



Sydney McGregor and Lillington Stud Farm

It's now just a memory and a bus stop, but from the mid 1920's until 1961, horses bred by Sydney McGregor at Lillington Stud Farm won all the most famous races of Britain, Ireland and France, including the Derby, the Grand National, the Cheltenham Gold Cup and the Grand Prix de Paris. Up to a hundred horses each year were bred in Lillington and sold all over the world, to clients including the Aga Khan and the Queen Mother, all recorded in the Stud Books which Sydney's great nephew Andrew McGregor still has in his possession.

Sydney's grandfather was Henry Burn McGregor (1820 – 1895), who married a Leamington girl, Keziah Ivens, and moved from Edinburgh to set up in business as a jobmaster, horse dealer and omnibus proprietor about 1860, at first from the stables of the Oak Inn in Radford Road, later in Bedford Street, and lastly at the Bath Mews behind the Bath Hotel. His hourly horse omnibus service provided the first public transport between Warwick and Leamington. When the Leamington & Warwick tramway opened in 1881, Henry McGregor provided the horses.

A jobmaster ran something like a taxi service, hiring out horses and carriages with drivers to the middling sort of Leamington residents who could not afford to keep their own in town. He also stabled horses for visitors, and hired out horses to visitors for hunting, then very popular in the country round about.

Henry's youngest son, Eddie McGregor (1861 – 1950), bought the livery stable business from his father in 1892, and in 1897 moved it to the Binswood Mews in Trinity Street, living next door with his wife Eliza and two young sons, Sydney and Edward, at Kelso Villa, 38 Binswood Avenue. Both boys were educated at Leamington College, just across the road.

Eddie began farming and horse breeding at Bericote Fields Farm from around 1900, and later at the Hut Farm at West Hill, Cubbington. He was himself a successful jockey, but was best known as proprietor of the Tally Ho Coach, drawn by four or sometimes six horses, which ran daily in the summer from Leamington to Stratford from 1890 until the outbreak of war in 1914. Binswood Avenue is wide enough for a coach and six to turn round without stopping. In 1892 Eddie took a party of friends in a coach and four, travelling the ninety miles from Leamington Town Hall to London in a day, leaving at 6am and reaching Aldersgate Street at 6:45pm, changing horses five times.



The McGregor racing colours

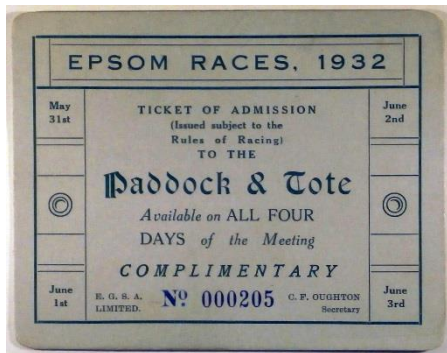
The Great War and the motor car put an end to coaching and jobmastering. Although some of the Binswood horses went to France, Eliza saved the best from requisition by hiding them among the rhododendrons in Bericote Woods. In 1916, with the war still in progress, Sydney's brother Edward took the tenancy of Manor Farm, Lillington, buying the freehold in 1921 after Sir Wathen Waller put his Lillington estate up for sale. When Sydney returned from three and a half years active service in France as a sergeant with the Warwickshire Royal Horse Artillery, he ran a motor garage from the Binswood Mews for a while, but horse breeding and dealing carried on at Bericote, and when his father bought part of Village Farm in 1926, the stud moved to Lillington.

Sydney married Katherine Terry in Lillington Parish Church on 1st July, 1930. Her red sports car and auburn hair had proved irresistible. They lived at first with her mother at *Ling Ness*, on the corner of Lillington Avenue and Arlington Avenue. The rest of Village Farm was bought in 1931, and Sydney and Katherine moved to a new house by the stable yard in newly-named Epsom Road in 1933. Their daughter Julia was born in 1934.



Lillington Stud Farm House

Bogskar, bred by Sydney McGregor, won the 1940 Grand National, but his most famous horse must be



April the Fifth, born at Lillington on Sydney's fortieth birthday in 1929. Tom Walls, who was famous as an actor and producer of Aldwych farces, bought a half share in the horse and trained him at his Epsom stables.

The Derby is a race for three-year olds, so a horse gets only one chance at it. 1932 was to be his year. Ridden by Fred Lane, *April the Fifth* started at 100-6. By Tattenham Corner he was still well back, but over the last half mile he pulled ahead, winning by $\frac{3}{4}$ of a length in 2 minutes 43 seconds. The horse was a very popular winner, though he never won another race, and retired to stud at Lillington. Among his offspring was *Red April* who won twenty three races for his owner, Lord Stalbridge, and two horses, *Good Days* and *Gladness*, who would play a key part in the career of the great Irish trainer, Vincent O'Brien.

Sydney McGregor and Vincent O'Brien met by chance at a Newmarket sale in December, 1943. Sydney saw something in the 26-year old O'Brien which prompted him to offer to help. Sydney found a buyer, Norman Wilkinson, to take a half share with O'Brien in *Drybob*, and then sent him *Good Days*, telling O'Brien to train him for the Irish Cesarewitch. Sydney McGregor's advice was sound. In 1944, O'Brien's first season as a licensed trainer, he gambled on both horses winning the Irish Autumn Double - the Cambridgeshire and the Cesarewitch - and won famously when they came in at 800-1. O'Brien's career benefitted again in 1954, when Sydney McGregor sent him the yearling filly, *Gladness*, a daughter of *Bright Lady* and granddaughter of *April the Fifth*, who would win eight races for O'Brien, including the Ascot Gold Cup in 1958, ridden by Lester Piggott.



Bright Lady, daughter of *April the Fifth*, won the 1943 Ascot Cesarewitch

Housing development on Village Farm had begun in Gresham Avenue in 1935, but a compulsory purchase order by Leamington Corporation in 1949 took 58 acres from the original 194 acres. Further purchases followed, and by 1961 only seventeen acres were left. In September 1961, Sydney McGregor, by now aged 72, sold his last three yearlings, and for the first time in over a century there were no McGregor horses in Leamington. Sydney McGregor died at the Stud Farm on 4th April, 1970, the day before his 81st birthday.



This cupboard now at Weston Hall Farm came from Lillington Stud. On the inside of the doors are listed some of the horses bred at the stud and races won by them.



A week after April the Fifth's famous win at the 1932 Epsom Derby, Sydney McGregor entertained one hundred and twenty of his old comrades from the Warwickshire Royal Horse Artillery to dinner at the Bath Hotel, Leamington.

Sources

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