

A sprinter in Juniper Green

By Ian Downie (Aberdeen)

A distant relative of mine (my great grandfather's brother-in-law in fact) ran in the Powderhall sprint probably in the 1880s. His name was James Chalmers Spence and he took part in the event under the name J Green since he was born in Juniper Green in 1864. I can't give you the exact date offhand, but it was probably in the 1880s as he was born at Juniper Green on 17 October in 1864 to parents David Spence and Margaret Hardie.

Let me quote from a printed poem of which I have a photocopy, unfortunately incomplete and without source. According to the poem it would appear that he came second by 'half a heid', but it is not clear whether this was the Powderhall Sprint or another event. It was certainly a big occasion because the prize was £80, and it is described as 'a big handicap'.

... a chap
.... strong,
..... es far and wide
.. middle-aged, and young,
In form and feature gey weel faured
There's nane can that deny;?
And though his name be Jamie Green
Ye'll fin' him geyan fly,
'Mong "pede" he spends a lot o' time,
And gangs w' mony a stunner,
It's "six tae four" he'll carry on
Till he's a tip-top runner.
Yince on a time this verdant youth
Cam' near up tae the scratch,
For five and twenty pound a side,
Wi' "Duncan" he did match,
And though some thocht this match
Was juist the heicht o' folly;
Yet ithers swore he wad hae won't?
But for a muckle collie.
For juist as they had started off
Along the cinder track,
The brute ran in atween his legs,
And laid him on his back.
The stanes ie brute did
.....
('Twas said it had been hoondit o..
By some o' Duncan's backers.)
And noo for a big handicap?
Wi' micht and main he tries,
But lost by half-a-heid, 'tis said,
The eichty pound, first prize.
Noo, Jamie, tak' a freend's advice

And never be a hedger,
Stick closer tae yer desk, my boy,
Yer cash book, sheets, and ledger
And show yer freends and neebours a'
That ye can mend yer "pace",
And leave a "record" that will be
A credit tae your race.
That whan yer aulder, and yer leaf
Has turned frae "Green" tae "yellow",
Ye still may be for years tae come
A big strong, powerfu' fellow.
And whan ye're grown sae auld and stiff
No fit tae rin nor ride,
Ye'll fin' whan "balancing" ye've "laid"
The "odds" on the richt side.

There is a report in The Scotsman of Monday 18th June 1888, page 4 of a 440 yards handicap at the Royal Gymnasium, in which "J. Green of Juniper Green (11) was second, having with a long, steady stride pushed rapidly ahead."

Then, on Monday 26 September 1898, page 4, a report on the 133 yards handicap at Powderhall (preliminary ties, held the previous Saturday) showed that J. Green, Juniper Green off 15 1/2 yards, won the thirteenth heat of seven runners.

I've also got a transcription of the golden wedding notice of James' parents, David Spence and Margaret Hardie (I also have a scanned version):

"Mr & Mrs David Spence, Margaret Cottage, Belmont Road, Juniper Green, who celebrated their golden wedding on Saturday, 2nd January, 1910".

Mr and Mrs Spence were both born in Leslie in 1836. On the 2nd January, 1860 they were married there by the Rev Alexander McLaren, Minister of the parish. Two sons and two daughters were born to them, and there are 20 grandchildren. A papermaker to trade, Mr Spence removed to Juniper Green in 1859 and for the long period of 48 years wrought in Woodhall Paper Mills, retiring about three years ago. Mr Spence has an unusually long record of service in another capacity - that of precenter. Fourteen years in Currie Parish Church and 40 years in the adjoining village of Hermiston, where, now in his 74th year, he still leads the praise on alternate Sunday evenings. Mr Spence had the unique distinction of being one of a family, the mother of which had four children at a birth. This was in 1845. The four children lived long enough to be baptised in the Free Church, Anstruther. Three of them died in infancy but the fourth lived to the age of 33. At the golden wedding celebrations on Saturday, Mr & Mrs Spence were the recipients of numerous gifts and many testimonies were given to the respect entertained for them by their many friends in the Water of Leith Valley."

I also have a letter written by David Spence in Juniper Green to Margaret in Leslie before they were married - a scanned version of it is linked to this story.