

Paladin's

War

*THE
STORY BEHIND*

Old Gold

Racing

by ED SEYFRIED



D

orothy Paget was the preeminent owner of the pre-war era. A compulsive gambler and obsessive eater who lived almost exclusively by night, a cursory glance across any 1930s or 1940s race card yields at least one Paget entry in most races. After a very expensive but highly inauspicious start she paid a further £12,000 (about £¼m in today's money) for two geldings, Insurance and Golden Miller; at the time the Cheltenham Gold Cup was worth less than £750. Golden Miller's record of five consecutive Gold Cup victories has never been bettered.

Today's racing press would refer to her operation as the "Paget juggernaut" in the same way as contemporary hacks refer to Michael O'Leary's Gigginstown operation. Whereas now Gigginstown's maroon or JP McManus's green and gold silks dominate jump racing (especially in Ireland), then it was Paget's blue and yellow colours that were ubiquitous in almost every jump race; certainly of any value. She was a formidable force in National Hunt with almost limitless resources.

As a consequence then, as now, more modest owners, with far tighter resources had to think and work hard to give themselves the best chance to beat the endless supply of quality Paget, or RyanAir, horses.

One such owner was Ronnie Holbech, of Farnborough Hall in Warwickshire; in the 1930s he was also trying is luck in the dank green fields of National Hunt and Gold Cup dreams. Holbech was a director of Banbury brewers Hunt Edmunds and his racing silks (old gold with





a white belt and cap) were designed to symbolise the gilded beery froth effervescing up and over a pint of Hunt Edmunds Supreme Pale Ale.

The Holbechs had been in the county for 700 years or so but a family gambler had put paid to most of the money, the Canalettos and a Panini – thus any racing activity had to be carefully budgeted. A boyhood polio victim, Holbech spent much of his time in a wheelchair though this in no way dampened his enthusiasm for life or life's responsibilities: he was an alderman for the County of Warwick and very active on the board of Banbury Hospital where the children's section is still called "The Holbech Ward".

And he had a passion for jump racing. Accordingly he stewarded at Towcester, Stratford, Warwick, Worcester and Cheltenham. At each course disabled members of the public could sit alongside him as he stewarded and thus his legacy to all five racecourses was unrivalled wheelchair viewing years in advance of its time. In this milieu, Holbech with his trainer Mr J "Sunny" Hall, operating from Lord Rothschild's former yard at Russley Park near Lambourn, had some decent successes and clearly a lot of fun: Zadig won a couple of times for him at Birmingham Races in 1930 and 1931 whilst at the April meeting at Warwick, also in 1931, the curiously named Virgin's Tangle ran in his colours. At the beginning of January, Pirton ran against Miss Paget's King Louis in a 100 sovereign selling handicap chase over the stiff fences at Haydock.

As the decade progressed Ronnie's string of racehorses, which only ever numbered two or three at any one time, gradually improved: he had a runner at the 1935 Cheltenham Festival with the notoriously badly behaved and riotous Banned, ridden Jerry Wilson, albeit unplaced in the County Hurdle. In the previous race Wilson had ridden Golden Miller to his fourth consecutive Gold Cup victory and Paget famously kissed her champion on the nose, reputedly the only man she ever did kiss; the gelding not the jockey.

In October 1936 the local press was set ablaze when 'a local





Warwickshire farmer and racehorse owner' landed a touch at Stratford with a 171/1 double when Banned, in a rare moment of co-operative behaviour, stormed over the line at 20/1 and then in the following race Chesterton 7/1 got up too, both winning to thunderous local support. Chesterton, a good Cheltenham type who later also won at Newbury and Wetherby, was later sold to Sir Allan Gordon Smith, chairman of Smiths Instruments, whose clocks and gauges were being bought in their thousands for RAF bombers and fighters as war loomed.

All these times, like a converging twain, two irresistible forces were being drawn together by the Fates. One was Ronnie Holbech; the other, Paladin, a totally black colt with no white socks and no white face markings. Trained by Henri Jellis in Newmarket he caused quite a stir in flat racing circles during the latter years of the 1930s. Jellis, a recently retired jockey, had sent Paladin out as his very first runner in the Chaplin Plate at Lincoln on the second day of the flat season. And he duly obliged winning not only this but a further three races out of his eight attempts in the 1937 season, becoming something of a favourite with the punting public and professional tipsters alike. He was regularly tipped across many of the UK sports and racing pages in the 1938 and 1939 seasons winning the Cesarewich Trial at Gatwick in September 1938 as the outsider at 10/1, in what was perhaps something of a betting coup. Gatwick Racecourse later became an aerodrome.

4.30

YORKSHIRE POST (Julius)	CARLINO
LEEDS MERCURY (White Knight)	PALADIN
LEEDS MERCURY (The Duke)	PALADIN (C)
SPORTING CHRONICLE (Kettledrum)	
.....	PALADIN (nap)
SPORTING CHRONICLE (Own Reporter)	
.....	PALADIN (nap)
DAILY DISPATCH (Carlton)	PALADIN (nap)
SPORTING LIFE (Augur)	PALADIN
SPORTING LIFE (Man on the Spot)	PALADIN
SPORTING LIFE (Bendigo)	PALADIN
DAILY SKETCH	PALADIN
THE TIMES	PALADIN
DAILY TELEGRAPH (Hotspur)	PALADIN





By now war had been declared but was not raging. Nevertheless the immediate future of racing was in doubt from vociferous detractors such as the pompous ultraconservative Sir Waldron Smithers and vengeful Labour MP Manny Shinwell, who would later ask whether “it [was] desirable to allow these insane and unseemly spectacles to continue”. Manny clearly had as much love for racing as he did the gardens at Wentworth Woodhouse*.

Where there were asserted efforts to keep flat racing going on the basis of protecting the future of the British bloodstock industry, jumping with its legions of sterile and hungry geldings was under serious threat and as belts tightened yards were drastically cut back.

An example was Edgerton House Stables in Newmarket, which had been partially taken over by the army and depleted of its stable staff on account of its lads leaving to join the forces. With nowhere to go, ten of its geldings were shot. One stable lad, Snowy Outen, a fourteen year old too young to witness the horrors of war was paid sixpence a time to hold and calm them as the thumping punch of the vet’s bolt gun despatched each horse singularly.

Against this setting, and having now been gelded, Paladin’s prospects looked ominous. His predicament swiftly worsened with the dire news of the death of his owner, Mr “Jacky” Phillips.

Paladin was sent to the 1939 Newmarket November Sales.

And so it came to be that Ronnie Holbech bought Paladin for 125 guineas (about £7,000 in today’s money). A bargain. The horse was moved to Sunny Hall’s to be trained. The anti-racing ideologues such as Shinwell continued to argue that racing should be suspended though Parliament would hear that if the oats saved were given to chickens instead of racehorses it would only provide about one extra egg per head of the population once in four years. Anyway the racing public were voting with their feet by turning up to racecourses across





the country in their masses. Racing was important for R&R and, said Dorothy Paget: “for morale”.

Paladin's first engagement in the old gold colours was to be at Leicester on January 8th. The same card presented two future Gold Cup winners: Poet Prince and Miss Paget's Roman Hackle both of whom were entered in the first race. The pertinently named Bachelor King in Paladin's race was also in the blue and yellow Paget colours. However the night before racing penetratingly cold conditions pierced the land with a bitter vehemence and, with persistent freezing and snowfall forecast, sport was initially postponed for a day and then cancelled. In London the Thames froze in for the first time since 1888.

There was no let up in the weather until Newbury on 21st February where Mr Tom Hanbury, rider of the first to finish in the United Services Handicap Chase, was disqualified after an objection from the owners of the fourth on the basis that he was not a commissioned officer. Accordingly the race was awarded to the second, Tetray, ridden by the nevertheless hugely popular and fearless amateur Lt. I K (Kim) Muir (10th Hussars).

A brief respite between bitter winter flurries propped open a window of milder weather that stretched into the next week allowing Paladin's first engagement over fences: a two mile novice chase at Ludlow on 29th February 1940, which is Leap Day: an auspicious day to make a jumping debut. The new connections would have been very pleased with their fresh charge's efforts coming third, beaten a short head and one length. He started at 8/1 and the bookies paid $\frac{1}{4}$ the odds on the third place. Everyone was happy. In fact so pleased were Holbech and Hall with Paladin's Ludlow exertions that they flirted with the idea of chucking him into the £300 two mile Broadway Novices Steeplechase (equivalent of the Arkle Chase today) on 13th March, the second race on the 1940 Cheltenham Festival's reduced wartime card.





In the event 27 ran but Paladin was not one of them. Perhaps owner and trainer felt that a large field of runners on recently thawed treacherous, bogging, holding ground was too much to ask and would dispirit a young horse in just its second run over fences. More likely he picked up a knock and they saved him for another day. Golden Knight, ridden by its amateur owner/rider, passed the post in first place but lost the race overnight after the stewards (presumably over a glass of whisky) deemed he'd impeded the second up the run in and so the prize money was reposted to Lord Sefton, owner of the aptly christened Iceberg II. The next day of the Festival was cancelled due to the snow and freezing conditions but reinstated seven days hence.

Instead Hall and Holbech opted for a less glamorous and less rigorous race at Hereford on 26th March where he was beaten a length by Harlequin, a useful chaser, in a two mile race. Ronnie and Sunny must have been pleased with their charge's opening forays into his new discipline of jumping.

A few days later the Yorkshire Evening Post, published on April 11th 1940, had only one column on the whole front page dedicated to anything other than the Nazi invasion of Denmark and Norway, the resulting landing of Royal Marines at Narvik and the King of Norway's refusal to bow to German demands that he recognise Major Quisling's puppet government. Indeed the only other front page headline news that night was a report from Cheltenham Racecourse that Golden Knight, erstwhile villain of the festival meeting, had "found an amazing turn of speed" in "one of the most remarkable finishes witnessed for a long time" to get up from fifth place when jumping the last and ran on to win by a length.

The third placed horse at that last fence was Paladin (although he finished unplaced). That Paladin's only appearance ever on the front page of the newspapers was shared with the world events that would bring down Neville Chamberlain's government illustrated the surrealism of those extraordinary days.





Breezily the article also arbitrarily observed: “the first three horses past the post in the Cleeve Handicap Chase were all owned by women”.

The Jockey Club and the National Hunt Committee had been encouraged to hold their race meetings in geographical clusters in order for horses and racegoers to cut down on to-ing and fro-ing and thus save resources and minimise traffic whilst there was so much essential military activity on the roads. Indeed horses were encouraged to be ridden rather driven between local meetings and special race trains for both racegoers and horses were strongly discouraged. It’s unlikely that Paladin himself walked the 100 miles in the two days between Cheltenham and Bangor-on-Dee for the gathering on 13th April 1940 but not impossible.

A drop in class into an easier contest, in this case a race for military riders (open to all ranks) on horses that had never won a chase before, might prove a useful confidence booster – and horses thrive on that more than they do on food that might otherwise go to chickens. Moreover the progress that Paladin had shown connexions had not yet been discerned by the general public or bookmakers, as evidenced by the generous opening offer of 8/1; all of which was swiftly hoovered up.

The race was open to all ranks so Ronnie, famously unfussed and unstuffy, had no problems in putting up Tom Hanbury as his military rider, making up for the Newbury disqualification. Paladin cruised up winning by four lengths with a starting price that had come into 5/1 suggesting that someone, or some people, may have had a bit on him.

Paladin had now had lost his novice status (and thus in the following season would have to tough it out in more experienced handicap company) but relieving bookmakers of some of that 8/1 must have cushioned the blow. Paladin would have been blissfully unaware of his involvement in a second coup.





For Hanbury it was an exculpation of Newbury: he got to beat his popular weighing room colleague and friend Lt I K (Kim) Muir riding Barn Builder who finished out of the frame.

Next up, two weeks later, was what would in normal times have been Stratford's showcase meeting. The dearth of National Hunt fixtures meant huge fields, with races having to be split into two divisions to cater for all the declarations. Paladin had now eased into the vision of some racing hacks and accordingly the Manchester Evening News tipped him.

Immediately beneath the tipster's panel was a notice informing the public "all communications between Denmark and foreign countries would now be subject to censorship – as issued by the German News Agency".

In a punishing day for punters every single Stratford favourite was defeated across all eight races; perhaps they didn't read the tips in Manchester evening newspapers. Dorothy Paget's Ard Macha was a firm fancy at 11/8 for the second division of the Shottery' Chase but he was comprehensively vanquished by six lengths by 9/2 shot – Paladin. Despite this the sporting pages the following morning, 25th April 1940, deduced that Ard Macha was "evidentially not as good as was thought" rather than saying Paladin was something special. It was back-to-back victories for Paladin and the fifth consecutive time he had jumped the last fence contesting first place.

Rather than heading east and home, Ronnie, Sonny and Paladin struck westwards into the stunning Welsh Marches. In line with the demands of the times Paladin was probably walked from Stratford to the last ever race meeting at Oswestry & Llanymynech on May 4th and the lanes and byways would have abounding with blossoming spring scents, wild flowers in the budding hedgerows and buttercups bursting in the meadows. He came third.





Three days later on May 7th Parliament debated the fall of Norway, a fiasco that had conclusively discredited Neville Chamberlain's judgement.

On May 9th Paladin was entered in a two mile chase at the now defunct racecourse at Woore in Cheshire. The course was about a mile round with very sharp left hand bends so it paid to stick close to the rails and jockeys vied for the inside position. Between the last two fences there was a bridge over which horses had to gallop. Jockey Bernard Wells, who rode his first winner at Woore Hunt, reported that the course was so tight it felt "as though you were going round on the inside of a saucepan."

Perhaps Holbech and Hall felt that Paladin would thrive on more of a galloping track. The course was also used for grazing and thus it was an unpleasant experience for any riders not on a front runner as the cow shit dug by the horses' hooves was propelled with stinging speed into the jockeys' faces and eyes (there were no goggles worn by jockeys in the 1940s) whilst they also wrestled with low hanging branches. Accordingly top amateur Alastair Hunter, who had two bookings that day, rode neither. In any event Paladin did not run perhaps for those reasons; perhaps for this: that afternoon Chamberlain resigned.

On May 10th the new Winston Churchill led government was formed. The same day Germany invaded the Low Countries and the Paddington to Newbury Racecourse specials were cancelled forcing disgruntled racegoers to find other means of transport, or entertainment.

The new Churchill coalition started with demonstrable purpose: it cancelled the Whitsun Bank Holiday (13th May) and likewise all racing was suspended. However despite the seemingly inevitable and existential disaster looming, the Home Office consented for the race meeting at Manchester on 18th May to go ahead.





Newspaper Editorials and correspondents went into an apoplectic frenzy alike: former Chamberlain doves in *The Times* now hawkishly criticised any activity not deemed to be helping the war effort. Sir Waldron Smithers railed about ‘total war’. The publication of racing results was sending precisely the wrong message to our enemies, was it not? Others vented their concern that the Derby might be bombed – (indeed a *Lufwaffe* plane would playfully strafe along side a string of horses being exercised on Newmarket Heath causing mayhem but no actual damage or harm. But in February 1941 Newmarket High Street itself was bombed and in 1944 Windsor races suffered a V1 bomb but they carried on racing as if nothing had happened). Other letter writers were more considered; one from R.C. Lyle was particularly sympathetic without mentioning that he was the paper’s racing correspondent. A.B. Clements, editor of the *Sporting Life*, condemned those who signalled “virtuous wrath” and leveraged the war to prohibit “those things of which they do not approve”.

Five days later in the 23rd May the *Gloucester Citizen* devoted page one column one to the campaign in France and Belgium. It reported that the British Expeditionary Force had been engaged in fierce fighting near Arras and had successfully withstood the German onslaught whilst the French forces were fighting with “the greatest violence” in the outskirts of Cambrai; two names that must have sent shivers down the spines of anyone over 40. In the next column the *Citizen*, as well as giving notice that there would be five days racing next week, reported the results from Newmarket and Ludlow where *Paladin* at 4/1 had won the two mile *Tenbury Chase*, with *Alastair Hunter* on board. He had improved beating favourite *Harlequin* into 3rd.

On May 26th the order was given for *Operation Dynamo*: the evacuation of British and French forces from Dunkirk.

Rail travel across the south of England was hugely disrupted as special trains were laid on to convey Dunkirk evacuees arriving in their hundreds of thousands. Nevertheless the late May meetings at Bath,





and Salisbury went ahead and racegoers mixed with battle shocked and weary soldiers. Even the June 3rd meeting at Lewes on the penultimate day of the Dunkirk evacuation was allowed to go on. The night before The Duke of Norfolk had disembarked with his battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment. He made his way to the racecourse where he wound down by watching his wife's horse run in the Berwick Plate.

On course at Lewes that bright high summer day news filtered that popular amateur Lt I.K. (Kim) Muir had been shot dead by a burst of German machine gun fire whilst trying to rescue his badly injured troop sergeant. The Cheltenham Festival each year in March has on its card The Fulke Walwyn Kim Muir Challenge Cup for amateur riders. Established in 1946 and originally called the Kim Muir Amateur Riders' Steeplechase, it was introduced by Mrs Evan Williams and named in memory of her brother: a name which is not forgotten.

The Derby was run at Newmarket on June 12th where the French runner Djebel had already been treated as non-runner for betting purposes. On 17th June France offered an armistice and the following day the voice of Churchill resonated "The Battle of France is now over. I expect the Battle of Britain is about to begin."

On June 19th The Jockey Club pre-emptively announced that all racing was cancelled until further notice. It being the closed season there was no need for the National Hunt Committee to say the same. Many racecourses, with their wide open spaces and ability to cater for large numbers of people, made excellent military encampments – Ascot, Cheltenham, Haydock, Nottingham, Aintree, Kempton Park – although this did not always prevent racing. Lewes Racecourse meanwhile provided the only mounted Home Guard detachment and a number of racing yards were also requisitioned.

At the end of July Lord Rosebery, now senior steward of the National Hunt Committee, was able to announce that there had been outline agreement to hold a moderate amount of racing from the middle of





September on the condition that it could be cancelled with next to no notice. The Times once again thundered its disapproval whipping up dissent from livestock farmers, who resented the perceived waste feed on racehorses, to retired blimps. One, former Life Guards officer, Capt. C. Noel Newton of Oakham somehow estimated that the aggregate export value of all UK bloodstock wouldn't pay for even an hour of war. Nevertheless on 22nd August a new reduced fixture list was published limiting racing to three days a week.

Despite the military now being opposed to all racing, compromise was found through the Home Office and meetings were permitted and went ahead in the North and in Scotland. In the South and particularly East Anglia the army were still on a high state of alert. The October Newmarket meeting, with its Cambridgeshire Handicap and Jockey Club Cup, was run at Nottingham and Thirsk held a replacement St Ledger. These fabled races have long been the harbingers of the end of the flat season – and thus the beginning of jumping.

The 1940/41 National Hunt term started at Taunton on 24th October. An editorial piece in the Birmingham Post embraced the coming of the new term stating: "Owners who support racing under National Hunt rules take many risks. To the possibility of loss through fog, frost, floods, snow and fatal accident there has to be added in these days a restricted fixture list which may be further curtailed at the shortest notice. Most of them are carrying on courageously." The article went on to tip Mr J. V. Rank's Timber Wolf, erstwhile winner of the Welsh Grand National, for the day's most valuable race, the Somerset 'Chase, which in the event was won convincingly by Paladin who, despite carrying top weight at 12st 7lbs, started 9/4 favourite and beat his nearest rival by one and a half lengths.

This must have been considered a half decent training feat given it was first time out after a break of four months; and there was a war on. Once again Mr T Hanbury was the pilot.





*Paladin, nearest the
photographer, jumps the water
jump at Taunton Oct 24th 1940*

The regional press which was largely even handed in the ongoing chickenfeed versus horse food debate deemed the Taunton meeting a great success.

Commander-in-Chief General Alan Brooke vehemently objected to the holding of race meetings period and expressly anywhere in the commands that made up the South, the East and the Southeast of England. And he added to his exclusion list a further eight racecourse towns and cities in the Midlands and North that he considered militarily sensitive. However in Sir John Anderson, (he of the Anderson Shelter) and Field Marshall Sir John Dill, the new Chief of the Imperial General Staff, racing found a couple of friends; a timely advent given the Christmas and January National Hunt programme needed to be sanctioned. On the 15th November Dill and Anderson held a meeting and agreed on the fixtures. As racing historian and author John Savile identifies:

“That a top cabinet minister and the wartime commander of an army of millions should solemnly sit down and discuss a few weeks’ jump racing fixtures seems absurd, but somehow characteristic of Britain at the time. Was it an example of such misguided priorities that we should wonder how Britain avoided defeat, or of a flexibility of approach that explains why we avoided it?”





A fixture that had already been sanctioned by the Home Office took place at Cheltenham on November 6th. This time Sunny Hall booked jockey George Archibald Jnr, who was home on leave from serving with the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards. The public had hoped to see Miss Paget's 1940 Gold Cup winner, Roman Hackle, but he was declared a non-runner and Paladin readily defied top weight (12 stone 7lbs) to win the season's most eye-catching handicap thus far.



PALADIN JUMPS WELL: Mr. R. A. Holbech's six-year-old which had previously won at Taunton, is seen (Archibald up) taking the last fence in the Charlton Park Steeplechase, which Paladin won by four lengths from Dominick's Cross. The favourite, The Uplifter, gave a disappointing display and finished fifth.

On December 11th Cheltenham held another “wartime meeting” with the Gloucestershire Echo reporting that some of the best chasers in the country were amongst plentiful runners interspersed with “the typical crowd of race-goers”.





The most valuable steeplechase of the day, the eponymous three mile handicap was worth 150 sovereigns and had attracted some of the best steeplechasers of the era including Savon, Uplifter and Dominicks Cross. Luxborough made the early running with Savon and Roi d’Egypt whilst Paladin was held up by Alastair Hunter. However approaching the last Paladin made his move and pulled away to beat Luxborough by three lengths again at a seemingly generous 7/1.

This was Paladin’s fourth win “on the reel” and now Fleet Street picked up on the Paladin phenomenon, their writers and inky print sheets exclaiming: “That smart young chaser Paladin” was “one of the best chasers in training” and the Birmingham Post proudly claimed “the Warwickshire sportsman Mr R. A .Holbech” for the county. Even the Tatler had sent its social diarist and a photographer and on those pages, principal amongst the photographs of pretty “gels” with society names straight from A Subaltern’s Love Song, was Paladin powering over the water jump.

And all this brought about a horse who just a year before might have ended up an early wartime casualty with a young stable lad holding is head and calming him as the vet reloaded the bolt gun.

Paladin was still only a six year old and over Christmas 1940 he was the horse of the moment, he had won six out of his last seven races since switching to jumping and at least six on the flat. He was given a near Stubbs-like full page spread in The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, whose journalists heralded him their 1941 Grand National choice.

Early in January 1941 Ronnie Holbech sold a half share to Sir Allan Gordon Smith. It was a canny arrangement with Paladin still running in the Old Gold colours and in Ronnie’s name. Perhaps Holbech also wondered how his eldest son, Edward who had recently joined the RAF in order to commence pilot training, would fare staring at those self-same Smith’s gauges as war raged in the icy skies above England.

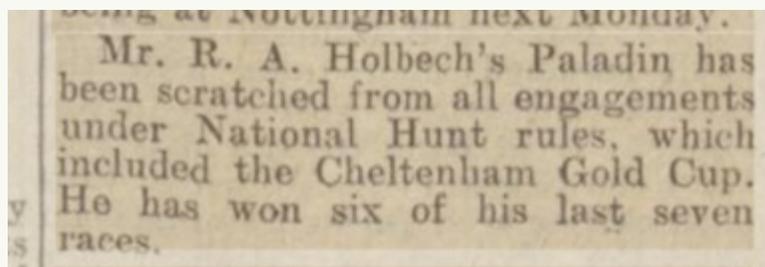


Snow fell frequently throughout the month of January 1941 making racing and training very difficult. The snowfall in the third week was considerable with strong winds causing deep drifts lying 15 inches deep in Central Birmingham and a foot deep in parts of Worcestershire. And February wasn't much better.

At the Cheltenham meeting in mid February 1941 Paladin, favourite at 6/4, was strongly tipped in early edition newspapers including the Scotsman to beat previous Gold Cup winner Roman Hackle as well Red Rower and Solarium in a two mile handicap. But he was not declared for the race: possibly Hall felt the opposition was too strong, or 12 stone over two miles was too much too fast, or perhaps there was a problem.

On March 2nd that year's entries for the Cheltenham Gold Cup were published and racecourse hacks and wags excitedly started to devote column inches in national and provincial newspapers alike speculating about who might be 1941's vanquisher. Alastair Hunter, now Paladin's regular pilot, was earwigged by a Sunday People flunky whilst at Plumpton and expressed every confidence that Paladin was the horse to deprive Miss Paget of a seventh Gold Cup win.

However elsewhere rumours were gathering that all was not well in the Holbech/Paladin camp. On 5th March confirmation was issued that Paladin had been scratched from all engagements under National Hunt rules, including the Gold Cup. Never had the word 'scratched' looked so pitiless.





Paladin had 'got a leg'. Time heals. He would need time.

In fact Paladin had nearly a full year away from racing. What would have started as full 'box rest' lead, as winter gave way to spring, to some R&R in the field. Parts of Farnborough Hall were requisitioned as a hospital for recovering war wounded too.

With ochreing of the leaves and the lowering of the sun Paladin came back into training in the autumn of 1941 whilst in Whitehall the attitude to racing abruptly changed. A Home Office paper acknowledged that the turf provided rest, leisure and a diversion for legions of people and that flat racing was the lifeblood of the bloodstock industry. But it also suggested, in terms, that money that might have gone into National Savings (and ultimately on the war effort) was possibly being diverted into bookmakers' camel hair pockets, and likewise shift workers might be tempted into absenteeism, crowds were both at risk and causing traffic congestion, petrol was being used for non-essential trips, and animal feed was being squandered outside of food production.

Most of the significant flat racing action had taken place at Newmarket, which had hosted the important Goodwood and Doncaster races too. When the season finished earlier than normal on November 5th, Harry Wragg was proclaimed champion jockey. Wragg conveniently doubled as an anti-aircraft gunner for a battery stationed in East Anglia.

The next weekend jumping burst back into life with a well-attended meeting at Nottingham, leading to others at Worcester and Cheltenham. Boxing Day fell on a Friday that year so there was no racing; correspondingly Wetherby and Cheltenham raced on the Saturday with Chesterton, erstwhile Paladin stablemate, winning the big handicap at Wetherby, whilst at Cheltenham a huge training feat was about to play out: Paladin's first race in year – his comeback race. Paladin carrying 11st-12lbs was joint top weight in the two mile Whaddon Optional Selling Chase. Also in the field and at level weights was that year's Gold Cup winner, Poet Prince with Sable Marten carrying



21lbs less at 10.0 the market leader at 6/5 on. Where Poet Prince's price drifted from 6/1 in the morning papers to a 10/1 starting price, there had been money for both Sable Marten, from 6/5 to 6/5on and Paladin who had come in from 10/1 to start at 9/2. The Birmingham Post enthused that most punters had backed Sable Marten, an odds on chance, who was "soundly beaten" by his rival who was conceding 21lbs; the Post proudly clucked:

"Mr Holbech is a great enthusiast in spite of a physical disability which necessitates the use of a Bath Chair"

Poet Prince was further back in third.

The excitement and hype started again: the London Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News reprinted their striking photograph and the Tatler, amongst its pictures of war time variety shows with daughters of the gentry nervously peeping out from their stage costumes, school football teams and bleached white, long trousered tennis tournaments, tipped him for the 1942 Gold Cup citing previous setbacks as only a 'slight leg'.

But it wasn't a 'slight leg', despite being entered in races at Nottingham and Cheltenham in January and another at Wetherby in March, Paladin didn't run. Sometimes this was on account of another brutally cold winter with all fixtures lost to snow for eight weeks consecutively. Nevertheless there was another biting reality: Hall was having to work hard to keep him sound which meant lightly racing him, conceivably just once a season. The newspapers and public began to discuss the issue, "Paladin Certain Starter" boomed the Daily Herald on March 16th, but Hall had been deliberately ambiguous when answering the paper's racing correspondent, 'Templegate':

"There has never been any intention other than to run him for the Gold Cup"



The Festival was run over two consecutive Saturdays, the last of the season, with the Champion Hurdle on the first and the Gold Cup the week following. This allowed for many of the fancied Gold Cup horses to have a run in either the National Hunt Handicap or the shorter Grand Annual which led to greater intrigue and speculation with Red Rower winning the latter. Paladin however, who was already in the Cheltenham racecourse stables, was simply given a gallop on the course after racing on the first Saturday, but he returned lame: for a second year it wasn't to be. On Gold Cup eve once again Paladin was withdrawn. Tatler mourned the no-show. In the event Red Rower was badly hampered leaving Medoc II to open up an eight length lead which was never headed. Roman Hackle fell. And so ended the 1941/42 season and the memories of it would have to linger.

The forces against racing were gaining momentum despite Home Secretary Herbert Morrison telling the commons that he didn't "think we should too readily adopt the philosophy of progressive misery" but the weather claiming eight Saturdays of racing demonstrated that life on the planet could continue without National Hunt racing. And the war was going badly: Benghazi was retaken at the end of January by counterattacking German and Italian troops whilst the Japanese, having taken Kuala Lumpur, forced the British into a last redoubt in Singapore which fell on 15th January 1942. Allied shipping losses were increasing especially as after the United States entered the war her coastal waters became fair hunting ground for U-boats. In February the basic petrol ration was reduced, then in March abolished, and the movement of horses by rail was banned. Of course there was zero effect on racing at this time as on account of the weather all meetings had been cancelled, which was setting a dangerous precedent.

The Ministry of Labour cited absenteeism, the Ministry of War Transport congestion, rail hold ups and wasted fuel; defending its turf in what was a turf war twice over, the Home Office was generally supportive arguing that racing wasn't in either's remit. In April the National Hunt Committee presented an unexpectedly timid



proposal suggesting just 24 Saturday meetings hosted solely at either Cheltenham or Wetherby. In a fatal nuance however this was submitted as a suggested proposal to limit racing rather than a request to restart. This time there were no major objections from the Agriculture, Labour and War Transport Ministries rather the coup de grace was delivered by the Home Office whose summary concluded: "...even the National Hunt Committee seem to be a little lukewarm... on the whole the best course would be for steeplechasing to be suspended altogether"

In July the Home Office concluded that even talking to the National Hunt Committee might look like some kind of commitment

On November 4th Jamaica Inn won the very last race of the year, on the flat, and then a long empty winter set in. And another.

The National Hunt Committee in July 1944 published an announcement to the effect that there would soon be a government statement about future jumps meetings; but none was forthcoming. In November a line-up was suggested that limited venues to Cheltenham and Windsor in the south and Wetherby and Catterick in the North

This was agreed by the middle of the month and within days National Hunt horses were reappearing from small holdings and farms whence they had been sequestered. However horses that had been moved to be trained and raced in Ireland were not permitted to race; among their number and thus never to race in England again was Miss Paget's Roman Hackle.

Most of the plans were ready by the middle of December. But then disaster: not only was the weather rubbish, the coldest Christmas in 50 years causing the cancelation of the opening meetings at Wetherby and Windsor, but also on the 16th December the Germans sprang their surprise counter offensive, "the Battle of the Bulge", in the Ardennes. On 6th January a small crowd braved the elements at Cheltenham



with a number of old favourites and re-purposed flat horses battling out over the Prestbury Park turf. A scandal ensued, as there had been a non-stop Paddington to Cheltenham Racecourse special that was completely in breach of current regulations, but at least it felt like the old days even if the usual anti-jumping crowd were demanding to know how much coal the illicit train had ‘wasted’.

Another Cheltenham meeting followed on the 3rd February. Jumping was back. Two weeks later the 175 horses amassed at Windsor shredded the course making conditions almost unraceable – or so thought Paladin, red hot 6/5on favourite, who first time on a racecourse in two or more years and in atrocious underhoof conditions, tried to refuse the first fence and fell in so doing.

Although he had an entry, they skipped the Cheltenham meeting on March 3rd and now his new temperamental foible became a fresh discussion point amongst the plethora of racing journalists imparting their insights into who might win the big race. Most stuck with Ronnie and Sunny’s charge with the frequent appearance of the headline “Paladin Should Win Cup” but the fickle Tatler observing the fall said “we really do not know where we are with him.” Do we ever?

Paladin was amongst the entries for the 1945 Gold Cup to be held on March 17th. A number of old friends were on the card and in the race too including Red Rower, made the 11-4 favourite after winning at Windsor, Poet Prince (now a 13 year old) and Schubert, who had won three races since the resumption of jumping. Paladin jumped off on the outside tracked the front-runners before going up to dispute the lead with and Schubert and Red Rower at the last fence. But heartbreakingly Red Rower drew away on the run-in to win by three lengths, Schubert second and Paladin third.

With only one exception Paladin had contended first place going over the last in each of his steeplechases: he was consistent, brave and game. But the Gold Cup was never to be: all the petrol rations, the walking,



the patience for healing, the column inches - all for a close miss that probably wouldn't be traded for anything in the world; apart from a win. Two weeks later Wetherby and Cheltenham held season closing meetings, the latter included the Champion Hurdle.

On 24th April news circulated that Ronnie's eldest son, Flt Lt Edward Holbech 2 Sqn RAF, had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his reconnaissance work in Spitfire Mk14s.

Paladin won once more at Cheltenham winning £300 two mile chase at 2/1 for new trainer Tom Yates who trained at the Old Manor House in Letcombe Bassett but only ran that once that season. His final race was as a 13 year old in the Grand Annual Steeplechase, traditionally and still the last race of the Cheltenham Festival. It would have been a tear welling farewell to an extraordinary career had he won, but the new guard were here now and the race was won by a horse less than half his age.

Ed Seyfried, Racing Director of Old Gold Racing, is Flt Lt Edward Holbech's grandson. He is co-owner, with the Corsellis family, of Braqueur d'Or who was entered and declared for the 2018 Kim Muir Challenge Cup but after a freeze up, thaw and rain the ground became bogging and holding and it was decided not to dispirit the young horse and he was withdrawn before the race.



Ronnie Holbech with Sir Gordon Richards at Warwick Races

