

Mayo Heritage

Newsletter

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The
North Mayo
Heritage
Centre

Strand Racing

Three beaches in Co. Mayo have become famous for strand racing

Read how this tradition still exists in modern times.

Are you interested in tracing your Mayo roots?

If you are interested in professional help to research your family history or are curious about your ancestry, why not contact us? All research can be done remotely.

Perhaps we can help you!

*Cover: Image of Carrowniskey races used on poster to revive the races in 2010
(image courtesy of the Carrowniskey Races Committee)*

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Strand Racing – Lacken, Doolough and Carrowniskey

‘The three o’clock race did not take place as the tide had not gone out.’
(Brendan Shine, ‘The Races of Killadoon’).

Mayo is famous for its golden sandy beaches. In a bygone world where only the gentry owned large tracts of land, and flat ground suitable for testing the speed of a steed was in short supply, it was no surprise that some of the county’s beaches doubled up as race tracks every summer.

Three beaches in Mayo have become famous for strand racing, and all three have held racing festivals in modern times, extending a tradition from earlier generations. Lacken, in north Mayo, Doolough (Geesala), and Carrowniskey, west of Louisburgh hold on to the tradition of strand racing.

Lacken strand, at the mouth of Killala Bay, has a square shaped beach, which allowed the organisers to hold racing on an oval circuit of five furlongs (just over a kilometre or a little over half a mile). Having been held since at least the mid-1890s, the Lacken races ceased in 1955, but were revived in 1997. They are held at the end of May.¹

Racing at Doolough strand, Geesala, takes place in August each year.

Doolough Strand offers a three mile long course and is considered the ‘best turf’ by Horse Racing Ireland. The races are now the focal point for the annual Geesala Festival.²

This is an old festival, the earliest mention in the press dates to 1895 when cycling and athletics shared the bill with the horses.

The Carrowniskey races are also held on an ‘out and back’ course. The earliest mention of the meeting in the local press dates to 1931, when Mary Gibbons and Kate Gallagher, both of Louisburgh, and Mrs. Fallon of Westport were all granted ‘occasional’ licences to serve alcoholic refreshment at the races.³

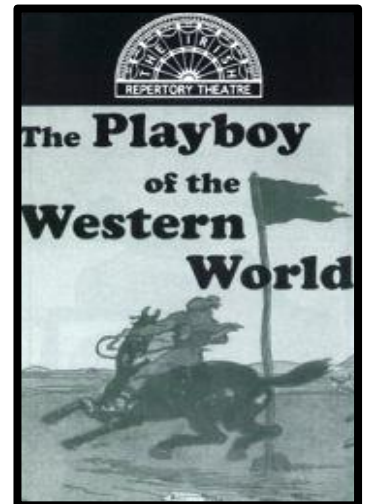
The date for the races varied between mid-July and mid-August. They were usually held on a Wednesday,⁴ the traditional half day for the traders in Westport.

Of course, as Brendan Shine’s song noted, the time the races actually took place depended on the tides! As with Lacken, the Carrowniskey races died out, with the last report dating to 1982,⁵ but they were successfully revived, with a mid-July date, in 2010.⁶

Being at the mercy of the weather, as well as the mood of the tide, and what it might do to the condition of the strand, is one of the many obstacles which have to be negotiated each year in order to be able to hold these race meetings. And of course, as Ms. Gibbons, Gallagher and Fallon proved, the fun of the fair at these meetings was as much about the carnival, amusements and socialising as it was in watching the runners and riders sprinting along the strand.

References:

- ¹ Mayo-ireland.ie
- ² Mayo-ireland.ie
- ³ The Western People, the 15-Aug-1931
- ⁴ The Connaught Telegraph, the 08-Aug-1964
- ⁵ The Mayo News, the 21-Jul-1982
- ⁶ Carrowniskeyraces.ie



Did you know?

John Millington Synge’s play ‘The Playboy of the Western World’ is widely accepted as being set in Geesala c.1900 and includes references to strand racing and donkey racing.

(image from Irishrep.org)

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*Extract from the Ordnance Survey
Letters of 1838*

A brief history of

DOOLOUGH

(Dubh-Loch,

meaning black lake).

Situated 6 miles south, south-east of Belmullet, having Blacksod Bay on the west. The property of W. H. Carter, Esq. Contains 2,499 acres, 3 roods, 7 perches, of which 635 acres are cultivated, 152 acres of blowing sand, and the remainder chiefly deep bog, in many places marshy and interspersed with numerous deep holes or little lakes. There is a Coast Guard Station near the north-west extremity of this townland.



Strand racing at Doolough beach in modern times (Image courtesy of Evita Coyle)