

The Late Captain Skipworth

Land and Water, September 8, 1894

On Saturday last there passed away, in the eighty-fourth year of his age, Captain John Henry Skipworth, who for many years took a prominent part in the world of sport, and of whom it may fairly be said that he distinguished himself in whatever line of life he took up.

Captain Skipworth descended from a good old Lincolnshire family, which had its origin at Skipwith in Yorkshire, and was born on June 25, 1811. The war-like spirit which the war with France had engendered had not abated during his early years, and he naturally turned towards a soldier's life. The late Sir William Ingleby had promised to procure him a commission in a cavalry regiment, but Mr Skipworth could brook no official delays, and the Portugese War of Succession breaking out, he hastened to offer his services to Donna Maria, and he sailed for Oporto with letters of introduction from Commodore Yarborough to Colonel Baker, who then commanded the Queen's Lancers. On his arrival off the coast of Portugal he was not long in showing his resourcefulness, when in a tight corner. Oporto and Villa Mora were closely besieged by the troops of the Usurper, Don Miguel, and his artillery had complete command of the river. With so large a vessel as the *Royal Tar*, in which Skipworth sailed, there was no chance of negotiating the narrow passage between the sand-banks in the dark, and to go in daylight was to court certain destruction. There was one way, and only one way out of the difficulty, and that was to run up a man-of-war's pennant, but the penalty was a heavy one, and no officer would undertake the responsibility. But Mr Skipworth wanted to be at work, and took it upon himself to order the pennant to be hoisted, with the result that the ship got through safely, and that there was something approaching a row royal with an officer from the man-of-war that was lying in the harbour. However as no officer of the vessel had given the command, there was no court-martial, and the ire of the naval officer expended itself in strong language.

As soon as he landed, Mr Skipworth joined his regiment, and his skill and pluck as a horseman soon brought him into prominent notice. He greatly distinguished himself in

several actions, and was decorated with the Portugese Order of the Tower and Sword, which is something of the same nature as our V.C. As soon as he got paid, which was not a very easy matter, for the young Queen's treasury was but bare, he returned to England; but it may be remarked that it was only by offering the eldest daughter of Colonel Count Sampoo, who was President of the Commission of Enquiry into the Army Accounts, a sum of £25, that he got his account settled at last.

After spending a year at home he returned to the Peninsula, where he took command of a troop of Lancers in the English Legion, and it is worth noting that on this occasion he took out with him two couple of hounds, with which he hunted during his time in Spain, and he is said to have been the only Englishman to have done so, with the exception of the Duke of Wellington.

During the year's active service which he saw he again distinguished himself, and in a very dashing cavalry affair at Loros he behaved with conspicuous gallantry. Then he left the service, the immediate cause being a duel which he fought with a brother officer. This duel made a great stir at the time and is worth recounting here. The colonel of his regiment had been invalided home and his place supplied in his absence by an officer whom we will name Colonel A., much to the delight of the Captain and other of his fellows who had looked upon Colonel Z. as sadly lacking in enterprise. After a while the latter gentleman recovered from his illness and joined the regiment without a commission, and the relative merits of the two commanding officers became the subject of frequent and angry discussion at the mess. One night when Captain Skipworth went down to the mess he found the argument waxing furious, and somewhat sharply expostulated with his comrades for their interminable jangling on the subject. A Captain R. replied to him, and, in the course of the argument which followed, he so exasperated Captain Skipworth that he said, "Colonel Z. was a d_____ coward. He would sooner serve under an old woman with a broomstick." This, of course, produced a challenge; and after Captain R. had attempted

to pot his adversary, Captain Skipworth fired in the air. A second shot was demanded, and again Captain R. fired without effect, but this time Captain Skipworth fired at an opening in Captain R.'s boot, wounding him slightly, and so the duel came to an end. Of course the news of the duel and its cause soon spread, and Colonel A. advised Captain Skipworth to resign his commission, so that Colonel Z. might have an opportunity of challenging him. This he did not do, preferring to leave the service, and then General Evans pressed him to rejoin, and offered him a staff appointment. But his health was not in a very satisfactory state, and he insisted on leaving the Peninsula. During the two campaigns in which he served he took part in fifty battles and skirmishes, and he thoroughly deserved his high reputation as a distinguished cavalry officer.

On his return to England he commenced farming, and at once entered keenly into all those field sports for which he had so great a predilection, and for which he was so eminently fitted by his pluck, his energy, and his skill.

It was in the heyday of steeplechasing. Lottery, and Vivian, and Moonraker, and other cracks, were in everyone's mouths, and sportsmen swore by Jem Mason and Captain Becher, black Tom Oliver and Wm McDonogh, whilst The Marquess was the idol of everyone. Amongst this distinguished band of riders Captain Skipworth soon took a foremost place, and on his own horses and on those of his Lincolnshire friends, he won many a hard-fought race. Croxby, a bad-tempered horse, but a rare good one, was one of his early chasers, and on him he won some good races. Rachel, Rallywood, and Jenny Lind were all good horses, and won races, and Rachel would have won the Grand Steeplechase at Cheltenham, had she not unfortunately put her foot into a rabbit hole. These good horses were all sold at high prices to Baron Meyer de Rothschild, and the last race which the Captain's friend, Mr FitzOldaker, ever rode was on Rachel, on whom he won the Brocklesby Hunt Steeplechase. Jenny Lind was a lucky purchase, for she only cost £10 when she came from the late Mr John Young when three years old.

One of the greatest triumphs that Captain Skipworth ever had was when he rode Gay Lad at Spalding. The course was the strongest that a steeplechase has ever been run over, and it was described by an eye-witness as "the most cruel country man or horse ever crossed."

One obstacle in particular was particularly forbidding, and some of the jockeys did not like it. When Captain Skipworth was asked his opinion, he said he did not think there was a horse in England that could get over without a fall, but if there was it was Gay Lad. The jump was not altered, and fourteen out of the fifteen that started came to grief as predicted, only Gay Lad was amongst the number. The Captain got him going again without loss of time, and won from Mr Walker's Peter Simple by Arbutus and the Hon. B Wodehouse's Bertha. Only one horse got over the obstacle without falling, and he took his own time and finished last. Gay Lad was so severely injured that he was six weeks at Spalding before he could be moved.

When Captain Skipworth married, he gave up steeplechase riding, but one day when out hunting, he saw a horse belonging to his friend Mr Marris, of Limber, that he thought looked a chaser all over him. He took a feeler at him, and as he was, as usual, riding something smart, he speedily became convinced that there was the winner of the Brocklesby Hunt Steeplechase. Mr Marris would not sell though he was well tried, and on the late Mr Jos. Kirkham interviewing him he refused to either sell or lend the horse, "though," he added, "I would lend him to you freely enough if Jack Skipworth were going to ride him, but I know he won't." Assured, however, that the Captain meant riding "for this occasion only," he lent the horse, and the last time that Captain Skipworth wore silk was when he won the Brocklesby Hunt Steeplechase on Mr Marris' Dubesus.

He turned his attention to the flat, and in partnership with the late John Osborn he owned Fanny Fern and Elastic, both of whom were useful and won races. Sunlight bred him some useful racehorses, and amongst those that he bred or owned were the Truth gelding, Zodiac, Mercury, Planet, Lictor, Lucifer, Mount Valerian, and Jealousy, whom he sold to his friend Mr FitzOldaker, and who afterwards won the Liverpool Grand National.

He was a keen and good shot, a famous hand with dogs, and, at one time, he was said to have the best breed of setters in England.

But hunting was, after all, the sport which was dearest to him. Distance was no object, and, perhaps, no man has seen more hunting than the gallant sportsman of whom we are writing. Up to 1892 he was regularly hunting with the Brocklesby, sometimes riding

a considerable distance to the meets, and never in a hurry to go home. One hunting trophy which he had is still in possession of the family, and, as may be well imagined, it is much prized by them. It is the brush of the "bobtailed" fox. Almost every hunt has, or has had, a "bobtailed" fox, about whom wondrous tales are told, but surely there never was such a vulpine hero as the bobtailed fox of the Burton. On six consecutive Mondays did Lord Henry Bentinck's hounds run this fox from Fen Wood, and rare runs they had with him, Captain Skipworth being present on each occasion and riding the same horse, Treacle Sauce, a bad-tempered one that made a noise, but a "good one to go." On each occasion he was, as usual, in the van, and may be said to have had the best of it, and when on the sixth Monday, hounds ran into the fox at Hazelby Plantation, after a splitting fifty minutes. It was fully ten minutes before anyone joined the late W. Nicholson (who died three weeks ago) and him, they two having cut out the work over some of the biggest country in England. Lord Henry presented the brush in

characteristic words. "Skipworth," said he, "you've seen more of this unfortunate fox than anyone when he was alive. Let me present you with his apology for a brush."

Captain Skipworth may be well said to have played the game all round. As a judge of horses and hounds, he had few equals, and perhaps no superiors. As a horseman he was not so elegant as his brother George, who was allowed to be the finest horseman in all Lincolnshire, but he was as bold as a lion, very strong on his horse, and a fine judge of pace. His nerve was such that even late in his life he would "ride anything with a head on," and Lincolnshire sportsmen will long talk of his gallant feats on almost unrideable horses. He was esteemed and respected by high and low, and with Lord Yarborough and his father he was a great favourite. He may be said to have been a connecting link between the old order and the new, and few such all-round sportsmen are to be found in the land as he whom his friends and neighbours lovingly called Captain Jack.

*Facsimile prepared by Mary Skipworth
24 Apr 2009*