

# The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum Information Sheet



## Fred Archer (1857-1886) Sporting Hero

Frederick James Archer, one of the most celebrated jockeys of all time, was born at Cheltenham on 11 January 1857, in a small cottage at the end of a narrow passageway leading off the west side of St George's Place; originally called St George's Cottage, it is now known as 43 St George's Place.



Fred's father, William, was a successful steeplechase rider, who won the Grand National in 1858. By then, he had moved with his wife and five children to Prestbury, a village on the north side of Cheltenham, where his father-in-law was landlord of the 'Kings Arms' public house. In 1861, following the latter's death, he took over the pub and ran it until c.1873. It was there that Fred Archer spent his formative years, during which his father taught him to ride - on a donkey, then a pony, and eventually a horse.



The young Archer showed a particular talent as a rider, and in 1868 his father apprenticed him to Mathew Dawson of Newmarket, one of the leading trainers of the day. The following year, he ran (and lost!) his first public race, but from 1870 onwards the number of his wins increased steadily, culminating, in 1874, with no less than 147 wins, which made him England's champion jockey, a position that he was to retain for the rest of his short life.

Archer's reign as champion jockey – which included, in 1885, no less than 246 wins, a record that was not equalled until 1933 – brought him worldwide fame. It also brought him the need to keep his weight under control. At over 5 foot 8 inches, he was unusually tall for a jockey, and he spent much of his life on a near-starvation diet, endless 'purges', and Turkish baths, all of which were eventually to have a disastrous effect on his health.



Although Archer regularly visited his family in Gloucestershire, he made Newmarket his home, and in 1882 he built himself a house there, which he named Falmouth House after Lord Falmouth, his principal patron. The house was completed shortly before his marriage, in January 1883, to Dawson's niece, Helen Rose, by whom he had two children - a son, who died a few hours after his birth, and a daughter, following whose birth his wife died, aged only 23, an event that sent Archer into a deep depression, from which he never fully recovered.

Even before his wife's death, Archer experienced many problems. He was gambling – and often losing – heavily, and was also accused of 'race fixing', although that was never proved. He also began to lose more often, and, for a time, dropped to second in the jockeys' list. Even so, he continued to put himself through a punishing regime of races, until, in early November 1886, his health gave way and he took to his bed with what began as a chill but was later diagnosed as typhoid fever.



From soon after his marriage, a spate of burglaries at Newmarket had caused Fred to keep a loaded revolver by his bedside, in order to protect himself and his family. At around 2.25pm on the afternoon of 8 November 1886, the depressed and delirious jockey took the revolver and shot himself through the mouth, dying instantly.

The Wilson holds a number of items relating to Fred Archer in its collections, including an oil painting by Edward Henson; two watercolours, one of which shows Archer with Lord Falmouth; two posthumous prints, one of which shows Archer's ghost riding across Newmarket Heath; several silk pictures (or 'stevengraphs') showing Archer on horseback or in one of his patrons' colours; two clay pipes with his portrait; and a ceramic plate showing his portrait with a list of his achievements.

The collection also includes a brass plaque that was affixed to 41 St George's Place in 1919, in the mistaken belief that it was his birthplace, rather than the small cottage at the rear. Exactly when this plaque was removed is uncertain, but in 1971 a new plaque was affixed to the correct house; it is still there, though it cannot be seen from the lane. A plaque outside the 'Kings Arms' at Prestbury commemorates Archer's early years there.



To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:  
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