



I went to Aintree the other week for the Grand National. Racing people aren't like the rest of us. For a start, they don't watch much racing. It is possible to attend an entire meeting without moving away from the bar—inhaling

tobacco fumes and ducking flying champagne corks. The thunder of hooves on turf is drowned out by the *glug-glug-glug* of people drinking and the crash of breaking glasses. This is punctuated by the occasional burst of aerobic exercise in which everyone rushes to the wall mounted video screen, jumps up and down shouting, "Come on, you bugger!" for several minutes, then hurls crumpled betting slips to the floor. Real fitness fanatics may also get involved in a spot of impromptu brawling.

I was introduced to an elderly titled chap who had a treble Scotch in one hand and a cigar the size of a railway carriage in the other. "Only just come out of hospital," he confided. "Had a spot of surgery on me

neck." This turned out to be some complicated and life preserving operation on the carotid artery and it had taken place a mere two weeks previously. Still, he'd managed to demolish a bottle of whisky the previous night, hadn't got to bed till 4, felt a bit off colour now but mustn't grumble. It was a little hard to come up with an appropriate response; of all the comments which came to mind the politest was, "What a twit."

However, I had the great good fortune to meet up with my favourite travelling companion, a Glaswegian sportswriter employed by one of our national tabloid newspapers. He is known as Big 'Un, not out of any irony. He is six feet tall and jolly fat, with a red round beaming face. A 40 a day man, and almost always the last to leave the hostelry, he has pursued this lifestyle for at least 32 of his 50 years, getting bigger and redder by the year. His joyousness never flags.

After the final day's racing we couldn't find a taxi to take us back to Liverpool Lime Street, so we joined a crowd of several thousand on the platform of Aintree station, where we waited for half an hour, during which my friend joined energetically in a singsong with the locals. Our train to London Euston left Lime Street at 6 40, and the

A healthy personality

Aintree train deposited us at Liverpool Central at 6 35. We had five minutes. The whole trip was worth while just to see Big 'Un sprint the half mile between stations. I thought, This is it; this has got to be the end; he will keel over and die. But there he was, bobbing tantalisingly ahead of me like a great red marker buoy while I flagged with the nervous dyspepsia that had dogged me since the struggle to meet the first day's deadline. Okay, I may have had a hangover too.

Lime Street loomed in front of us. Big 'Un rounded the barrier, laid a restraining hand on the guard, and held open the carriage door for me. We got in. The train moved off, at which Big 'Un had a large cigar and a bottle of champagne to celebrate, and I went away and sat in a corner and tried not to throw up.

Why is my friend still alive and kicking? He loves his job, and he has a very happy marriage, though these may be effects rather than causes. I think he just has a healthy personality—an immense and continuing enjoyment of life, a curiosity and relish, a splendid combination of scepticism and romanticism, and a childlike ability to play. Mind you, I do think he could lose a couple of stone.—JULIE WELCH, *freelance journalist, London*

Sickness and the new unemployed

Tower Hamlets was never really in on the roaring eighties, except in the rather dubious form of Canary Wharf, so it is now suffering from a double whammy of structural decline and recession. Those made unemployed in the long term by the closure of the docks and the river based industries have had virtually to give up hope of a job. Tragically, so have a lot of school leavers. According to age they drift variously towards chronic depression, psychosomatic illness, bitter despair, petty crime, dope of various sorts, and cathode tube addiction. All experience the progressive paralysis of will which chronic UB40ism generates.

But over the past year they have been joined by the new unemployed, skilled east end artisans from the building, engineering, and manufacturing sectors whom I have never previously known to be out of a job for more than a few weeks. Privatised, deregulated, and deunionised during the Thatcher clearances, they have had to travel further and work harder with no redress for bad conditions. But whether it was building

Disneyland, burying cable television, or fitting the channel tunnel, there was always something. Now there's nought and they sit at home half heartedly fitting dado rails and cut price kitchen units, with the extended families who relied on their remittances unexpectedly broke. So too are luckless small businessmen of the enterprise culture, the redundant industrial workers who were pressured into taking out bank loans to get up their own companies, buy their vans, and set up as subcontractors. But now Enterprise Florists and Essex Piping are well and truly stuck in the economic gridlock which is east London. Not only has their work dried up but the cost of their borrowing has soared.

I now see many cases of "Small business sciatic syndrome," the rather exaggerated lumbago characteristic of a self employed central heating engineer who needs a two month sick note. Not because he'll be entitled to a bean from "the social," but if I sign the forms the banks will give him a moratorium on his repayments. Add to them retail workers whom cash flow makes let go, the service

industry workers newly sacked by British Telecom and the city banks, and casualties of the casual catering trade and it's a very sizable blip. The optimists say, "I've not got a job like, but I'm still with an agency." The rest just look shifty when you ask for an occupation.

The implications for medical workload are grim. We are familiar with prolonged unemployment's ill effects on health and know it is the single most potent generator of family poverty. But there is growing evidence that after a bumper year of NHS spending, post-election austerity and a public sector squeeze are likely. Medical business will boom, regrettably, on the basis of everyone else's recession.—DAVID WIDGERY, *general practitioner, London*

