York Racecourse Trackwork Project: TELL ME MORE

York Races

As you may be aware York Racecourse has undertaken a major trackwork project over the past year. The purpose of the following section is to outline the project, advise on progress to date and activity to be undertaken by answering some questions.

What are the elements of the trackwork project?

The trackwork project at York Racecourse is one of the largest of its kind on a British racecourse and the first time a comprehensive drainage scheme has been installed under the racing surface at York. The works involve four elements. Firstly, to install a comprehensive drainage scheme throughout to allow better management of the track, thus helping reduce the risk of abandonments and improving conditions, particularly in excessively rainy periods or periods of drought. Secondly, to widen and re-grade the south bend which will allow more options for producing fresh ground with rail movements and to improve the camber around the home bend. Thirdly, completely replacing and upgrading the irrigation system fed by drilling a bore hole into the natural aquifer some 90 metres below ground; this provides the water for both boom irrigation and a new network of pop up sprinklers. The final element of the scheme is a new service track around the inside of the racecourse used by the ambulance and vets on a raceday and racecourse maintenance vehicles. It will also provide an all-weather alternative for joggers and walkers on the Knavesmire.

Why is the work being undertaken?

The quality of the racing surface is one of the key assets of any racecourse. Recent improvements in turf technology, drainage and irrigation offer the opportunity for us to improve the performance and consistency of the racing surface, particularly in periods when it is very wet or very dry. This will help us to consistently produce a top class surface for the best thoroughbreds to compete at York.

Although the project had already been designed, the disappointments of losing the June meeting in 2007 and Ebor 2008 serve to further show the importance of having the best drainage scheme available in these times of climate change.

How has the work progressed?

After a period of consultation and development, the planning application was submitted in late May 2007 and granted that summer. Enabling work on the trackwork project commenced in January 2008. Seven deep carrier drains were dug and now link the track drainage system to a large culvert beneath the centre of the Knavesmire which then flows into the River Ouse. During the summer of 2008, main drains and irrigation pipes were installed alongside the racing surface and the service road was constructed. Work on the widening of the south (home) bend was completed and turfed and this should be available for use in 2010. After the end of the season in 2008, work commenced on the racing surface itself with a lateral drain inserted across the racecourse every 5 metres and sand filled slits injected parallel to the running rail every one metre, thus creating a grid effect. All these drains were inserted by the end of October 2008 and the racing surface was then protected from any construction traffic.

The project has progressed well and on schedule and the racing surface is set for the start of the Dante Festival on Wednesday 13 May 2009.

March 2009: The track viewed from the six furlong start, the new canter down can be seen to the right.

Have any extra elements been added as the project progressed?
Additional French drains have been installed to help address surface water running from adjacent land, these have been laid outside the racing surface yet offer further protection of it. A grass canter down has also been installed on the stands side of the home straight; it will further save the racing surface as horses will use the canter down to go to post. The track itself remains at its original width.

What happens next?
The project has progressed well and to schedule. In autumn 2009, the final phase of the project will see the completion of some minor earthworks to marry in the levels on the new extended south bend and the existing racing surface.

Who is doing the work?
The project has been led by William Derby and Adrian Kay from York Racecourse. The scheme has been designed and specified by Mike Harbridge from Professional Sportsturf Design from Preston who designed York's north bend and is vastly experienced in racecourse track design as well as football, rugby and cricket pitches. The main contractor is J Mallinson (Ormskirk) Ltd and the irrigation contractor, Arden Lea. These contractors are experienced and specialist firms focussed on sports turf construction at Premiership football stadia and Championship Golf Courses.

The project represents a £2.5m investment by York Racecourse in the racing surface with the Levy Board supporting the funding of the scheme.

What difference will I notice after the work has been done?
As with many infrastructure projects, once the work has been done, then there will be very little to see and the York vista will be much the same as now. The south (home) bend will be a little wider and there has been an upgrade to the service track that follows the inside of the course.

Would the drainage work have saved the Ebor Festival 2008?


Spring 2008: A Carrier Drain Trench is laid

This is a very difficult question to answer categorically. It certainly would have helped and it is a bitter irony that the last August meeting to be held, without the drainage system being installed since racing started on the Knavesmire in 1731, is the one that was lost to the weather. August 2008 was an exceptionally wet month and was the second wettest month we had on record (the wettest being June 2007). We hope that the last two summers were an exception rather than a trend. So whilst we have learnt that, given the force of nature, there can be no guarantees; we are certainly better placed now than ever before to withstand the worst of the elements.

Trackworks: Facts and Figures

- 24 miles of drainage and irrigation pipes, enough to reach Leeds Railway station or complete 12 circuits of the racecourse.
- 3 main drains (go around the inside of the track like a wheel), 7 carrier drains (spokes of the wheel linking main drains and culvert), 452 lateral drains (the tread on the tyre on the wheel, actually under the track).
- 7,500 days of work, equivalent to a thirty-five year project for one person.
- 308 sprinkler heads: 30% more than a typical 18 hole golf course.
- 90 metre (nearly 300 feet) deep borehole, equivalent to 3 Ebor Stands underground.
- 6,300,000 gallons of sustainable water supply available annually under the licence from the borehole, equivalent to the daily drinking water for a year for nearly 4,000 racehorses.

March 2009: Winning Post, Track heading towards north bend, canter down and Parade Ring