

# The Bookie's Runner in Greenock.

*Joseph McGeer*

It is dinnertime on a wet Wednesday in the centre of Greenock in 1952. Roddy is a bookie's runner for Gallagher's and is in his usual place of work at the back of a close in the East End of Greenock. Two polis arrive at the mouth of the close and shout up "C'mon Roddy, it's your turn". Roddy grudgingly walks down the close, having 'relocated' the bulk of the bets and stake money, and is escorted to the station where he spends the night before being fined and released the next day. The bookie has sent in his tea and breakfast to the polis station before paying the fine. The real downer is that he missed his night out with Mary the night before. No matter - he is back on his patch later in the day.



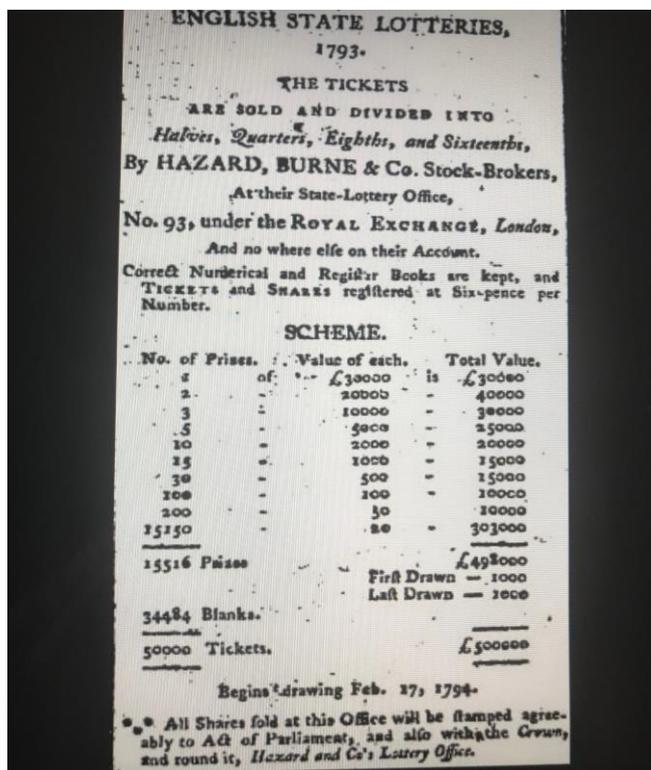
*Roddy's home patch, Chalmers St Greenock.*

Stories like this were commonplace across Britain in the middle of the twentieth century. Gambling was a major leisure pursuit which was socially acceptable and, although widespread, took place within an almost Byzantine set of legal and practical restrictions. Britain was not unique across the world or through history in having such an ambivalent attitude to gambling. The desire to have a 'flutter' is found even before the Roman soldiers cast lots for the clothes of Jesus at the foot of the cross.



It could be argued that gambling is part of the human psyche either as a distracting leisure pursuit or for gain. Therefore we all recognize this part of our nature and find it difficult to view it as a crime. Nevertheless we can also see the downside for either practical or moral reasons. The practical ones often related to gambling because it distracted some from their duties. In 1190, the kings of England and France introduced limits on the size of bets, but not gambling itself, because it was undermining military preparedness. The moral objections are clearly seen in the minority of people whose lives are blighted by gambling.

In Britain this ambivalence is shown in the legislation over time. The first true national lotteries in England were in 1694 and were privately run. By 1721 private lotteries were banned and the State one introduced. It became an important source of government revenue in the eighteenth century. As can be seen below.



*Image of invitation to purchase.*

In 1823 the lottery was ended as a result of mismanagement and fiddling, not to reappear until 1993. By the nineteenth century horse racing had become the most common form of gambling, and had several features. It was stratified by class, illegal for poor people, widespread and commercialised in the sense that it took place at specific locations. Through the nineteenth century legislation became ever more restrictive, culminating in an outright ban on street betting in 1906. It proved ineffective. Street betting remained very widespread and was even used by the police themselves. As a result, between 1906 and 1961 a shadowy figure emerged: the illegal bookie. Betting on horse racing was a popular pursuit with many Scots, but most did

not have legal access to place bets, as only on-course cash betting at racecourses, or telephone and postal bets were legal. As a result, the bookie flourished in many communities: in the streets, factories, shipyards, mining villages and tenement closes all over Scotland. He had an army of agents, runners and watchers enabling his trade, and he formed a strange relationship with the police, as illustrated in Roddy's story above. This point was accepted by a Royal Commission set up in 1949 but not acted upon until 1961, when the bookie's shop became legal, and the need for the illegal bookie's runner was eliminated.

How then did the bookie's runner operate? As the name implies, the runner would take the bet (or line) from the punter at a convenient spot. In Roddy's case this was often the corner of Hamilton Street and the Vennel (*below*) in the 1920s as well as his home patch. He would take this to the bookmaker, handling the cash and delivering any winnings back to the punter.



*The corner of Hamilton St and the Vennel in Greenock.*

Some bets were legal, which allowed postal and phone betting to an official bookie. So betting was not illegal, just very difficult for ordinary people. Trustworthiness was important but the honesty of the runner was underscored by the consequences to a runner of money going missing. Stealing money from some bookmakers could have very serious consequences. It could be equally grim from the punter who had not had his bet placed if the runner felt the nag had no chance. The issue of trust also meant that runners were often young boys aged around 14–16 and the police would tend to turn a 'blind eye' to them as they went about their business. In hard times they were often unemployed adults. Some of the runners also covered the evening dog racing.

Shipyards workers were also provided with a tailored service. Roddy was also

a turner in Scott's Shipyard in Greenock when in full time employment. His job as a turner meant he stayed in one place. The runner could not therefore 'run' and was not able to place the afternoon bets. The solution was ingenious. Anyone in the yard who wanted to put on a line would walk to the shelf beside the turning machine and simply put the bet and the money on the shelf and move on without saying a word or even looking at the runner. No one could put his or her name to the line so everyone had a nom de plume. These often included a first name or initials such as *Jack the Lad*, *J32*, *ShuggieM*, *Juhex3ri* or *Gran June*.

The money was then put in the runner's pocket but the line was put in a bag. All of the lines had to be in the bag before the first race took place at any racecourse. That time could range between 12.00 and 1.30. The runner would then 'lock' the bag with a timed mechanism similar to that used in pigeon racing. The bag was grey and made of sturdy rubber with the time locking mechanism welded into its side. At the end of day the runner would take the bag to the bookie's shop, and the locked time would be verified by the staff at the bookies. All of the lines were then 'on'. The bets were then checked and later that evening the winning lines were identified and a list provided by the bookie to the runner. The runner would then pay out next morning in the yard. The runner held on to all the money placed between Monday morning and Saturday teatime. In this way he had sufficient funds from the bets placed to payout next day. By Saturday this could be a considerable sum of money, often over £100, or over ten times the average wage for the 1950s.

All of this was, of course, illegal and not without risk to the runner. Being caught could result in getting his books (being sacked) on the spot. One day Roddy saw a yard manager (a 'bowler hat' as they were known) heading directly towards him and assumed the worst. The bowler hat looked at the shelf then quickly placed his own line before striding away.

When punters went on holiday, they took their love of betting with them. Alan Barlow remembers a raid on Rothesay on the Isle of Bute where over 100 men were arrested. They were frog-marched to the tiny police office where, as a young cadet, Alan had to call their 'home' police offices to ensure the crime was logged. A runner also provided a 'bag' service, like that in the shipyard, to the steamers lined up at Gourrock Pier. The runner stopped at the gangplank of each steamer and a crew member would bring the lines from the crew and known passengers.

In spite of the law, some police officers did not consider this to be a serious crime. Duties such as arresting offenders were carried out, but in the late 1950s in a staged manner. Quite often a senior officer would telephone the bookie and alert him that he would be getting a visit. This gave the bookie time to hide the cash and arrange stooges to stand in for himself and, more crucially, his more respectable punters. One retired officer based in the east end of Glasgow remembers a time when a wily inspector double-crossed a bookie. The inspector gave the bookie his advance warning, and simultaneously sent the then young constable, in plain clothes, to put

on a line and observe what was done with the cash. The constable watched as a 'wee old man in a corporation uniform' collected the money in his pockets. When the police raided the bookies, they had a habit of sending men in council or railway uniforms back to their work. When raids were made at the bookies shop where illegal bets had been accepted the result was a surprise to some. One punter recalls a young man starting to cry when the police arrested him since he did not know it was illegal; such was the prevalence of illegal betting. Those punters arrested usually faced a police caution.

On Sunday all of the runners would meet the bookie at a prearranged place to reconcile the accounts. The bookie had calculated how much had been placed in bets minus the winning payouts and minus the runners' commission. That was the amount to be handed over by the runner. Each bookie had a different number of runners and around 8 would seem to be about the average. The Sunday meeting was a very vulnerable time and a determined raid by the police could really harm the bookie financially and result in the arrest of the bookie and the runners. In Roddy's case the meeting place was in Sugarhouse Lane in Greenock.

The bookies established a number of measures to protect their business. Punters were subject to a betting limit so that a large successful line placed at the last minute could not bankrupt the bookie. They also did not allow large multiple bets to be placed at one time. If a substantial bet was accepted, the risk would be spread with other, larger, bookies. This practice was known as 'laying off' and protected bookies from huge payouts, and ultimately going bankrupt. If a bookie did go bust, he had two options; run, or work on and pay out his debts over time.

One sideline activity was taken up by some runners, that of the small time moneylender. Lending was often restricted to family, friends or neighbours. The sums were relatively small usually being 10 shillings or £1 loaned on a Tuesday or Wednesday and repaid on a Friday, with interest, when the men collected their wages. The money collected from Monday onwards provided the capital. One was Bob Gourley\*. Bob took bets, was a money lender and charged 2/6 in the £1. Not surprisingly the runners were relatively well off compared to neighbours and one report from Warrington noted that the two runners on the estate were the only ones who had phones. This meant that if an emergency arose such as the need to phone the doctor or an ambulance people went to the runner to use the phone, and they always obliged - what else could they do! Indeed such was the acceptance of the runner in society that it did not prevent one from becoming a cabinet minister. Ernest Marples became Minister for Transport in the 1960s.

When betting shops were legalised on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1961, up to 10,000 opened within the first six months although on the insistence of Rab Butler, then Home Secretary, betting shops should have 'dead windows', blacked-out or shuttered with no visible enticements to prospective punters. Butler noted in his memoirs that "the House of Commons was so intent on making betting shops as sad as possible, in order not to deprave the young, that they ended

up more like undertakers' premises".

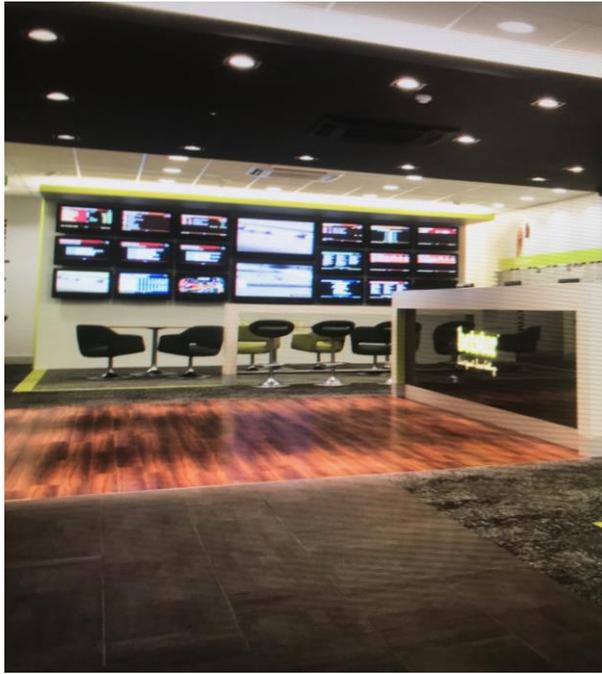


*A typical "Butler Bookie's".*

Nevertheless bookmakers rushed to open shops and take advantage of the legislation that had knocked their street-based competitors out of business at a stroke. Some of the illegal bookies made it through the new vetting procedures, established by the 1960 Betting and Gaming Act, but a lot of them found that the capital required to set up premises, pay staff and 'go straight' was beyond them. The existing betting firms that had run their businesses for on-course clients and for those with the financial (credit) and technical (telephone) means to place off-course bets, quickly established themselves. Scotland's most famous bookmaker at the time was the Glaswegian John Banks, who was in no doubt about the value of being on the High Street saying "Betting shops are a license to print money."

Even after 1961 the bookmakers were still open to dodges and fiddles from their own staff. One method was for the counter staff to collude in 'stamping lines'. The counter staff would stamp lines for all the horses in a race. The bookmaker's stamp confirmed that the line had been placed before the race began. The winning line would then be inserted into the pile of winners and collected by an accomplice coming in and handing over a similar looking line. Proceeds were divided in the pub later.

Over fifty years on, there are scarcely fewer bookmakers in operation and nearly every High Street in the country seems to have at least one and often more. In 1986 gambling legislation was amended to allow betting shops to be 'improved' with the provision of hot drinks, albeit from a machine; brighter interiors, with seats for comfort; and, best of all, television pictures from the racecourses.



*A typical modern betting shop.*

Like it or not, betting shops are now an established facet of the British landscape. Indeed so common that some local councils have expressed a desire to restrict the number on their High Streets. In 2013 local Councillors said a street in Newham, east London, has more bookmakers than any other in the country - 18 in total - and 80 in the borough as a whole.

The ambivalence towards gambling remains much as it did for the past thousand years, and in May 2018 the apparent fiddling with the rules on gambling continued. Until then gamblers in Britain's betting shops could stake up to £100 every 20 seconds on electronic casino games, such as roulette, with the betting machines. The £100 maximum bet was reduced to £2. Sports Minister, Tracey Crouch, said this "will reduce harm for the most vulnerable". A group called the Campaign for Fairer Gambling (CfFG) said in an article on the PoliticsHome website that players "are more likely to be young men (aged under 35), unemployed and/or from low-to-middle income households".

It would appear that the debate on the nature of gambling has not changed.

*\*Information from Billy Sinclair.*

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