



## A Dodgy Hillman 10, The Tiller Girls and Horses Making Monkeys Of Us



*In his young(er) years, David Allan worked as a 'Board Man' in London betting shops. That's not him in the photo above, but you get the idea?*

IN the dim and distant past, I had what today is called a Gap Year. Mine did not involve anything exotic like back packing in Thailand, but it did do (part of) a job on me. The “job” was to try to grow up a little before going up to university too young.

Less than ten years beforehand, compulsory National Service in the UK had been abolished with the immediate effect of making every university entrant two years younger. In those days, the university population was smaller but its members in their first year were, quite suddenly, closer to children than to the pipe-smoking “young university chaps” so stereotyped in black and white Ealing Comedies.

The impact was especially pronounced in the colleges of the ancient universities where undergrads more or less made their own study timetables, attending what lectures they preferred in order to get through fearsome one-on-one weekly

tutorials often with the person who wrote the book about the subject being studied. Sherry was sometimes served to steady the nerves.

My gap year consisted partly of teaching and partly of working as a Board Man in betting shops.

The teaching part had racing connotations but first let me make it clear. Having a memory for facts, figures, events, quotations, dates and so on – which is what had carried me through academic life thus far – is one thing. Learning to think is something else and of course I fairly soon banged my head on that reality. The aforementioned Don who wrote the book was rarely impressed.

Nevertheless, at 17/18 I found myself teaching Maths and Music Appreciation to 9-13 year-olds as well as being an Assistant Housemaster at the Junior School of St Peter's, York which was (*to page 2*)

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founded in 627 AD. St Peter's has had its tongue in its cheek for several hundred years "disputing" King's School Canterbury's claim to have been founded earlier – 597 AD. Sometimes, a rugby match was held to decide which was actually the oldest.

How incongruous to consider – in 2017 – that a 26-year-old master and a teenaged one (me) were allowed to take a party of 11-13 year-olds climbing in the Lakes for a week with heavy Easter holidays snow at all heights. Actually that was regarded as completely normal.



*The young "Allanmobile" was a 1948 Hillman 10. The author hastens to add that his was already an old model when he bought it.*

On the other hand, when I squeezed five or six 12-year-olds into my first car, a Hillman 10 with many parts of it not working, to go evening racing at Pontefract and Thirsk, the level of disapproval was quite severe. I wanted to take some of them to the May Meeting at York's own great racecourse but was prevented. But therein lies my love of the city and – for me – the very best of all racecourses anywhere.

After the academic year, my attempt to grow up was continued in betting shops. I did two weeks' apprenticeship as a Board Man on Fulham Broadway, still a kid really and excited to be "professionally" involved in racing.

Such shops were primitive, only legalised for a few years – a disastrous move for the finances of British Racing, redressed 56 years later (now) by thrilling

new legislation. But back then there was a different kind of thrill and intensity.

With The Sporting Life pages of racecards drawing-pinned on felt boards around the room, the only other reading material was The Board, a very large blackboard on the wall behind the grills at which the punters punted.

There were of course no screens. Not allowed until 1986. And no commentaries to hear. Only the tinny voice of the single broadcaster relaying (through a single speaker with a fabric front cover) each show of betting plus the warning announcements of "Going Down Salisbury" or "At the Post Ripon".

When races started, the call was "Off at Haydock" - or wherever - signalling the end of betting on that race. Then silence. Or maybe a show from another racecourse. Everyone was on tenterhooks 6, 12, 18, 24 times every afternoon, sometimes evening. Then "Result Haydock" would come through the loud-speaker, listing the winner and placed horses with their starting prices. If the shop had done well, the rule was "dead straight faces". I got ticked off very early on, showing boyish delight when a horse of which I was a special fan was called as the winner.



*"They're off!" at Pontefract.*

Throughout all this "commentary", it was the job of the Board Man to record every detail for all to read.

The runners in every race had to be chalked up over the top of rubbed out completed races. Every betting show was chalked up as the race approached, reacting to the disembodied voice chanting the odds as they were relayed by tic tac from the bookies' pitches on course.

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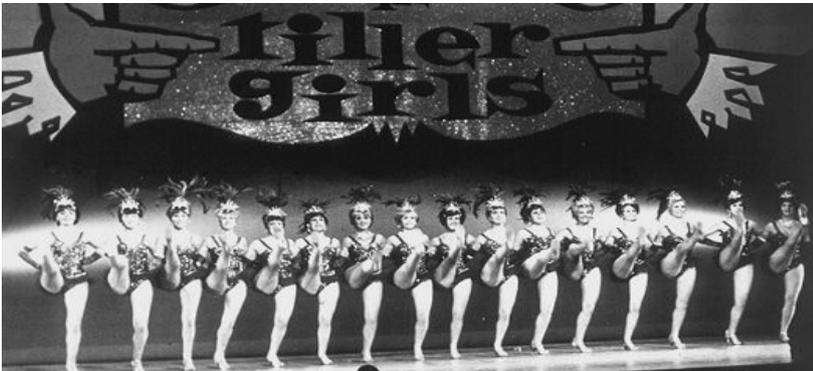


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Punters could see – as they do electronically today - what was drifting, what was being backed and what was a rag. You had to write quickly with three races due off every half an hour. Board Men had to spell without error – no spell checker and no database - and keep up with complicated announcements of odds. Odds such as 100/8 and 100/6 were in common use- only 100/30 remains now – and woe betide any Board Man who made an error or whose chalk writing was not easily legible from the back of the shops – usually through thick cigarette smoke. It was like a form of theatre, which for reasons too lengthy to explain here, suited me down to the ground. As did the location of my second shop where I was properly “in charge” of the Board.

It was right opposite the Stage Door of the London Palladium in Great Marlborough Street. Stars and stagehands, musicians and cleaners: they would all pop in for a flutter around afternoon rehearsals or matinées mingling with regular punters and staff. The noise in the shop from this vibrant, joyful community made it difficult to hear the disembodied man telling me what to chalk up. Most of that noise was laughter and somehow we sorted everything out.

That’s where I first heard “*The horse I bet on was so slow, the jockey kept a diary of the race*”; “*My horse started at 25/1 – he was supposed to start at 12.30*”; and (trainer to jockey) “*Ride him to win – I’ve got a monkey on him and so’s the wife*” (jockey) “*Won’t be room for me then*”.



*The original Tiller Girls at the London Palladium.*

One afternoon – a big midweek race day – most of the Tiller Girls came in, in costume and made-up. The high kicking line of Palladium dancers had iconic national status, nothing less. Their friendly, giggling presence excited everyone in the shop, some of whom threw screwed up betting slips at me when I missed a call, gawping at the enmeshed legs on these extraordinary creatures.

The whole Palladium company had clubbed together to put “a monkey” on a particular horse: a single bet of £500, a very large sum – so-called (and still called) a monkey by returning soldiers serving in the Indian Army, familiar with the 500 rupee note on which there was a picture of a monkey.

Racehorses, of course, regularly make monkeys out of all of us. But they do take us to some wonderful places! - tt.

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