

## The Kennett House Ringer: A scandalous episode in East Ilsley's racing history

By Kay Sanderson



Seventy years ago East Ilsley was the centre of a horse racing scandal that culminated in a trial at the Old Bailey. It involved a “ringer” – the substitution of a good horse for a mediocre one. The trial lasted for seven days and was reported daily in newspapers nationwide. An unusual feature of the trial was the appearance of one of the horses in court as an exhibit.

Edward Ernest Hill came to East Ilsley in 1946 to train at Kennett House. He was a former jockey, and a gambler. A close friend, Jack Morris, was one of his owners and also a betting man. In May 1949 Hill and Morris went to Ireland. At the Curragh they bought a promising two-year-old colt called Stellar City from Mrs Lilian Quirke for £1,400. Stellar City had already run three times, winning twice, and being placed in his other outing. This horse had a white star on the forehead.

A week later in Dublin, the pair arranged to buy another horse for £325, “a thin, poor, weak and undernourished horse” named Peaceful William, which had run once unplaced. Peaceful William was similar in appearance to Stellar City, but without the distinctive white star. The trainer and head lad where he was stabled testified later that it would have taken at least six weeks to bring the horse into a condition fit to race.

By the time the two horses reached Kennett House, they had swapped names and form history. The horse now known as Peaceful William performed well in a trial gallop, easily beating two other horses while carrying considerably more weight. Around this time Harry Pearce, the East Ilsley saddler, received an order from Hill for a bespoke bridle. Harry duly made the bridle which had, as requested, a leather disc sewn on to the browband, which would conceal any mark on a horse's forehead – should there be any such mark.



Harry Pearce in his workshop

The false Peaceful William was to continue his racing career in the humblest of company, running in selling races, beginning at Carlisle on 29 June. With a late change of jockey to throw casual punters off the scent, he was backed from 100/8 down to evens favourite and won by a length. In his next outing at Yarmouth on 6 July, he finished third. Two weeks later at Lanark he won by an impressive five lengths, having been backed down to 2/1, followed by another easy win at Alexandra Park a month later at 3/1. By this time "Peaceful William" had attracted some attention as being a horse with some ability, but in his next run at Bath he finished a distant third, his odds of 100/9 suggesting no serious money had been bet on him.

The movements of the two horses over the next year are unclear, but Hill claimed that the horse known as Peaceful William had become untrainable, that he "turned sour, and turned a pig, and would not go on the Downs". The horse falsely known as Stellar City had allegedly been sold to race under Pony Club rules. One thing seems certain: the real Peaceful William was disposed of, either sold to the knacker for horsemeat, or (as was rumoured locally) buried clandestinely somewhere in the village or on the Downs.

Meanwhile back in Ireland Mrs Quirke had been wondering what was going on with Stellar City, the good horse that she had bred. Her enquiries drew various excuses from Hill which left her unconvinced. Subsequently suspicions were aroused, the Jockey Club took an interest and the police began to investigate.

Feeling the net closing in, Hill had the real Stellar City photographed, with his white star showing, and put pressure on several of his young apprentices to sign it confirming it to be Stellar City. They complied, of course – no apprentice would have dared disoblige his trainer. A few months later, when interviewed by police in June 1951 they all admitted that at the time they did not believe it to be Stellar City, as the horse they knew as Stellar City had no white star. On the fourth day of the trial, Stellar City himself was brought to the Old Bailey for identification.

Hill and Morris were both arrested on 14 June 1951. Hill had already dismissed his staff and put Kennett House up for sale, amid rumours that the Jockey Club had withdrawn his licence.

The trial opened at the Old Bailey on 22 October 1951. Hill and Morris both pleaded not guilty to two charges of "*conspiring to cheat and defraud horse owners and promoters of horse races by entering a horse known as Stellar City in the name of Peaceful William; to four counts of obtaining by false pretences, with intent to defraud, sums totalling £875 from racecourse companies in Carlisle, Lanark, Alexandra Park and Bath; and one count of attempting to similarly obtain £170 at Great Yarmouth*".

There was more to it: Morris's bank statements were given as evidence and they revealed that, over a two-month period, £30,000 had been paid in from successful bets. It is likely that the pair made as much as £50,000 from betting on their ringer. There was a price to pay though. Both were found guilty and sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment. Both were also “warned off” by the Jockey Club, ending any hopes of further involvement in racing.



RACEHORSES leaving the village on their way to the training gallops.