

# Westmeath Independent

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## RACING IN IRELAND

On that wide expanse of plain called the Curragh of Kildare, fairs and races were held by the Ancient Irish. From these remote ages up to the present the Curragh has been celebrated for its racing meetings. In the library of Trinity College Dublin, there is a manuscript on vellum, in the Irish language, written in the twelfth century, a compilation of some records that even at that remote time were considered by the scribe as of very ancient date. In it there is a copy of some poems by Osin. The poet states that he composed one of these on the very day on which by order of the King of Ireland, races were run. The plains on which the races were held, now known as the Curragh of Kildare, were then called 'the Curragh of the Liffey.' Osin also relates an anecdote relating to a race meeting, held one thousand eight hundred years ago by order of Feacha Muilleathan, King of Munster, at Clogher, in that part of the island now called Limerick County. All the races were won by the King's grandfather, Dil the Druid, with a black-coloured horse. After the races he presented this horse to the King, who, immediately on his obtaining the animal bestowed it on Finn, the son of Cumhal. On leaving Clogher, Finn, in company with Oisín and Cailita, set out for a tour through the Kingdom of Kerry, and the black horse was always successful.

### *Horses in Celtic Mythology*

*Amongst Celtic peoples the horse has always been highly venerated and seen as a prized possession. Horses were viewed as status symbols, treated with great respect, treasured, and well cared for. There was a great bond between Celts and their horses. The esteem in which they were held is not surprising when the impact of the animal on everyday life, survival and battle are considered. The Celts were known as very skilled cavalry fighters and charioteers. The Romans used mercenaries from Gaul because they were known to have these skills. The importance of chariots in battle is recounted in Irish medieval literature that draws on much older ancient folklore.*



# THE CURRAGH

## WHERE CHAMPIONS ARE MADE

Manuscripts indicate the ancient Celts raced horses on the vast heath called Cuireach (Gaelic word for racecourse). The Curragh plain had served as centre of Irish horse racing ever since. The oldest official course located there was the four-mile King's Plate, dating at least as far back as 1717. Conolly's Mile, the straight mile run to the winning post, is still part of the extant course, and dates to the 1760s. The rest of the present course is part of an elliptical course established in the 1750s, later supplanted by the Rutland Course, named for Charles Manners, 4th Duke of Rutland and Viceroy of Ireland. The right-handed course is mostly flat, with a three-furlong uphill run-in.

