

## **Horses, Races and Pedigrees**

HI3T5 Value in the Age of Reason

2025-6, term 1, week 10

Dr. Michael Bycroft

### **The origins of horse-racing**

- Newmarket racecourse established 1636, Charles II wins Newmarket Town Plate 1671
- Ascot races established 1711, near Windsor Castle, by Queen Anne
- By 1714, “[horse] racing had spread throughout the length and breadth of England” (Blanning 2007)
- National racing calendar printed from late 1720s
- Jockey Club oversees races from 1750s

### **A window onto eighteenth-century Europe**

- Hunting with horses (especially of foxes and stags) a royal and aristocratic pastime
- Louis XIV said “L’État, c’est moi” in 1655 when storming into Paris Parlement after a hunting exhibition; Louis XVI wrote “nothing” in his diary on July 14, 1789, because he did not hunt that day
- Deforestation due to agriculture and shipbuilding makes fox-hunting feasible in England due to large grassy fields
- Science: selective breeding of hounds (Hugo Meynell at Quorn Hall, Leicestershire, 1750s) modelled on selective breeding of livestock (Robert Bakewell, Meynell’s neighbour)
- “Never before (or perhaps since) has there been such a rapid and complementary development of two species [ie. horses and hounds]” (Blanning 2007)
- Hunting and racing part of the public sphere, akin to salons and coffee houses
- Political significance of hunting: associated with Tories rather than Whigs; but tenant-farmers of gentry also involved; serves as a social glue binding king, court and country

### **Evaluating race-horses**

- Key idea: judge a child by its parents, the parents by their parents, etc.
- “Breeding,” “pedigree,” “ancestry,” and “blood” key concepts for evaluating people in an age when birth matters more than merit
- Breeding also key for agricultural reformers such as Robert Bakewell (see above)
- The “English” thoroughbred was defined by its ancestry
- Three Middle-Eastern stallions, Byerley Turk (imported 1688), Darley Arabian (1704), and Godolphin Arabian (1729)
- General Stud Book published from 1793 to track pedigrees of English horses