there'll be a bonfire and a fireworks display, and all sorts of things. So the racecourse plays quite a full part in local life. Although I would say it's probably a backdrop, it might not be something that people think about all the time, until it comes to race day, and then suddenly, the racecourse is front of mind, because of course, it's attracting such a large number of people.

AA So with this space that you have here, and obviously just nine meetings, it's nine meetings, what can be done here, or how do you use it for the rest of the year ?

- JG Yes. So there are plenty of other things that go on. The grandstand behind us is regularly used for functions, so people hire it for their weddings, and all sorts of other parties, and things like that. [8 mins] We're very popular for camping rallies. The race course is always a great place to go for a camping rally because we have electricity in certain places, we have loos, we have all the right things. So we'll host about 8 or 9 camping rallies throughout the summer, varying between a long weekend and sort of 9 or 10 days length. So they're very popular. And then we have some other much larger events, so for example, we have the Cartmel Agricultural Show, on the first Wednesday in August each year. Now we don't actually run that ourselves, it's run by the Cartmel Agricultural Society, but this is the venue, and we sort of help them to get things in place, and so on.
- AA So how would you market it as a venue. People just know this space is here, or would you actually actively market it ?
- JG Yes, there are various directories and things that you can be in for camping rallies and [9 mins] weddings and all sorts of things, but a lot of the most effective marketing is word of mouth. So it's often people that have visited here, or have been a guest here at a function, who will say, oo, that was a good place, why don't we go back, or suggest it to other people for their ...
- AA Sort of photographic opportunities – the winners enclosure on the wedding day.
- JG Yes. There are lots of bride and grooms like to have their photographs taken in the winners enclosure. And a lot, actually it may sound slightly strange, but a lot will also have photographs taken on the weighing scales in the weighing room. [both laugh]
- AA Come back for the Golden Wedding ! How might the village actually use you and your space here ? Are you quite willing to offer it up to support them ?
- JG Yes. We engage very closely with all sorts of groups within the village. So, perhaps most naturally, [10 mins] we're considered to be part of the commercial entity of the village. So one of the traders ... there's actually a guild of Cartmel traders, of which the racecourse is part, and we work with the local pubs and retailers, and all sorts of other people who work in the village. And we often host those meetings here in the grandstand, and we host other meetings as well. So there will be perhaps the Cartmel in Bloom society will use the grandstand for occasional functions, and other groups. So we're here as a meeting place and a space, and so people are often sort of coming to us and asking those sorts of questions. You know, can they use this for something, and we're always here, so ...
- AA I believe there's a Steeplechase Sunday, and it's a special celebration. Tell us a little about it.
- JG That's right. Well, Nick Devonish, the vicar [11 mins] from the Priory, every year will bless a horse, outside the Priory, as part of Steeplechase Sunday. So, he'll give a service. They tend to be the typical readings for that Sunday in the year, but Nick will always preach a sermon which is relevant to both the sequential Sunday, but also the steeplechasing and the races. And there have been a number of things in recent year about pilgrimage, because Cartmel for hundreds of years has been a place of pilgrimage, but the racecourse is certainly pilgrimage of a different sort for various people. And this year, they talked about naming, so the naming of horses, but the readings were about the name of God. [12 mins] And so it was all

very relevant and thought provoking, but the most charming thing is that at the end of the service, there will be this blessing of the horse ceremony, and it's just great fun.

AA You have increased the number of meetings in the year. I believe under your tenure it's gone from 7 to 9. [JG : That's right] And have the crowds grown ?

JG Yes, so ... since we've been growing the number of race days, we haven't seen a record crowd, like the 21,000 that we had in about 2001 or 2002 I think it was, but, we had a race day earlier this year when Simply Red played after racing, and that had just over 17,000 people.

AA The concert itself or the entire meeting ?

JG For racing and the concert, so the concert followed immediately after the [13 mins] racing, and it was one ticket if you like. So most people came early and enjoyed the whole race day experience, followed by the music. And then we had a very similar crowd just for racing, an afternoon of racing, on the Saturday of the August Bank Holiday weekend, when again we attracted 17,000 people. And 17,000 is a really good crowd for us. We know that we can get more, you know, when conditions are right, we can get around about the 20,000 we consider to be our ceiling number. But even on a wet Bank Holiday, when you think it's the right day, but the weather isn't really with you, we would still expect 12 to 13,000 people, which is an awful lot of people to be standing in the rain. [both laugh]

AA Your racing must be so good, or the entertainment for people !

JG [14 mins] Well, it's the social experience. So people come to picnic and barbeque, and to meet friends, and to ... a lot of people will come back to the same race meeting year after year as a landmark in their social calendar, whether it's to meet friends or family. And a lot of people, especially if you know Cumbria well, then expect it to rain quite a lot. So a lot of people are not terribly surprised if it turns out to be a slightly damp day.

AA It's part of the experience. But would you expect people, race lovers, to be travelling from all corners of Britain ?

JG Yes. Cartmel attracts people from all over the country. Every race course is different in this respect, so some race courses attract predominantly a local audience. Pontefract, for example, [15 mins] has a very strong following from its local community. It used to be a mining community, and so a lot of people around there, locale, will go racing at Pontefract. Cartmel is almost the opposite. I mean, lots of local people do enjoy coming to the races, but we attract people from Aberdeen, down to Devon and Ashford in Kent, you know. It's all over the country. And perhaps particularly ... so people will come and they'll stay in local hotels and B&Bs, and we now have camping associated with the races as well. So we had about 1000 people camping overnight for the August race meeting. But then those that come for the day, a very high proportioned them are coming from the region around Liverpool, Manchester, Southport, those sort of areas, [16 mins] and so they'll be travelling an hour and a half, two hours, up the motorway. And on the Saturdays in particular, we find we get a lot of coaches and buses, so quite big groups of people coming from that region.

AA Have you introduced a lot of innovation here since you came ? You speak about camping, has that been a long term tradition, that people could come to the races and pitch up ?

JG No, it's quite a new thing for us, so the formal camping that we now provide ... I think that for many years there was a bit of informal camping, people just looking for somewhere to,

you know, put their tent up, not very many of them but a few, but we've been offering camping now as part of the race meetings for 3 years, and ...

AA So what would you offer ? Would you offer the tents themselves ? Would you have them set up ? Or for people to bring their own ?

JG No. At the moment we simply offer a pitch, and what we offer is very very basic. [17 mins] But we've seen the demand just shoot up, so we're now looking at how we develop that further, and what sort of services we might offer. Because what we currently offer is effectively field camping, it's a festival experience if you like, and there are people like me, that probably wouldn't want to camp in a basic field, I like one or two more comforts. [laughs]

AA Quite happy really a few miles down the road.

JG Yes, that's right, and quite happy to go back to a proper bed. So I think that there are sort of developments that we could make in the future, that would appeal to different types of people.

AA What's the one thing that you've brought to Cartmel that you're very proud of ?

JG Actually, I don't think it's anything particularly [18 mins] new. It's just concentrating on the basics to make sure that the racecourse runs well, and it's difficult to explain. I can't really take any credit for the way that the racecourse is, it is a real gem of a racecourse. It has this wonderful personality. It's so different from all the other racecourses. And that's something that is built in, it's built into the landscape, and it's the way that the race meetings have developed, and the visitors that come here think ... they expect a certain sort of atmosphere so they create it. And I can't take any credit for that atmosphere because it was here for a hundred more years before I was here. But before I arrived, I would say that [19 mins] the racing that Cartmel staged was of a very modest quality. And indeed, if you did an analysis, a formal analysis of the classes of race that we run, so that we can run races of any class between 6 and 1, 1 being the best, 6 being the least good, if you had done an analysis 10 years ago of all the race courses of average class, I'm pretty certain that Cartmel would have been propping up the table, right at the bottom. And that was principally because it didn't really need to attract the best horses to attract a good crowd. But I think perhaps, if I've brought something to Cartmel, it's a sense that the racing is also important. So it's ... the social side of the racecourse is [20 mins] incredibly important, that's why people come, but the racing is the backdrop, and I think it's quite an important backdrop, so key things that I have concentrated on in the time I've been here, are to get the track absolutely right, so that the track needs to be safe, and it needs to appeal to as many owners and trainers as possible, so they want to, you know ... when they arrive and see the track, they need to be thinking : that's going to suit my horse, the ground isn't really too firm or too soft. You know we try and produce good ground for every meeting, which is going to broadly appeal to the largest number of people.

AA And how difficult is that for you, as you said right at the beginning, we know what the weather does here, [JG : Yes. yes] so, you know, the going is wet a lot I imagine, [laughs] soft, as we say, so how will that [21 mins] affect, you know, your geographical position ? How does it affect, you know, the success of a racecourse ?

JG It's everything, so we spend a lot of time monitoring forecasts, and some of the time of course it's a hopeless thing to do because you can't change the weather, [laughs] [AA : And you have a fixture] yes, but what we can do is we can ... we've undertaken quite a lot of drainage projects. We, at certain times of the year, we've actually erected marquees over parts of the track that we felt were particularly sensitive, and that's shed the water off, you

know, in a certain direction that's enabled us to grow a good sward of grass in a sensitive area, perhaps on a key part of the bend where the horses tend to dig the track up as they go round the bend, and so it's helped us to prepare the track to it's optimum. And this [22 mins] last year, every race meeting we had, we had a full covering of grass, just as though it was the first race meeting of the season. And that's what owners and trainers, when they come to the racecourse, ideally that's what they want to see.

AA That must be what they're looking for because, at the end of the day, it's about the safety of their horses as well.

JG Yes, exactly, yes. And so this year, we've had lots and lots of plaudits about the quality of the turf and the grass and the ground. We've had more runners than we've ever had before. And yet, as you've said before, more race meetings than we've had before. And so that preparation of the track is a really important thing for me.

AA So perhaps you could say that possibly what you have brought is taking it more seriously, to bring it up to a better standard, so you're getting a better horse racing.

JG Yes, very much so. And the other [23 mins] element to that, in terms of improving the standard of the racing itself, is to get more money into prize money. So the more prize money we have, the better quality of race we can stage. And the two things, the preparation of the track, and the improvement of the prize money, have to go hand in hand, because the better horses won't come if the track isn't suitable, but, you also need to put on more money if you want to stage the races that they will enter into. So both things have to happen in tandem, and we've worked with the local business community particularly, to get sponsorship onto the races, which has helped us to boost our prize money, which has, you know, led to more horses coming. And so we worked with a number of people, and a lot of the names will be familiar to people who [24 mins] live in the village. So for example, Cartmel Sticky Toffee Pudding is ... [AA : Is there such a race ?] they always sponsor the first race of the season, and the first race on the last day of the season. And every single winning connection, every winning owner, every winning trainer, is given a Cartmel Sticky Toffee Pudding, as part of their prize. [laughs] You wouldn't believe it but, you know, somebody might win a £20,000 race, and the odds are that afterwards they will say, of course, we came for the Sticky Toffee Pudding. [laughs]

AA If only you could get away with just the pudding !

JG That's right. But a lot of our sponsors are local and regional brands, so Cartmel Sticky Toffee Pudding couldn't really be more local, but you can buy it from John O'Groats to Lands End, in all sorts of places. And so, a lot of our sponsors are similar, so for example, we've had Willow Water, [25 mins] and the source of Willow Water is just down the road in Flookburgh, but you can buy it in Waitrose and all sorts of supermarkets up and down the country. And so where possible, we try and work with brands like that, that have a local context, and I feel that as well as promoting them to quite a wide audience, they say a lot about us. So when people look at our race programme, they see the Cartmel Sticky Toffee Pudding Novices Hurdle, or the Willow Water Handicap Chase, it says something about who we are as well, and I think that's important, been quite important.

AA Of course, yes. It's identity again, isn't it, a brand, [JG : Yes] your own brand. I was wondering how many people you would employ from the village or the surrounding area ?

JG Yes, well, on a race day, there will be close to 500 people working on the race course. Most of those are not employed [26 mins] directly by us, but they might be employed by contractors, so, our catering staff for example, or the tote betting staff, and those things, and some of those staff will, for example the tote betting staff, will often work around a number of racecourses from day to day, so one day they might be here, next day they might be in Carlisle, another day they might be in Hexham, so there isn't necessarily a call for all of those contracting staff to be local. But a lot of the casual staff that we employ directly, it'll be about 120 people, will, most of them will live within about a 10 mile radius. And we get a lot of help again from our local sports clubs, so local netball club, the football club and the cricket club, will ... they all have a system whereby they give up their time and we pay the club [27 mins] for their time, so it's a way of helping those local clubs, and putting a bit of money into them, [AA : And everyone benefits] exactly, yes.

AA What's the story with having to move the stable ?

JG So, if you were to build a new racecourse now, you'd have to build it to a set of guidelines, and one of those rules, if you like, is that the horses have to be confined to a certain space, from their journey from the stables to the parade ring and out on to the track. They wouldn't be able to cross a highway. And of course at Cartmel, they do. They come out of the stables, they walk down the road, get on to the track, and then come down the track to the parade ring. [AA : Is there a horse crossing ?] So there is a horse crossing that we set up on race days. And there aren't very many racecourses where that still happens, there's probably [28 mins] about 3 or 4 in the country. And we actually have to get special dispensation from the British Horseracing Authority before they grant our license to race each year, to allow us to do that. And part of the dispensation, part of the reason they give us that, is that we need to have a plan for putting it right in the future. So, we actually have a development plan which is ... it's in a sort of plan form on my desk at the moment, and we're probably a couple of years away. But what we would like to do is to build a new stable yard on the other side of the parade ring, where the horses wouldn't actually have to come across the road to get on to the racecourse. And then that will link to a number of other ideas that we have, so around the parade ring itself, [29 mins] we would like to have some new saddling boxes, so that the old wooden saddling boxes that we have, and are fairly ropey, we would like to replace with something a little bit tidier, and ideally, in my view, I think it would be lovely to build something that members of the public could actually walk up and over, and then they would have a fantastic view from the top of there. And there are other aspects as well, so, the camping we've talked about, we would like to sort of formalise that, and put some more facilities in place to improve the quality of the service that we offer there. And again, the village car park which used by so many people on a regular basis, but we would like to get more of the people who work in the village, but don't live in the village, to use the car parking facilities, [30 mins] which will probably mean expanding that area slightly. So those are a few of the things that we're looking to do as part of the future development of the racecourse. And we don't want to change the outlook, you know, and the feel of the place, but we just want to ... our facilities to keep step with where they need to be for the future.

AA And any further developments ?

JG Yes. So at the South end of the racecourse, where the Pay & Display car park is, we would like to expand that area to accommodate parking for more people who work in the village but don't live in the village, and currently there is an initiative, the Cartmel Township Initiative, which is trying to resolve some of the parking and traffic issues in the village, and a large part of the problem is people [31 mins] working in the village who will come and park in particular places all day, and that restricts the short term parking for visitors. So we are hoping that by improving the car park, and providing a permit system for those that work in the village, we might be able to free up some of those other parking areas in the village a lot more, and allow the traffic to flow more freely.

AA An excellent idea. And what about the old stables, what's the planning here ?

JG So the existing stable yard has been included within the local plan for residential development, and at the moment it's probably too early to say what that might look like. But we are now in the process of starting to talk to potential developers who might be interested in building some sort of residential development in that area. [32 mins] And in the long term, I think it would be a lovely place to live, because it's ... it just borders ... although it on this side people tend to think of it being on the road by the racecourse, on the other side it's just opposite L'Enclume, and very close to the Priory itself. So whoever is lucky enough to live there in the future will have some splendid views of the Priory, yes.

AA What's the particular joy that lives in you from being here ? When you come in the morning, and walk with the course, what's ... is it something you're looking forward to each day ?

JG Oh definitely, I mean, I think ... I have a huge amount of pride in the racecourse, and what we've achieved over the last few years, so I'm proud of what I do. I'm proud of the very small team that I have here as well. We have two full time ground staff, Gary Sharpe and Martin Fogg, and at the moment I've got two part time [33 mins] helpers in the office as well, Pam and Lois, and together they pull together some huge events, you know, in the summer. And a lot of people say to me, Jonathan, what do you do for the rest of the year ? You only race from May till August, what do you do all the rest of the time ? But it takes a huge amount of planning. So I'm very proud of them that we pull it off every year. And when it comes to a race meeting, there's a need for that small team to be able to communicate and delegate a huge number of tasks to a much larger team who make it all happen. And so there's quite an art to that, and I think, particularly this year, things have gone very very well, and so that makes me happy. I love horse racing, and I think that's something that motivates me every day. [34 mins] But also, as I mentioned before, just the drive to work, I mean, sometimes ... you know, just coming to work in the morning, and you work in an environment like this, and you think, I'm very very lucky.

Break in recording at 34 mins 17 secs, then silence to end of file at 34 mins 25 secs.