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INTRODUCTION

Pleasure and recreation deserve inclusion in any survey of Anglo-Japanese history. The British connection was critical to the development of Western-style horse racing in Japan from the 1860s onwards and has continued to influence what is today an important component of the nation’s leisure industry. Racing matters in Japan. What began diffidently as little more than an amateurish diversion
for the tiny expatriate communities of the treaty ports has evolved into a vast multi-billion Yen enterprise that provides entertainment, employment and a substantial return to the exchequer through the highest betting turnover in the world. The sport also has important international ramifications and racing can be seen from its earliest days to have mirrored, however approximately, the general state of Japan’s ties with the outside world.

Yet it remains a neglected story for students of British links with Japan. Despite the fact that the early years of racing are covered in voluminous detail in the rival nineteenth-century English-language newspapers, racing rarely receives more than a brief mention in the standard texts. There does not appear to be anything remotely comparable to Austin Coates’ valuable treatise on racing in Hong Kong and elsewhere on the China coast, although the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the opening of Yokohama recently prompted such illustrated material as the Equine Cultural Foundation of Japan’s nicely titled ‘Civilization[,] enlightenment and horse racing.’ What follows is very much a set of tentative findings on a subject where historical, cultural and sociological work has barely begun.

EARLY DAYS

The difficulties of tackling the evolution of racing in Japan so long after the event become readily apparent when searching for the date of the first race meeting. Although official and unofficial sources are content to endorse differing years, it can now be stated with a degree of confidence that organized Western horse racing began on Saturday 1 September 1860. The most reliable source to this date is the statement of the pioneering American businessman and journalist Francis Hall. He noted in his journal:

Today is famous in the annals of western civilization on the shores of Japan as inaugurating the first horse race. The foreign citizens according to programme held the Yokohama races 1st season on a spot of ground prepared near the Bluffs. It was a half mile course on a firm sandy bottom. Its situation was picturesque. Bordering the home stretch were the undulating hills of the bluff covered with profuse vegetation. On the other sides were the green vegetation of the plain and the town of Yokohama. The course was marked off by posts and ropes. A judge’s stand, and stand for spectators was erected, which was filled with foreign population. Numerous entries were made. The contest was amusing at the least. There was running and trotting. Some horses would not go at all, others went where their riders did not wish them to go, and riders went where they did not wish to go. The animal showed his native stubbornness to the full. Several gentlemen were unhorsed but fortunately nobody [was] hurt. A Hurdle race was the