

## Where Did the first Derby start from ?

Kevin McCarthy & Michael Church

### Abstract

This article shows that the first Derby Stakes, run at Epsom on Thursday, the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, 1780, “over the last mile of the Course,” took place on the Orbicular Course (see Fig. 5.) known to have been in use in 1710, and not, as previous racing historians have assumed on the earlier straight four-mile course that ran between the current winning post and an unknown starting place over Banstead Downs towards Carshalton. We demonstrate that the orbicular course, which crosses the current racecourse at the mile-post, had already superseded the earlier course by at least 1716, since when annual Epsom race meetings have been run there. We introduce new evidence from the public domain in the form of eighteenth-century newspaper accounts, book excerpts, and maps which redefine current thinking as to where the race began. Finally, we show by way of a new course plan how the various Derby courses on Epsom Downs have co-existed, and pinpoint the exact location of the 1780 Derby start.

### Introduction

Much that has been written about the earlier races for the Derby is indebted chiefly to the imagination of writers, facts being scarce.<sup>1</sup>

It is understood from the 1780 Racing Calendar that the first Derby was run at Epsom on Thursday, the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, “over the last mile of the Course.” But which Course? There is no known description of the race itself, ‘the one newspaper that deigned to give the result offered no details.’<sup>2</sup> Though Wynn Jones and other historians decry the lack of reportage,<sup>3</sup> this was standard practice for the period; having searched through the available newspapers from 1700-1780 in regard to Epsom races, only a handful of reports describe anything beyond the bare results. Those that do refer to the

orbicular course: there is simply no mention of the old straight course. Despite this lack of information, racing historians since Louis Henry Curzon's *The Blue Ribbon Of The Turf*, the first acknowledged history of the race, published in 1890, have largely concluded that the inaugural Derby was run on the old four-mile course, though none name an exact starting place:

The race, which started in the parish of Banstead half a mile to the east of Tattenham Corner, was run over a straight mile.<sup>4</sup>

Michael Seth-Smith, *Derby 200*

The old "four-mile course for horse-races from N.E. to S.W." had been greatly improved and altered in modern times.<sup>5</sup>

James Rice, *History Of The British Turf*

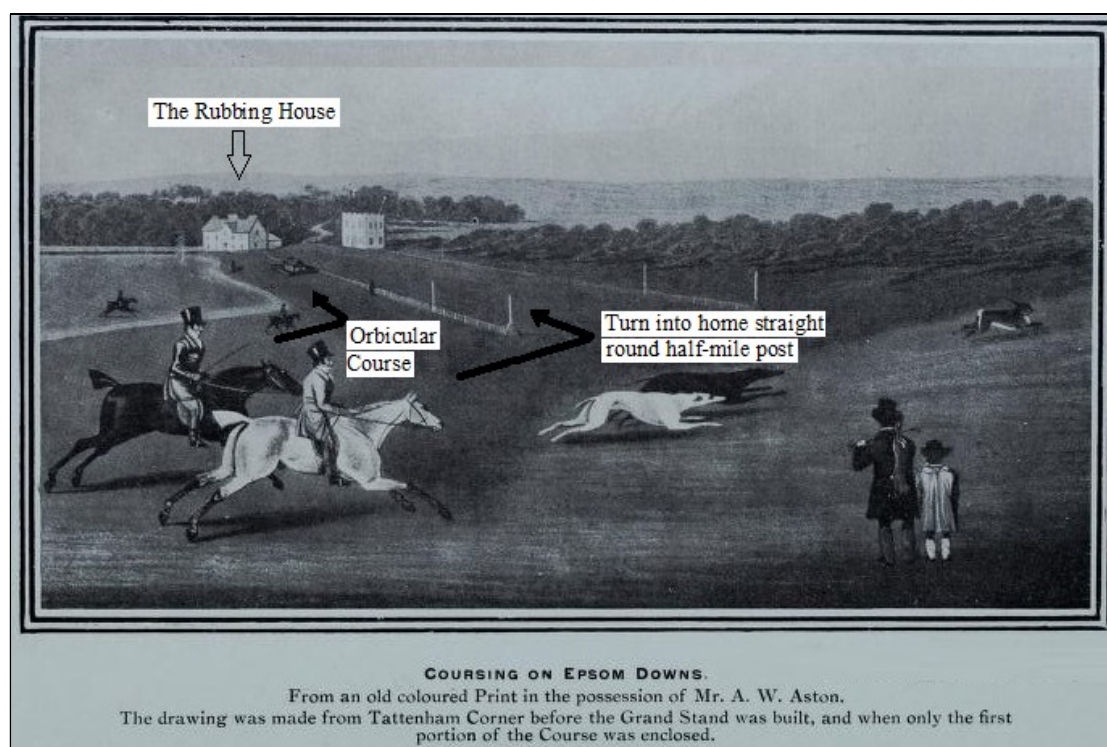
Events began at the Banstead end of the four mile straight course ... the Derby run over a straight mile.<sup>6</sup>

David Hunn, *Epsom Racecourse*

Over the last mile of the original 4 mile Course.<sup>7</sup>

Michael Church, *The Derby Stakes*

Other Derby historians such as Edward Moorhouse, Michael Wynn Jones, Alastair Burnet, Tim Neligan, and Roger Mortimer (again), simply avoid the issue and do not describe the course at all.<sup>8</sup> None, however, nominate the orbicular course.



**Fig. 1.**

**Undated print, likely 1770-1810, depicting the orbicular course as seen from Tattenham Corner**

Gordon Home, *Epsom: its History & its surroundings* (London: The Homeland Association, Ltd.) p.110.

As far as is known this is the only image of the orbicular course seen from near Tattenham Corner, showing the inner two-mile circuit and finishing straight. There is no evidence on the right of the picture of a course heading off towards Carshalton, nor is there much to support a straight course extending beyond the four furlong home straight behind the artist's view.

When considering the orbicular course as the viable alternative to the older venue, compare the above picture with the following account of a race from the May meeting of 1755. It describes exactly the process of turning into the railed portion at the home straight:

*King Alfred* engaged three Miles with great Superiority of Speed but gave it up to *Liberty* in running from Tottenham's [*sic*] Corner to the Rails.<sup>9</sup>

## The Case for the Orbicular Course

The source of confusion is probably John Toland, the philosopher, who, writing about Epsom in 1711 mentioned *both* race courses:

the fine grounds of the new orbicular Race, which may well be term'd a rural Cirque.  
The four-mile course over the Warren-house to Carshalton ...<sup>10</sup>

Despite this early acknowledgement, the orbicular course has been largely dismissed as the course for the first Derby, though inexplicably it has been generally accepted that the race 'in 1784 was transferred to the Orbicular, or Cup, Course, along with the Oaks.'<sup>11</sup> No explanation for the switch of courses is put forward. No explanation as to what became of the straight course. It is our belief that the latter was simply never used for the Derby or Oaks, and in fact had decades earlier been superseded by the other.

In 1825, Pownall's *History of Epsom* states: 'when the races on Epsom Downs were first held periodically, we have not been able to trace with accuracy; but we find that from the year 1730, they have been annually held in the months of May or June.'<sup>12</sup> However, a search through *The London Gazette's* online archives shows that annual race meetings were held on Epsom Downs from 1716, often in both May and September, and had also been held in 1713.<sup>13</sup> The nature of these advertised annual meetings raises the question as to whether the old straight four-mile course could have been more suitable than the orbicular.

David Hunn recognised the problem, but drew the wrong conclusion. In *Epsom Racecourse* he questioned the logic of racing horses in multiple straight-course four-mile heats:

The Plate in each case went to the horse that won two of the three heats. If the three heats were shared between three horses, those three were to run a fourth heat ...

remembering the mounts had 4 miles to canter back to the start after rubbing down. It may have been this very meeting that sired the Oaks and the Derby, among the owners almost certainly involved in those Plates [1778] were Sir Charles Bunbury and the young twelfth Earl of Derby, and neither of them can have watched their horses covering perhaps 32 miles in one evening for a prize of a few sovereigns with much pleasure.<sup>14</sup>

He concluded that their answer to the problem was to introduce shorter distance races, such as The Oaks in 1779. However, the Oaks was not Epsom's first shorter distance race, mile-and-a-half heats having been introduced in 1774.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, two, three and four-mile heats continued to be run for several years after the Derby and Oaks were established.<sup>16</sup> Is unlikely that horses, grooms, riders, owners, officials and spectators would have trekked backwards and forwards over Banstead Downs when the orbicular course afforded convenient facilities for horses to recover between races, better shelter from the elements, and far superior viewing; the latter point being one of the key advantages of using Epsom Downs.

One of the greatest causes of the popularity of Epsom is the situation of the course, the physical conformation of which allows of the racing being seen by an enormous crowd.<sup>17</sup>

The 1754 May meeting provides a perfect, if extreme, example of the problem faced if races involving more than a handful of runners had been run on the old straight four-mile course. Nine horses contested the 'four Years old Plate' of four heats. None being distanced (i.e. beaten by 240 yards, and thus eliminated from the contest), the nine ran in all four heats.<sup>18</sup> The race distance is not given, but as two or four miles were the norm, all nine horses covered either fourteen or twenty-eight miles, including shuttling back and forth between races. In November 1772, fourteen started for a £50 Plate.<sup>19</sup> Realistically, the orbicular course was the only suitable location for such large fields.

## Addressing the confusion regarding Banstead Downs and Epsom Downs with the use of maps

When German scholar and travelogue writer, Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, visited Epsom races in 1710 he wrote a detailed description of what can only be the orbicular course:

At three o'clock in the afternoon we rode out to the place where the races are usually held, called Banstead Downs near Epsom ... we were amazed that the racecourse was so uneven and hilly. All around, almost as far as the eye could see, were placed coloured stakes or posts, *round which the horses had to run twice in one race.*<sup>20</sup>

Confusion caused by interchangeable descriptions of Banstead Downs and Epsom Downs may have been a hindrance in unravelling where each racecourse is situated. Uffenbach, like Toland, may have wrong-footed later historians by referring to *Banstead Downs*, over which the older straight course was known to have stretched, when clearly describing the orbicular course. However, here we must make an important distinction: where *Epsom Downs* is named in print, it is certainly the site of the orbicular course, whereas *Banstead Downs* appears on maps of the period as an inconsistent wider sweep of downland, often encompassing the bespoke Epsom Downs.<sup>21</sup> This matters because the *articles of agreement* for Epsom's May meeting, published in *The London Gazette* in 1713, then annually from 1716 until the 1730s, all begin as follows: 'On Epsom Downs ...'<sup>22</sup>

Although maps of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can offer no more than a rough guide, some mapmakers included references to Epsom races, so these are of more than passing interest. Crucially, none give more than a vague idea as to the four-mile course, whereas the orbicular course is always recognisably on the current site on Epsom Downs, as the following examples illustrate:



**Fig. 2.**

**1749: Bowen's map showing both courses.**

Emanuel Bowen, *An Accurate Map of the County of Surrey* (Sold by I. Hinton at the King's Arms in St. Paul's Church Yard, London, 1749).

The circled areas to the right of the map represent the boundaries for any four-mile course running from the orbicular course (and present-day) winning post towards Carshalton either directly across Banstead Downs to the west of Lamberts Oaks (later Lord Derby's seat), or incorporating a straight mile beyond Banstead village before presumably angling up towards the Oaks and Carshalton. As has been shown, no historian really knows its precise layout. What is notable is that the orbicular site is titled "The Races" whilst the older course is named "Horse Races." *The Races* suggests a dominant role in proceedings.



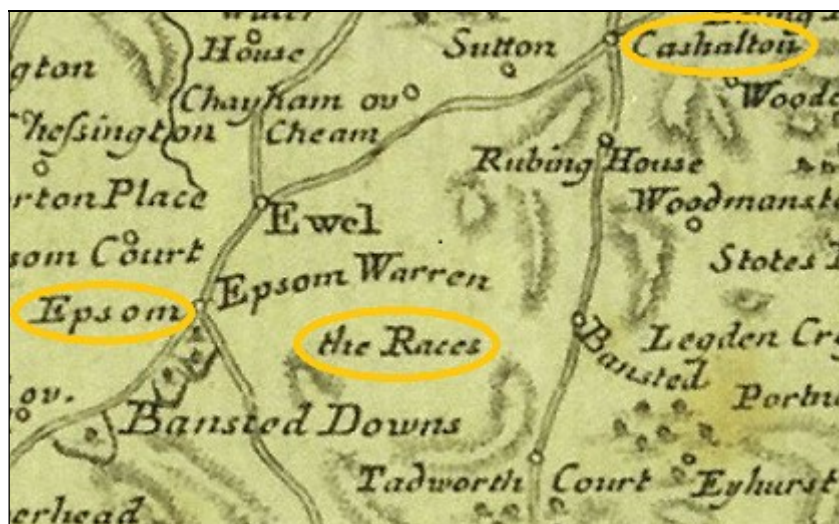


Fig. 3.

**1779: Zatta's map showing the sole orbicular course a year before the inaugural Derby.**

Antonio Zatta, *Map of Surrey aka Provincia di Surrey di nouva Projezione* (Venice: 1779).

By 1779 the old four-mile course had disappeared from the map, evidently long enough disused by this time to be no longer a feature of the landscape. Note that 'Rubing House' does not refer to the famous Rubbing House by the Epsom winning post.



Fig. 4.

**1782: Map showing just the orbicular course**

Anon., *A New & Accurate Map of the Countries Thirty Miles Round London, Drawn from late Surveys in 'A Gentleman for his private Amusement, The Ambulator, Or The Stranger's Companion In A Tour Round London* (London: Printed for J. Bew, 1782). Inside front cover.



The above “new and accurate” map published in 1782, *two years before* the Derby and Oaks supposedly switched from the old four-mile course to the orbicular, shows only the latter.

Although visually compelling, the maps by themselves give little detail with which to prove an argument. It is necessary to examine written accounts of the period to demonstrate the eminence that the orbicular course had taken.

### **Print Descriptions of Epsom Race Course after 1700**

Uffenbach had seen the orbicular course in action in 1710. When, the following year Toland wrote of the two courses, his description of the pleasure he received from the area surrounding the old course<sup>23</sup> was the last contemporaneous account of it known to appear in print. Odd, considering it is believed to have continued as the mainstay course. That the orbicular course alone continued to receive journalistic attention, little though that was, is illustrated by the following examples:

**1739:** A most remarkable Task is to be undertaken on Epsom Horse-Course for 50 Guineas; a little Poney about 11 Hands and a Quarter of an Inch high, is to run in one Hour, **Nine times round the same Course**, making the whole, by Measurement, 18 miles and a Half, within about 150 Yards.<sup>24</sup>

**1750:** To-morrow will be run one of the greatest Matches almost ever known, upon Epsom Course, between Mr. Greswood’s famous Crop, and a horse of Mr. Harris’s<sup>25</sup> ... Crop ran 20 miles, which is **10 Times round the Course**.<sup>26</sup>

**1761:** Three matches were Yesterday run over Epsom Course. *Ill Bred* ... very civilly led his Antagonist [*Hero Champion*] **twice round the Course**, but *brought him in genteely [sic]*; for which Reason his grateful Master has changed his Name to *Wellbred*.<sup>27</sup>

In 1852 Dr. John Burton, a ‘well-known and somewhat eccentric scholar,’ wrote an essay, *Iter Surriense et Sussexiense* [Journey Through Surrey and Sussex], wherein he visited the orbicular races. It was described in 1916:

Seeing Banstead Church on his left (he went) to overlook Epsom Racecourse, from the high ground near Tattenham Corner. **The old straight racecourse on Banstead Downs was disused about 1740**, according to Salmon’s *History and Antiquities of Surrey*, **and the “orbicular course” at Epsom, which had existed when Toland wrote thirty years earlier, had quite superseded it.** The old Epsom course started in Langley Bottom, out of sight of the place where the Grand Stand is now, and came round the Warren into the present course on top of the hill, and went right round from the present winning-post to Langley Bottom again. It was adapted for running four-mile heats. He clearly did see a race meeting.’<sup>28</sup>

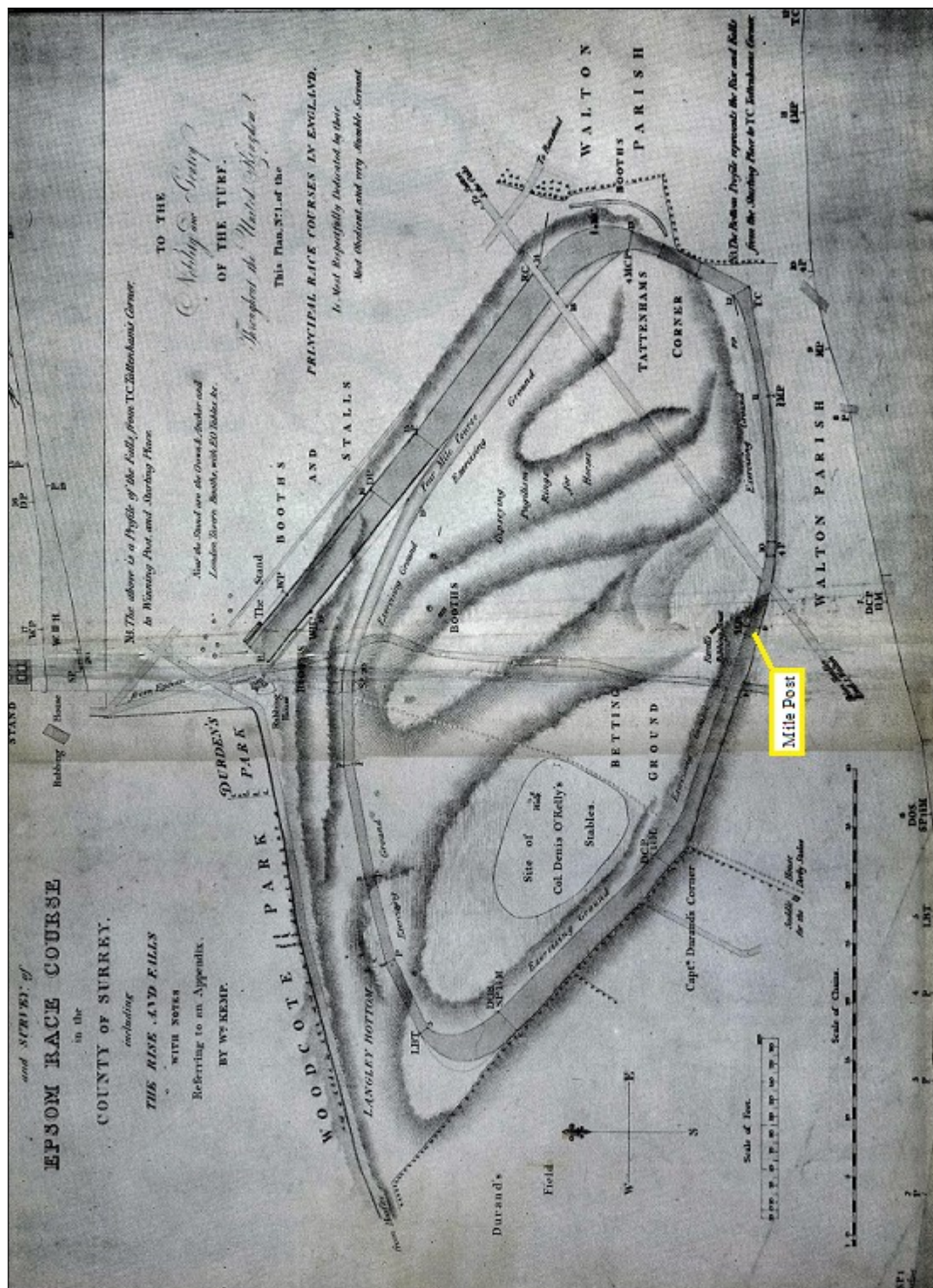
This is the earliest description of the layout of the orbicular course used for the 1780 Derby, though thought by current historians to have been used from 1784. The pre-1916 opinion that it had by 1740 quite superseded the older Banstead Downs four-mile course is backed up by the new research we have undertaken for this article.

### Location of the 1780 Derby Start

*The Racing Calendar* of 1790 describes The Oaks as to be run over “the last mile and a half” and the Derby “the mile and a half course,”<sup>29</sup> confirming that the renowned publication, aside from using confusingly interchangeable vernacular, viewed both races (which all historians agree were held on the orbicular course) in the same language they had used to describe the 1780 Derby: to be run over “the last mile of the course.”<sup>30</sup> *The course.* They are referring to a single racecourse, and as the orbicular course had been in existence since 1710, it follows that the *Racing Calendar* was describing that course. The mile start is clearly marked on William Kemp’s 1824, *A Plan and Survey of Epsom Race Course*,<sup>31</sup> the orbicular course remaining

unchanged until 1848, when like the old four-mile course it replaced, it became obsolete by modern requirements. In order to show the location of the mile start of 1780, since today's course layout differs markedly from that of the seventeenth century, sharing only that portion of the course from Tattenham Corner to the winning post, we overlaid Kemp's orbicular plan (Fig. 5.) onto a satellite image of Epsom Downs (Fig. 6.), which demonstrates that the start for the first Derby took place seventy yards<sup>32</sup> short of where the orbicular course would have met today's eight-furlong post.

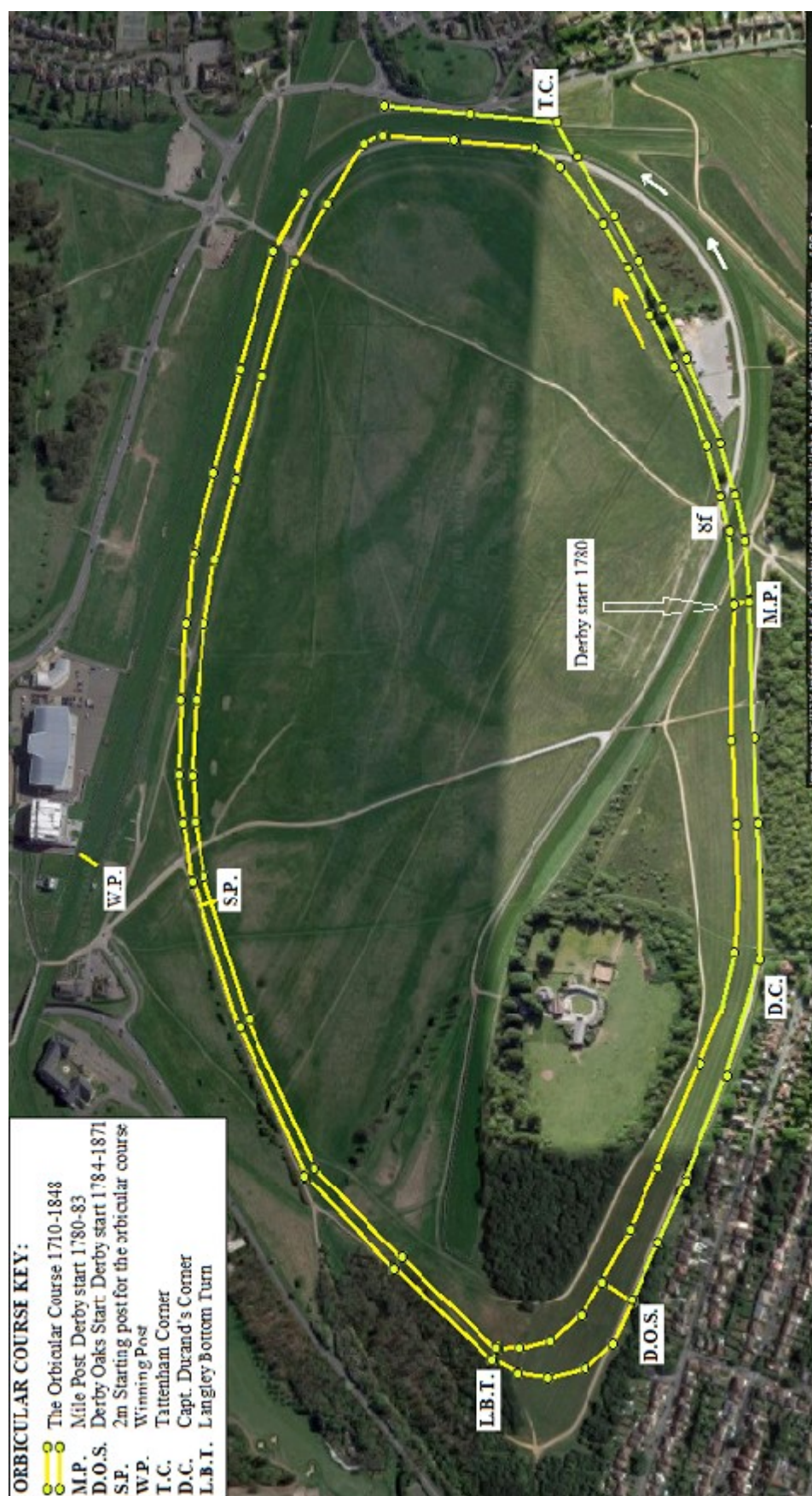
The 1780 start is open to the public today, forgotten by the dog-walkers and ramblers who pass over it, and by the jockeys who use the busy sand gallop on its perimeter.



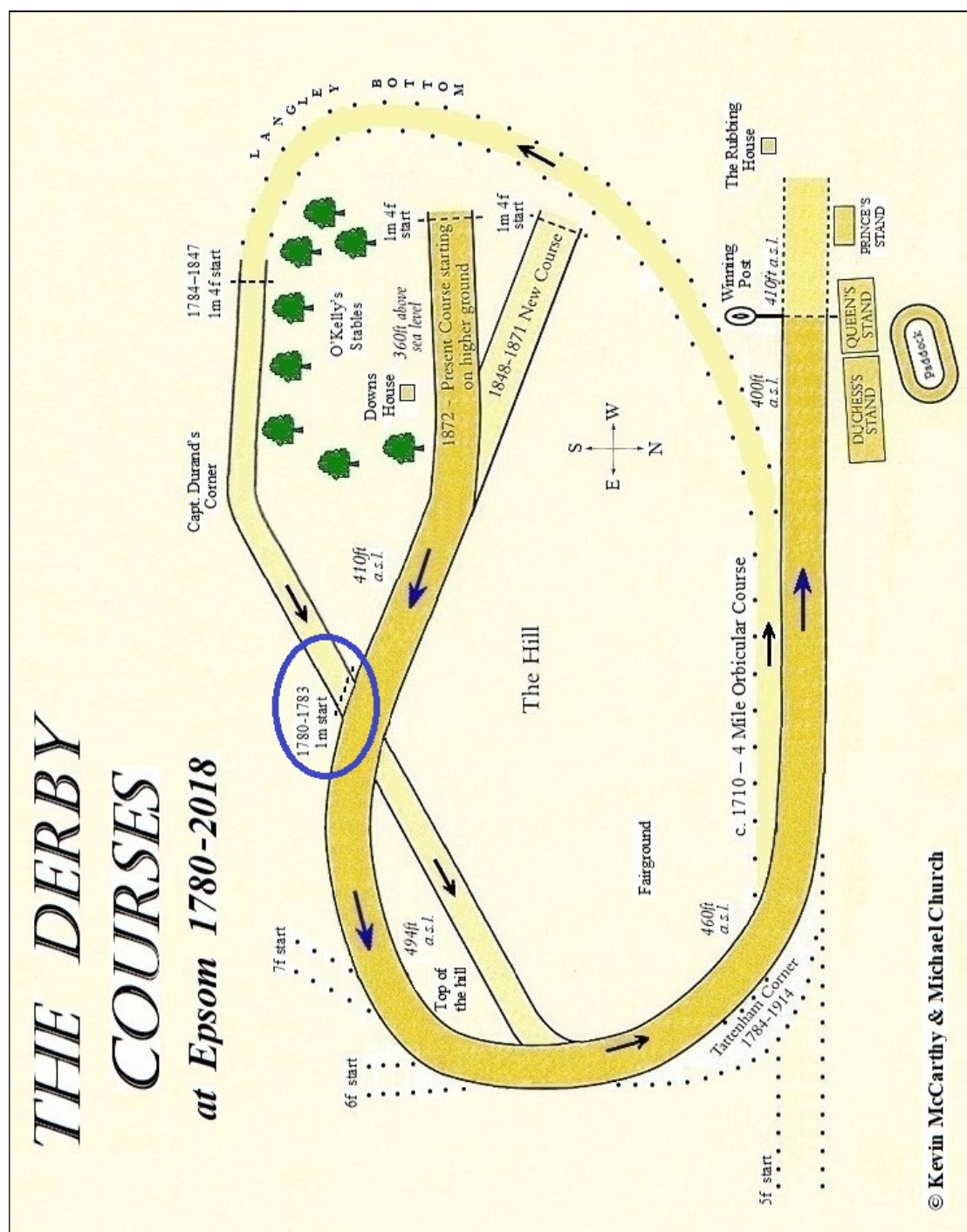
**Fig. 5.**

William Kemp, *A Plan and Survey of Epsom Race Course* (London: Sherwood, Jones, And Co., 1824). Shows a detailed plan and elevations of the orbicular course used at Epsom since 1710.





**Fig. 6.**  
**The Orbicular Course Today**  
*Google Earth* accessed 25 Apr 2018.



**Fig. 7.**

***The Derby Courses at Epsom, showing the starting place of the 1780 Derby.***

Kevin McCarthy & Michael Church, *The Derby Courses at Epsom 1780-2018*. Authors' collection.



## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Louis Henry Curzon, *The Blue Ribbon Of The Turf* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1890) p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Wynn Jones, *The Derby – A celebration of the world's most famous horse race* (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1979) p.30.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Mortimer, *The History Of The Derby Stakes* (London: Michael Joseph Limited, 1973) p.5. 'Because the race was then deemed of no particular importance few details concerning it have been handed down.'

<sup>4</sup> Michael Seth-Smith & Roger Mortimer, *Derby 200 – The Official Story of The Blue Riband of the Turf* (London: Guinness Superlatives Ltd) p.15. Note: Seth-Smith wrote the section referring to the straight mile.

<sup>5</sup> James Rice, *History Of The British Turf, From The Earliest Times To The Present Day* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, And Rivington, 1879) Vol. II, p.23.

<sup>6</sup> David Hunn, *Epsom Racecourse – Its Story And Its People* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1973) pp.40 and 180.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Church, *The Derby Stakes 1780-2016* (Newbury: Raceform Ltd, 2016) pp. 22, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Moorhouse, *The Romance of the Derby* (London: Biographical Press, 1908) pp.17, 288; Michael Wynn Jones, *The Derby*, pp.21-22.; Alastair Burnet and Tim Neligan, *The Derby – The Official Book of the World's Greatest Race* (London: Michael O'Mara Books Limited, 1993) p.11.; Roger Mortimer with Tim Neligan, *The Epsom Derby*, pp. ix-x.; Roger Mortimer, *The History Of The Derby Stakes* (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd, 1962) p.12.

<sup>9</sup> Anon., Epsom Races, *The Manchester Mercury*, 13 May 1755, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> John Toland, *A New Description of Epsom* (originally published as *The Description of Epsom* (London: A Baldwin, 1711) p.28 in *The Miscellaneous Works Of Mr. John Toland, Vol. II* (London: J. Whiston, S. Baker, and J. Robinson, 1747) p.112.

<sup>11</sup> Nigel Pullen, *Gazeteer: Race Courses of Great Britain and Ireland. The Epsom Derby Stakes*. <http://www.tbheritage.com/TurfHallmarks/Gazeteer/GazeteerSurrey.html#epo> Accessed 27 Apr 2018.

<sup>12</sup> 'An Inhabitant,' *History of Epsom, Containing A Succinct And Interesting Description Of The Origin Of Horse Racing, And Of Epsom Races, &c.* (London: J Hearne; Epsom: W Dorling, 1825) p.106. See also James Rice, *History Of The British Turf*, Vol. II, p.9; Michael Seth-Smith & Roger Mortimer, *Derby 200* (London: Guinness Superlatives Limited, 1979) p.12. Note: 'An Inhabitant' is Henry Pownall. See <http://www.epsomandewellhistoryexplorer.org.uk/HenryPownall.html> Accessed 27 Apr 2018.

<sup>13</sup> *The London Gazette*, 4 Apr 1713 p.2; 27 Mar 1716 p.2; 31 Jul 1716 p.2; 9 Apr 1717 p.2; 13 Jul 1717 p.2; 9 Apr 1718 p.2; 29 Jul 1718 p.2; 14 Mar 1719 p.2; 28 Nov 1719 p.2; 22 Mar 1720 p.2; 7 Mar 1721 p.2; 27 Mar 1722 p.2; 7 Aug 1722 p.5; 17 Mar 1723 p.4; 25 May 1723 p.4 &c. <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/> Accessed 26-27 Apr 2018.

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<sup>14</sup> David Hunn, *Epsom Racecourse*, pp.40-44.

<sup>15</sup> Anon., Epsom Races, *Northampton Mercury*, 14 Nov 1774. p.2.

<sup>16</sup> Edward and James Weatherby, *Racing Calendar 1796* (London: H. Reynell, 1797) pp.26-28. Two, three, and four-mile heats were run at the 1796 Derby & Oaks meeting.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Richardson, *The English Turf – A Record of Horses And Courses* (London: Methuen & Co., 1901) p.109. Authors' italics.

<sup>18</sup> Anon., Conclusion of Epsom Races. *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 1 Jun 1754, p.1.

<sup>19</sup> Anon., London, Thursday, Nov. 5, *The Salisbury Journal*, 9 Nov 1772, p.2.

<sup>20</sup> Epsom & Ewell History & Archaeology Society Newsletter Excerpts 1968-1999, Epsom Wells II 1981/2 pp.5-6. <http://www.epsomewellhistory.org.uk/epsom-well-ii/4585854225> Accessed 27 Apr 2018. Authors' italics.; Michael Wynn Jones, *The Derby*, p.21-22.

<sup>21</sup> George F Bosworth, *Cambridge County Geographies – Surrey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909) p.14. Epsom Downs and Banstead Downs are stated as distinct from each other.

<sup>22</sup> Same editions as endnote 11.

<sup>23</sup> John Toland, *A New Description of Epsom* (1711) p.112.

<sup>24</sup> Anon., *The Derby Mercury*, 7 Jun 1739, p.2.

<sup>25</sup> Anon., *The Newcastle Courant*, 28 Jul 1750, p.2.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, 4 Aug 1750, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Anon., *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 21 Mar 1761, p.1.

<sup>28</sup> The Surrey Archaeological Society, *Surrey Archaeological Collections Relating to the History and Antiquities of the County. Vol. XXIX* (London: Rowarth & Co. Ltd, 1916) pp. 34-36. Henry Elliot Malden, recounting Burton's Greek essay, determines that the account took place not long before 1752.

<sup>29</sup> James Weatherby, *The Racing Calendar* (London: H Reynell, 1791) pp.42-43.

<sup>30</sup> James Weatherby, *The Racing Calendar* (London: H Reynell, 1780) p.25.

<sup>31</sup> William Kemp, *A Plan and Survey of Epsom Race Course* (London: Sherwood, Jones, And Co., 1824). Shows a detailed plan and elevations of the orbicular course used at Epsom since 1710.

<sup>32</sup> This measurement was also calculated using Kemp's 1824 course plan against scale, with existing paths running across the course as reference points. These paths are in the same location as they were in 1824.



PLAN  
and SURVEY of  
**EPSOM RACE COURSE**

in the  
**COUNTY OF SURREY.**

including  
**THE RISE AND FALLS**

WITH NOTES  
Referring to an Appendix.

BY W<sup>m</sup> KEMP.

PRINCES  
STAND

Rubbing House



17 WP

W.H.

SP

16 DP

15 P

14 RC

13 MC

12 MCP

11 TC



N.B. The above is a Profile of the Falls from T.C. Tattenhams Corner to Winning Post and Starting Place.

Near the Stand are the Crown & Anchor and London Tavern Booths, with EO Tables, &c.

TO THE

*Notable and Great*

OF THE TURF.

*Throughout the United Kingdom*

This Plan, N<sup>o</sup> 1. of the

PRINCIPAL RACE COURSES IN ENGLAND.

Is Most Respectfully Dedicated by their  
Most Obedient and very Humble Servant.

WOODCOTE PARK  
LANGLEY BOTTOM

from Headley

Durand's

Field

W E

S

Scale of Feet.



Scale of Chains.



DURDEN'S  
PARK

Rubbing House

SP

The Stand

WP

BOOTHS

AND  
STALLS

BOOTHS

Exercising Ground

Exercising Ground

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Exercising Ground

Exercising Ground

Site of  
Col. Denis O'Kelly's  
Stables.

BETTING  
GROUND

Capt<sup>d</sup> Durand's Corner

Saddle  
House  
for the  
Derby Stakes

From Headley  
to Walton

WALTON PARISH

DCP

11M

TATTENHAMS  
CORNER

WALTON  
PARISH

BOOTHS

PARISH

N.B. The Bottom Profile represents the Rise and Falls from the Starting Place to T.C. Tattenhams Corner.

SP1

2 P

3 P

4 P


LBT

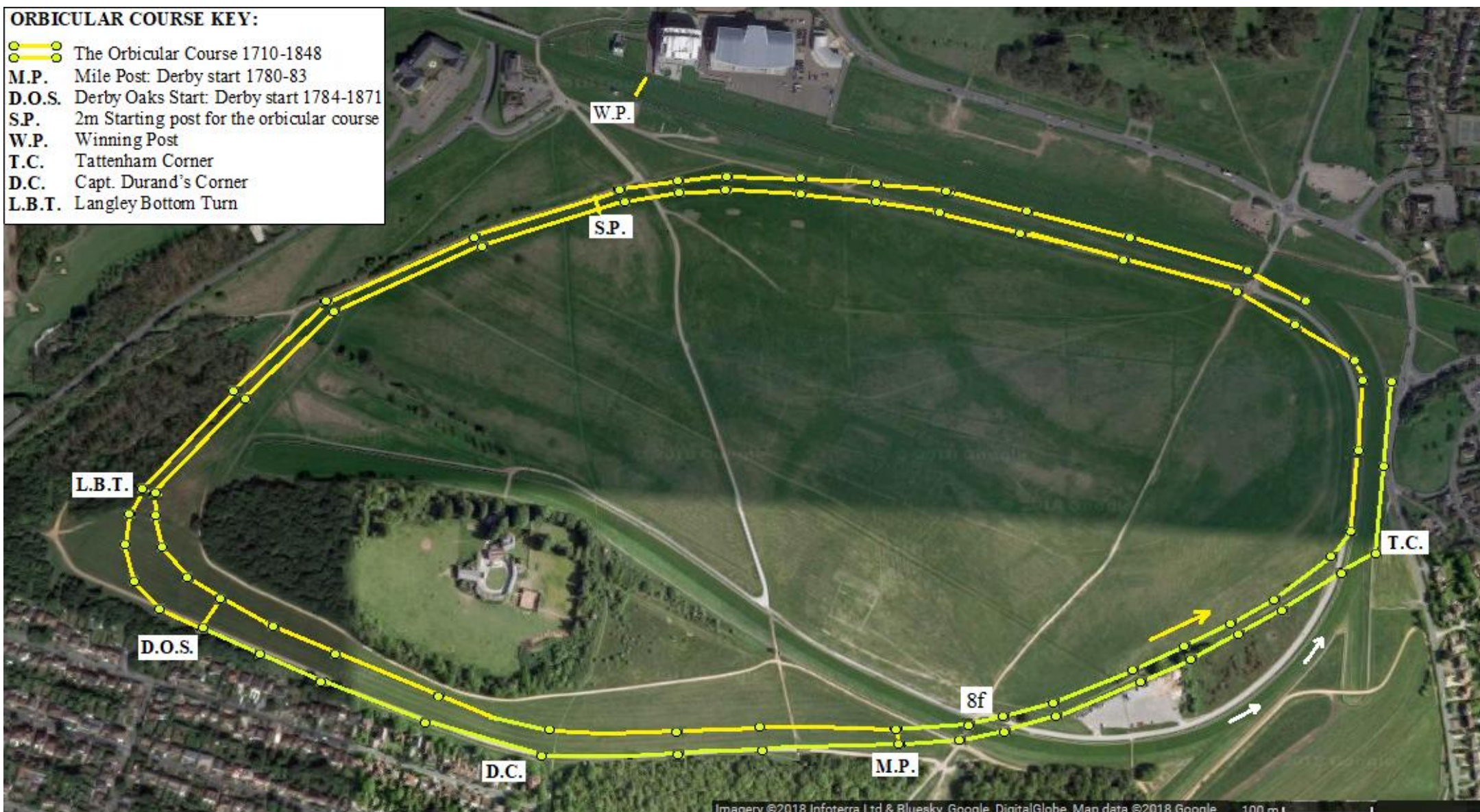
6 DCS

SP11M



**ORBICULAR COURSE KEY:**

-  The Orbicular Course 1710-1848
- M.P. Mile Post: Derby start 1780-83
- D.O.S. Derby Oaks Start: Derby start 1784-1871
- S.P. 2m Starting post for the orbicular course
- W.P. Winning Post
- T.C. Tattenham Corner
- D.C. Capt. Durand's Corner
- L.B.T. Langley Bottom Turn





# THE DERBY COURSES

at Epsom 1780-2018

