



The Racing Rothschilds: the sportsmen, the maverick and the legend

In 1909 a horse called Bomba won the coveted Ascot Gold Cup under the blue and gold colours of James de Rothschild. Diana Stone's essay celebrates that victory and explores how the Rothschilds' successes and conduct within the Sport of Kings helped strengthen their position in a society where Jewish members could often count on an uphill struggle for acceptance.

*Hannah,
Mayer de Rothschild's
champion filly.*

The world of the Turf is a kaleidoscope of colour and action, speed and tension, with occasionally the satisfaction of victory, but often the misery of defeat. Horseracing is a great leveller – merchants and gentry, farmers and aristocrats, financiers and future kings – anyone, even the most distant outsider, has a chance to win. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a successful race-horse breeder and owner was a celebrity, and the racing public and the press took him to their hearts. Triumphs in racing brought the added benefit of association with cosmopolitan society.

The Rothschild family's entry onto the racing scene began in 1835, when Baron James de Rothschild (1792–1868) established racing stables at Ferrières, his estate outside Paris.¹ Remaining first and foremost a banker, Baron James set the standard for achievement on the Turf, counting victories in two of the major races of his day – the 1839 French St. Leger at Chantilly, and the Grand Prix Royal in 1844. Although racing was only a diversion for him, Baron James's stables were successful enough for him to leave a thriving operation to his two sons, Alphonse and Gustave. Following his death they expanded it to include a breeding farm and in 1873 moved the stud to Meautry, near Deauville.

Baron James's English brother Nathan Mayer (1777–1836) had four sons. All of them were bitten by the racing bug in varying degrees. Anthony (1810–1876) lived for many years in France. He built stables at La Morlaye, near Chantilly, in 1839. His horses were trained by Thomas Carter, also his uncle's trainer.² Records show Anthony's horse *Muse* winning the Criterium de Deuxième Classe at Chantilly on Saturday 2 October of 1841 in Carter's colours of amber, lilac and grey. Through the years Rothschild horses have occasionally run in their trainers' colours. Perhaps this has been a way of circumventing the tradition of non-participation on the Jewish Sabbath.

Prize money was an important aspect of Anthony's racing, as he expected his horses to pay their way, preferably with some 'pocket money' left over. He won in excess of 30,000 francs (£1,200) with his horses in 1841.³ In a letter to his brothers in the autumn of 1842 when he had ten horses in training, he wrote that he was hoping to '... win one or two more [races] this year so that our expenses will all be paid. It would be a famous good thing'.⁴

When Anthony returned to England in 1843, his younger brother Nathaniel (1812–1870) took over the horses at La Morlaye. One of the first Jews to be elected into the French Jockey Club, Nat continued the successful relationship with Carter as trainer. Among their biggest wins were the French Derby in 1846 and the French Oaks in 1852. Agreeing with his brothers' philosophy that the horses should not be a financial drain, he wrote from Paris in 1842, 'I am in great hopes of seeing Annetta win tomorrow, if so the little mare will pay nearly all the expenses of the stable for this year ...'. But following this is a very telling comment '... I hope to good-

ness she will win, for it's the best fun in the world seeing the blue and yellow come in first.' This is an early indication of the passion that was beginning to creep in to the up-to-now *divertissement*. Meanwhile, the eldest of these four brothers, Lionel (1808–1879), was having a smattering of successes over fences with a horse called *Consul*.⁵

Not all the family were enthralled with racing. Lionel's wife, Charlotte, disapproved on all fronts. Family rumour suggests that this may have been the reason that Lionel sent his horses to the post under a pseudonym. For three years, 1876, 1877 and 1878, his colours were registered with Wetherby's in the name of 'Mr Acton'.

The youngest of the four brothers, Mayer (1818–1874) was the first Jew to be elected to the English Jockey Club, the bastion of the richest and most influential men of the day. Mayer's approach to the business of breeding was shrewd as well as enthusiastic. He was known to have avoided rash speculations, bought from the best breeders and employed the best trainers.⁶ An added advantage was that he had a natural discerning eye for horseflesh. His stud produced a string of champions that still feature as legends of the turf.

In 1843, at the age of 25, he registered his colours of blue and yellow. By the 1850s he had become a familiar sight in the paddocks at Ascot, Epsom, and Newmarket, usually seen in the company of men such as the Prince of Wales, Lord Rosebery and other notables. His horses were trained by William King and Joseph Hayhoe.⁷ From the beginning victories had come quickly and Mayer was on the way to becoming one of the most successful racehorse owners in the country. That first year he won six major races, including his first Classic, the One Thousand Guineas with *Mentmore Lass*. He was to win the race for a second time in 1864 with a horse called *Tomato*.

Favonius, winner of the Derby 1871. Print on linen.



St Amant racing to a win in the 1904 Derby.



1853 was a busy year for Mayer. He also set up a breeding farm at Crafton, near his country seat at Mentmore.⁸ Some canny acquisitions reaped long-lasting rewards particularly a broodmare called *Emerald*. In addition to *Mentmore Lass*, her offspring produced wins in the Cesarewitch, the Goodwood Cup and the Derby. The best of *Mentmore Lass*'s descendants was a homebred filly called *Hannah*, whose sire was Mayer's grand stallion *King Tom*. In the 1871 season *Hannah* won the One Thousand Guineas, the Oaks, and the St Leger 'amid the deafening cheers of myriads of delighted Yorkshiremen'. That year was known in racing circles as 'The Baron's Year'.⁹

Mayer's flamboyant style helped to create a popular Rothschild image. Generous, exuberant, slightly eccentric and genial, 'Muffy', as he was known to his family, was a celebrity also because his racing colours won money for countless punters. On Mayer's death one of the obituaries read, '... to say that [this] was deeply regretted by sportsmen of all classes would be to convey a very inadequate idea of the profound sorrow caused by his death. In every phase of his life his generosity and munificence had been unbounded. His expenditure in charity was as vast as it was unostentatious. Society lost in him a polished and agreeable host; Sport, a genuine and enthusiastic patron, and Suffering Sad Humanity a liberal and sympathetic benefactor'.¹⁰ Another obituary published in *Bailey's Magazine* – five pages long – was entitled 'A Model Sportsman'.¹¹

Known for his characteristic charm and great sense of fun, Mayer's nephew Leopold (1845–1917) was captivated by the magic of thoroughbred racing during his university years.¹² He soon became a devoted and successful patron of the Turf and remained so for his entire life. Although in body he joined the banking group at New Court, his passions lay elsewhere: horses and motor cars. Leo considered the greatest moments of his life to be his election to the Jockey Club in 1891, and getting the contemporary motoring speed limit increased by 6 miles an hour in 1902.¹³ In 38 years of racing he won an estimated 851 races, many with his trainer Alfred Hayhoe.¹⁴

Throughout the years, Leopold's keen and friendly rivalry with the Prince of Wales was the subject of much publicity.¹⁵ This was mainly sparked by two talented horses, both 1893 foals. Leo's home-bred *St Frusquin*, an ordinary looking brown colt described as 'without elegance', turned out to be one of the best youngsters of his age group. He began his three-year old year in 1896 with a win in the Two Thousand Guineas. The Prince of Wales was running *St Frusquin*'s

half brother, the sleek and elegant *Persimmon*, also with success. The two had met once, in 1895, and on that occasion *St Frusquin* had emerged the victor.

They were destined to meet again two years later. When *St Frusquin*, after a decisive win in the Two Thousand Guineas, finished an unexpected second to *Persimmon* in an historic and heart-stopping 1897 Epsom Derby, letters of condolence flooded in to both Mr and Mrs Leopold, proving that Leo's celebrity reached far beyond racing circles. The half-brothers met on one final occasion later that year in the Princess of Wales's Stakes. *St Frusquin* proved the better horse on that day by half a length. The competition between the two only increased their popularity. *St Frusquin*'s merit was celebrated by the London and North Eastern Railway when it named one of its famous 'A3' locomotives after him, an honour which was repeated when, years later, they christened a second locomotive *Bronzino*, after another Rothschild winning stallion.¹⁶

An outpouring of sentiment similar to 1897 occurred again in 1904, only this time it was the result of jubilation, when Leo's *St Amant*, a *St Frusquin* colt, captured the Derby. The race had taken place in a colossal thunderstorm, and Leo is reported to have run out into the driving rain without coat or hat, and fairly dancing with joy in a typical demonstration of spontaneous pleasure, led his horse into the winner's circle. Leo and his wife Marie were overwhelmed by letters of congratulation from good friends, acquaintances, and unknowns. One such, from Kings College School, Wimbledon Common, read: 'Dear Sir, may we, the present pupils of your old school, knowing the kind interest you have always taken in it, be permitted to offer our most hearty congratulations on your great success at Epsom last Wednesday'. Another from the Post Master in Leighton Buzzard, '... May I be permitted to congratulate [you] on your great victory ...'. Vita Sackville-West wrote, 'Dear Mrs Rothschild, [Our] compliments on St Amant's great victory. We had all backed him here ...'.¹⁷

Leopold's second cousin James Armand (1878–1957), was his contemporary on the racing scene for a number of years until Leo's death in 1917.¹⁸ Their contrasting figures – Leopold jovial and portly, 'Jimmy' tall, angular and beaky – were familiar sights at race meetings. Although they were dissimilar in many respects James, too, was hugely popular in Turf circles, recognised for his high standard of integrity more than for his winners. He was known for his predilection for long-shots and outsiders.¹⁹

James's lifelong approach to the sport was always less ambitious than most wealthy owners, and while his cousins and uncles energetically pursued the top honours of Grade I races James seemed content to buy and breed what were considered 'second class' horses by his comrades – recognising their limitations and exulting when they achieved surprising victories at long odds. He also had a sense of humour. After his horse named *Snow Leopard* failed to produce an expected win, James promptly officially renamed him *Slow Leopard*. He became notorious as 'a fearless gambler'. His wife, Dorothy, later wrote that, 'while being a man whose judgement and wisdom were indisputable in the more serious matters of life, James was forever delighting in the unlikely and unorthodox and loving any upset of the accepted norm in his recreations ...'.²⁰

James retained Frederick Pratt as his private trainer in 1903, an association that lasted for 42 years.²¹ He registered his racing colours of bright blue shirt with two rows of yellow chevrons and a yellow cap in the same year he engaged Pratt. There were several quiet years, then came James's first successes as an owner. The horse, *Beppo* was the grandson of Leo's *St Frusquin*, and was James's first really exciting horse, winning seven English races, and a third place finish in the 1907 St Leger. Continuing the early British links with French racing, James sent *Beppo* to race across the Channel several times, but did not find the success he had enjoyed in England.

James's greatest victories on English turf were with *Bomba* and *Atmah*. In 1909 *Bomba* was the unexpected winner of the Gold Cup, at odds of 25/1. Ridden to victory by the apprentice Freddie Fox, he triumphed by a half length over the favourite, cousin Leopold's *Santo Strata*. Two years later Fox brought James's only English Classic winner, *Atmah*, home first in the One Thousand Guineas.

St Amant, 1904 Derby winner.

'Mr Leopold de Rothschild winning the Derby with *St Amant* (1904)'. Watercolour, Mason.

In 1922, James inherited Waddesdon Manor and Estate from his great-aunt Alice, and in the same year was elected to the Jockey Club. Although his 'independent views' possibly prevented him from becoming a steward, he was later seen as a man with vision in advance of changes that were accepted in later decades. In 1929 the Club recorded its thanks for his support of a test case which ultimately changed a controversial rule affecting nominations and entries for particular races. Described by his friends as a 'grand seigneur', James was a man of striking distinction, violently proud and morally fastidious. He was known to be a good loser and 'gracious' when he failed. Despite his rather formidable demeanour he was regarded by all classes of racegoers with cordial respect.²²

Almost immediately after inheriting the estate, James set to work building a stud farm to house his mares and foals, a legacy which remains today. His breeding philosophy was something of a talking point. One friend famously commented that where many people were known to back outsiders, only Jimmy attempted to breed from them.²³ In fact James's 50-year racing career was remarkably successful, with 193 winners and some £82,000 in prize money.

After the fashion of the earlier Rothschild studs, James tended to race his home-bred horses, rather than trying to make money from their sales. While some good solid stock and a few winners emerged from his nursery, his results did not compare with those produced by his relatives. Both *Bomba* and *Beppo* were disappointments as sires. *Milenko*, one of *Bomba*'s sons, was





the only real success for James, notable for winning consecutively the Jockey Club Stakes (a distance race) and the Cambridgeshire (a sprint). It was considered extraordinary to win at those distances in that order.

The racing world had a surprisingly international aspect in the early twentieth century and the Rothschilds contributed to the universal improvement of bloodstock. The bloodlines of James's horses were sufficient to be perceived as an improvement to mediocre stock. He sold two winning stallions abroad – *Milenko* to Argentina and *Bronzino* to Australia – to accolades from the racing press.²⁴

Through the years there have been many famous and well-loved Rothschild equines. The most legendary of them all is the French stallion, *Brantôme* (1931–1952). Owned by the Rothschild Haras de Meautry, he was bred and raced by Edouard de Rothschild (1868–1949). He remains ranked among the best French horses of all time.

This colt was an outstanding example of the cross-channel activity between Britain and France, and of British influence on French racing. His sire, *Blandford* was Irish and his dam, *Vitamine* was French. *Brantôme* was unbeaten in 1934 and 35, his first two years of racing. His wins included the most important races of the day: The Prix Robert Papin, Grand Critérium and Prix Mornay as a two-year old, and the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, Prix Lupin, Prix Royal Oak and Poule d'Essai de Poulains the following year. Descriptions of the Arc de Triomphe, the richest race in France, told how he seemed to falter as he drew up on the pace setter, then



opposite, from left
Alphonse (1827–1905),
Leonora (1837–1911),
Gustave (1829–1911), and
Leopold de Rothschild
(1845–1917) with jockey
Crickmer at Deauville
Races, 1904.

Leopold de Rothschild in
a 'Spy' cartoon of 1884.

above
Anthony de Rothschild
(1887–1961) and wife
Yvonne at Epsom races.

'James de Rothschild Esq.,
taken from the life',
coloured etching by
George Belcher, 1922.

he gathered himself to stride past the eventual third place horse, held off a late challenge by another (English) horse, and passed the finish line going away wining by two and a half lengths. It was a thrilling race, the crowd went wild, not only for the exciting race, but because second place runner was a highly touted English horse.

In 1935 his training focused on preparation for the Ascot Gold Cup. He had two easy wins before disaster struck. As he arrived to run in the Prix de Dangu just prior to leaving for England, he escaped from his groom and went on a mad gallop through the streets of Chantilly. By the time he was caught, he had lost three shoes and cut himself badly. Despite this, Edouard felt compelled to send him off to Ascot rather than risk being perceived as unsportsmanlike and causing huge disappointment to the racing world.

It proved a bad decision. The champion never found his stride. Throughout the distance he did not cover the ground in his usual style, even though he ran up near the leaders until the end. He finished fifth, completely out of the running, and even the English press reported that he was well below form. *Brantôme* had beaten the third-place horse by 20 lengths in the Prix du Cadran on an earlier occasion.

Edouard is said to have commented after the race, 'I realise now, too late, that the mishap which prevented my horse undergoing his scheduled training and gallops had caused him not to be his best. I suppose I should not have sent him over, but I knew that such a wide interest was taken in him and the Gold Cup that I wanted to keep faith with the English public'.



"BRANTÔME"

André Marchand, Pinxit.

Brantôme returned to France and was given time off. In September of that year he had an easy win in the Prix d'Orange. He then went to Longchamp for his second Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, but came fourth, two lengths behind the winner. It was said that there was a mishap during the race, and he had struck a stake marking the course, which affected his going. The Arc was his last race, and he retired from the turf still a champion to the French public.

But his story does not end here. After five seasons at stud, in August of 1940, the Nazis swept in and, along with all the best bloodstock in France, seized virtually all the Meautry horses broodmares, foals, and three stallions, including *Brantôme*. The horses were either sold to make money for the Nazi coffers, sent to Germany or Hungary for racing, or consigned to the German army stud at Altfeld for breeding. It was not until after the war ended, in 1946, and after prolonged negotiations, that some the Meautry horses were returned to Baron Edouard and his son Guy. There were subsequent clouds surrounding the progeny of French sires in Germany for those years, so although *Brantôme* did not appear as an outstanding sire – he made second on the list of French leading sires in 1950, his highest rating – one can't help but wonder how successful he might have been had his fate been different. With a lifetime record of 12 wins in 14 starts, he remained a hero in the hearts of the French, and when he died in 1952 the newspaper headlines announced: *Brantôme de Rothschild is dead*.²⁵

The Rothschild involvement in racing continues today, although perhaps slightly lower-key than those early years. The long-established stud farms at Southcourt and Waddesdon are alive and well. The Haras de Meautry remains a successful operation, the oldest in France continuously owned by a single family. And every spring brings high hopes for the new crop of foals and every season the anticipation of victories.

Diana Stone is an Assistant Curator at Waddesdon Manor, doing research on various aspects of the collection, working on special exhibitions, giving special tours and lectures, and managing the photographic library. She previously worked on a stud farm, competed in equestrian sports and owned a point-to-point horse.

NOTES

- 1 Details on the Rothschilds as breeders in France have come from the Thoroughbred Heritage website, text prepared by The Rothschild Archive, 2007 with additions by Patricia Erigero. Ferrières was close to Chantilly, which rapidly became the heart of the new French racing world.
- 2 In those early years, many trainers, jockeys and stable lads were brought over from England and flat racing was an English import. Thomas Carter was one of the best of the English-born trainers in France.
- 3 Notes provided by Tim Cox, The Library of Thoroughbred Racing and Breeding.
- 4 RAL XI 109/42A/2/1.
- 5 This horse had given Lionel his first win in 1841. Flat racing provided, as brother Nat described in a note from Paris, ‘... ten times the excitement of a steeple chase because you see the whole of it.’ RAL XI 109/43A/2/43.
- 6 RAL XI 109/45B/6/40.
- 7 George Ireland, *Plutocrats: A Rothschild Inheritance* (London: John Murray, 2007), p.306. He put his horses initially with William King and Joseph Hayhoe at Russley Park near Lambourn in 1853, and three years later moved the yard to Newmarket under the sole direction of Hayhoe.
- 8 Mayer’s breeding programme produced long lasting results. In 1871 *Hannab’s* sire, *King Tom*, had been purchased by Mayer for £2,000. After a disappointing career, he was retired to stud in 1857. By 1863 he had sired 56 winners. Between 1861 and 1877 he made the list of top ten sires in Britain 14 times. In 1870, and again in 1871 he topped the list as the leading sire. In 1864 Mayer won over £11,000 in prize money. Twenty eight of that season’s winners were by *King Tom*, proving beyond any doubt the success of Mayer’s breeding program.
- 9 In honour of *Hannab’s* triumphs, Mayer gave the New Court clerks a dinner at Richmond. In addition his filly’s victories, Mayer’s colt *Favonius* had brought him a Derby win. Only three times previously in the history of racing had the Derby and the Oaks been won in one year by the same owner. Mayer finished that extraordinary season by winning the Cesarewitch Stakes with *Corisande* at Newmarket. Even the press celebrated with him. Among advanced backers, the betting motto that year was ‘follow the Baron’. Racing chronicles of the day spoke glowingly about the Baron, ‘... he is grudging his success by none, and his cheery face makes no secret how proud he is to see his horses – not only themselves, but also their sires and dams, bred by himself – win. All honour to such a noble sportsman! It would be well for the best interests of the Turf if all raced as he’. Dixon W W ‘Thormanby’ *Kings of the Turf: Memoirs and Anecdotes of Distinguished Owners, Backers, Trainers and Jockeys who have figured on the British Turf, with memorable achievements of famous Horses*; (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1898) p.353.
- 10 Ireland, p.307.
- 11 Ibid, p.347.
- 12 Upon finishing an uninspired tenure at Kings College Cambridge his father Lionel wrote to him in 1867 saying, ‘I am glad you are pleased with yourself for having guessed the winners of the two great races, your [college] examiners were quite right in saying that you have a good hand at guessing ...’ – Leo remained undiscouraged and immediately took over the running of Lionel’s stud at Gunnersbury. He later moved the breeding operation to his beloved Ascott and christened it Southcourt Stud.
- 13 Virginia Cowles, *The Rothschilds: A Family of Fortune* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), p.170.
- 14 Alfred Hayhoe took charge of the training of Leo’s race horses at Palace House Stables, Newmarket in 1881. This partnership resulted in years of racing satisfaction, with many successful horses. When Hayhoe retired, John Watson took over as Leopold’s trainer. In a demonstration of loyalty that was to later be echoed by Leo’s second cousin James, this association lasted 40 years.
- 15 Leopold was popular to such an extent that the future King Edward VII struggled through a snowstorm to be present at his wedding in 1881. This marked the first time a member of the Royal Family had attended a service in a synagogue.
- 16 Cowles, p.197.
- 17 RAL 000/1373/8/a–c; RAL/1037/117/3 and 7.
- 18 Born in France, James was the son of Baron and Baroness Edmond de Rothschild. Neither were racing enthusiasts, but indulged their elder son’s interest in horses by allowing him to stay on an extra year at Cambridge University where, in addition to a reasonable academic standing, he had cultivated a circle of friends and relatives with whom he spent most of his time either racing or hunting. It was during this time, when he was twenty, that he had backed a horse named *Jeddab* at odds of 100/1 against, in the 1898 Epsom Derby. The horse won and James’s fate was sealed.
- 19 James’s impulsive and eccentric style shines through clearly in stories of two fillies purchased within three years of each other. The earlier was *Tishy*, who became notorious for ‘crossing her legs’ a euphemism for being clumsy, or not trying. Despite her reputation, or perhaps because of it, James bought the filly at the autumn sales. The following spring he was vindicated as she won the Summer Handicap for him at Newmarket, but finished last again in the 1922 Cesarewitch. The second had a happier ending. In 1925, in London, James read in a French newspaper that a three-year old filly named *Reine Lumière*, who had a modest record up until a surprise win the previous day, was to be sold. He immediately told his agents in France to buy her, and the deal was finalised five days before the prestigious Grand Prix de Paris. *Reine Lumière* won the race by a head, in a race described in the press as full of incidents.
- 20 RAL 000/1373/4.
- 21 This partnership must have jelled into friendship because in 1913 James commissioned the Russian artist Leon Bakst to make a portrait of Pratt for inclusion in the set of paintings illustrating the Sleeping Beauty story which was meant to hang in the dining room of James’s London house. Pratt’s portrait was the only non-Rothschild included in the seven paintings.
- 22 James’s obituary. *Bloodstock Breeders Review*, 1957.
- 23 Mrs James (Dorothy) de Rothschild, *The Rothschilds at Waddesdon Manor* (London: Collins 1979), p.108.
- 24 James had a promising stallion called *Bronzino* who won the Greenham Stakes and the Doncaster Cup in 1910. The horse gave an impressive fourth place finish in the Cesarewitch. Sadly, his racing career came to an end in 1911 when he broke down during preparations for the Ascot Gold Cup, for which he had been favourite. After that, James sold him to an Australian racing enthusiast who recognised his breeding potential and shipped him out to stud in Sydney in hopes of raising the quality of bloodstock there.
- 25 Details on *Brantôme* and his career have come from Thoroughbred Heritage website, text prepared by The Rothschild Archive, 2007, with additions by Patricia Erigero.