

The Hon. Harry Gibson (b. June 13 1870 - Dec 13 1905)

The Hon. Henry D'Olier Grant 'Harry' Gibson was known to his friends in St Moritz as "H.G.". He was the second of four sons and four daughters of Edward Gibson, 1st Baron Ashbourne P.C., K.C. who became Lord Chancellor of Ireland. . One of his sisters, the Hon. Violet Gibson made an attempt to assassinate Benito Mussolini in 1926.

Harry was educated at Wellington College and was a fine all-round sportsman. He played cricket, football and racquets and excelled in particular at athletics, becoming the finest hurdler of his generation. He was one of the instigators of the purchase and presentation of the Kingsley Cup for the School's annual cross- country race which he also won. His subsequent career in the Army at the Royal Academy at Woolwich was cut short in his early 20s when he was invalided out due to his poor health. He had become a crack shot but he suffered from tuberculosis, known at the time as the white Plague, or consumption. This may have been the reason that Lord Ashbourne took Harry, with all the rest of his family for extended stays in the clean, dry air of St. Moritz. During the winter months they became an important part of the social scene. When not in Switzerland, they lived at 22 Merrion Square in Dublin.

Harry's enthusiasm for winter sports, and especially the Cresta Run, which he discovered in 1892, was to become a passion for the rest of his brief life. His father spent his time curling whilst Harry's brothers and sisters were keen skaters on the Kulm rinks. Harry would go to the Cresta in the mornings and spend the afternoons on the Village Run. In addition he was one of the first people to try skiing in the Engadine in 1892 with his friend Harold Topham. On the Cresta they enjoyed a great rivalry winning, every Grand National between them from 1892 -1896. "H.G." won the race in 1893 and again in 1896.

His analytical mind turned to the development of toboggan technology and riding technique. He adapted Bulpett's all-steel framed 'Skeleton' for use on road courses, and with Bertie Dwyer, created a monster which was over seven feet long. He recorded all his insights and observations in the first instructive book about the sport - *Tobogganing on Crooked Runs*, which was published in 1894.

On the Village Run he initiated a timed race of six courses over two days, for which a Cup was presented by Lord and Lady Ashbourne in 1895. It was won for the first time, rather appropriately by their son –"H.G.". The Cup was subsequently won twice in 1896 & 1897 by Bertie Dwyer. In 1898 the SMTC, at the request of the donor, transferred the trophy to a race from the Junction on the Cresta Run, to be held over two days. The fastest eight riders over three courses on the first day, would ride a further three courses the following day to decide the winner. In addition it was decided that the eight qualifiers would be eligible for their Club Colours. The Ashbourne Cup was won outright by Emil Thoma in 1909, and then was succeeded by the Curzon Cup which followed the same format. It remains the premier race from Junction... The Village Run was also the scene of a wonderful "duel" between "H.G." and Lord Manners when the pair raced down together on Hobby Horse toboggans, wearing their hunting colours. "H.G." was the victor in both courses.

"H.G.'s" involvement and support for the St. Moritz Tobogganing was enormous. He suggested, and was a major contributor, to the purchase of its first silverware in 1893 - the Grand National Challenge Bowl. He designed the SMTC Colours cap that Members were encouraged to wear in the village to promote the Club. He served briefly as Hon. Treasurer,

and then as Hon. Secretary from 1893-96, finally becoming the youngest President to date in 1899, by which time his tobogganing days were almost over, due to his failing health. As President, one of his suggestions was to build up the slope at Finish to see how far the riders could leap in the air. The President decided to try it himself but the record was set by Philip Spence, who sailed through the air the length of a cricket pitch – 66 feet, before landing on a heap of specially prepared soft snow.



"H.G." airborne at Finish

This was also a wonderful photo opportunity for the many photographers who populated the course in those days, carrying their heavy wooden tripods and glass plate cameras from Top to Finish. "H.G." became a keen photographer himself, eventually dispensing with the glass plates, in favour of the smaller, lighter and more portable Kodak Brownie, first introduced in 1900 which used film. Examples of his work, informed by his expert knowledge of the sport, can be found in the National Archives at Kew.

That same season, Gibson presented a cup for the fastest speed to be attained by a rider covering the last 50yds before the contacts at Finish. To everyone's surprise, the highest speed was recorded, not by one of the best riders such as Spence or Thoma, but by the novice Capt. Vaughan Williams who average speed over the short distance was 73 miles per hour.

Gibson allowed the controversial introduction of the sliding seat in 1901/2 by the former University oarsman J. Arden Bott. Within a few years, its use became universal among the best riders, and the wooden *Americas* and the Bulpett designed, steel-framed *Skeletons* were consigned for use by novices and on the Village Run.

He was also a great supporter of women riders. One of his sisters had come third in the 1895 Ladies Grand National. It was during his Presidency that a woman was first awarded her Colours when Lorna Robertson, the young 19 year old daughter of the co-founder of the Cresta Run – George Pringle Robertson, finished among the first eight riders in the 1900 Ashbourne Cup. She went on to win the Ladies Grand National from Top in all of the three seasons she rode the Cresta. .

"H.G.'s" charm, wit and intelligence attracted many people to the Club, and also to the Kulm Hotel where he held court, discussing the hot topics of the day, such as the South African War and the Irish question. Politics were another great family interest, and many of his siblings were keen advocates of Irish Independence, unlike their father. The eldest brother

William, later the 2nd Baron Ashbourne was a staunch Nationalist, insisting on speaking only in Irish and wearing national dress at all times. He had also converted to Catholicism, and so opposed was his father to his elder son's behaviour that he left him virtually nothing in his will, favouring instead Harry's younger brothers Edward and Victor Gibson.

Ill-health forced "H.G." to relinquish the SMTC Presidency in 1904. His gaunt face and tall, skeletal figure appeared in the 1904 Grand National photograph for the last time, surrounded by his friends. Less than two years later, whilst staying at the Hotel Royal Victoria in Varenna on the shores of Lake Como, he breathed his last. After his death on December 13th 1905, a funeral was held in St. George's Church in the town, and he was buried in the English Cemetery attended by his friends from the Engadine, many of whom were Members of the St. Moritz Tobogganing Club. . As his friend and leader of the Visitors' community in St. Moritz the British Consul Dr Frank Holland wrote in his obituary, "Don't let us forget, above all, the fine sportsmen who brought renown to the place, and, in this connection, let us never forget the true sportsman, who has just passed away and whose name should always be identified with the place."

Stephen Bartley
Hon. Archivist St. Moritz Tobogganing Club

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