

"Three years ago this summer," says Terry Keefe, "down our shop at the back of the Strand, we had a young lad, 28 to 30, long, thin, 5ft. 10in. He kicked off, had a couple of pound bets. He backed winners and winners and winners. He walked out that day winning £500. Then he said, 'I'm going to the dogs, I'll see you tomorrow'."

"It was the first time we'd seen him. So we said good-bye to our five hundred quid. He walks in next morning; he's had another couple of hundred pounds added to it from the dogs. He built it up to £1500 that day, he went out and he said 'I'm going to the dogs'. So again we said good-bye."

"Back he comes the next day and he's held his own with the dogs and he's levels. He had his first bet, at three meetings across the card. He had £100 to win each, three £100 doubles and a £100 treble. A patent. Two out of three won. The SOS went out. This shop had a manager, no family. So me father had to go down. He said, 'All right I'll take him over', and me father went down. Now he had to see the money and there was no money available. So we had to shoot round to every shop to see what money we could all of us rake up. He had this £700 stake. I think he won about three hundred quid on the bet so he had a thousand to come. Now we had to lay the £1000 on the counter. He had to see it, touch it. He didn't put it in his pocket."

"He went on like this, and at the fourth race he'd got £5000 laying there, and he had £500 to win each - across the card - three £250 doubles and a £250 treble. They was all favourites and he said before he had the bet, 'when I get to ten thousand I'm going to stop, walk out and I'm going back to Scotland to buy a business'. So we get to the fourth race. He'd laid out £2500. He got one winner and it came to the fifth race. He starts losing. He'd got three thousand left. Same thing, across the card, done the lot. He had £750 left and he laid it out on the last races across the card and he walked out penniless. We called him back and said 'how much did you start with?' He said 'a fiver'. And we said, 'Here you are, son. Here's the fiver that you started with'."

"But 90 per cent. of the time in the betting shop," says Terry Keefe, relaxing from that harrowing recollection, the mathematics of which

MUGS' MONEY

A profile of Terry Keefe, bookmaker, whose family has an annual turnover of about £3 million from business at their 10 betting shops throughout London, by James Fox; photograph by John Seymour



seem deeply fixed in his mind in every detail. "It's mug money, which we call panic money. Which is the sweetest money."

A smile starts on his face, very slowly, like the warming of an electric fire, at the sound of this phrase. His face muscles move slowly anyway, perhaps from years of hypertension. His speech is equally slow and adenoidal, a sleepy Bogart from the Covent Garden barrow yards. Underneath, like most bookies, his mind is a digital computer, and he likes stories of villainy or of the punters suffering - related with head bowed at the appropriate moment. Can Terry Keefe help it if the punter puts on panic money day after day? Or if the odds are in the bookmaker's favour every time the horses bolt from the starting gate? Course he can't, son. His smile is the age-old smile of the bookmaker.

Anxiety may have given Terry Keefe this slowed-down, tightened-up appearance - given that the Keefe

family business, started by Terry's father, James Keefe, was run illegally and with full-blooded skirmishes with the law for 35 years before the Betting Act of 1961 made street betting legal. Terry started by passing betting slips in his school lunch-hour. At 15 he was a bookie's runner in Covent Garden and was showing promise. The bookie in this case, the one who preyed on the sherbet-sucking infants at Terry's school, was none other than his father, James Keefe, a warrior of the street pitches, now cushioned by respectability and a fat turnover.

But it sounds as if the Twenties, Thirties, Forties and Fifties were a risky and never-ending game of "kick the can" between the bookie's runners and the police. Wasn't there violence, protection, squabbling for pitches? "We had it cut and dried," said Terry, dismissing the topic. "My father was brought up the hard way, and they respect a hard one."

Convictions in those days, he

says, were worn as lightly as a first speeding endorsement on your driving licence. The Keefe empire now extends to 10 shops from Victoria, Covent Garden, and King's Cross to Kilburn. Officially their annual turnover is about £3 million, from which they make 2 per cent. profit, they say, after the Levy Board, the Customs and Excise and the overheads have been taken care of. (In Britain betting on horses alone, excluding the bets made with the Tote, has an annual turnover of £1050 million.)

The Keefes' first legal shop opened in Drury Lane, and Terry is still manager of it. "When it opened we already had an established runner within 25 yards of the premises," says Terry, "so we already had a basic idea of what we were going to walk into. We had already planned that we was taking £100 a day in the street, on illegal betting. We knew that provided we could get the frightened people in who wanted a bet, it would be a success. The first day we opened it was a revelation." The revelation of Terry Keefe is now displayed in a framed photograph on the wall behind the cash register. It shows the queues stretching 100 yards down Drury Lane. But in that first year, much to Terry's amazement, he didn't make a profit. "It was a mug shop. But everything went wrong. Fifty-pound yankees; all the dog favourites coming up day after day. Dear, oh dear. You just got to keep calm. Mustn't panic."

"Course, the law at that time said the punter must not loiter. So we built that shop with an 'in' door and an 'out' door. But a loophole transpired. There is no such thing as loitering. You're just collecting your winnings. So we knocked the shop down and rebuilt it. The second loophole was about broadcasting in the shop. You weren't allowed to broadcast, and nobody had the service. But it was clear quite early on that a broadcast was one thing, but a commentary - Terry relishes each syllable - was something else entirely." (This is an important point. Without the emotional momentum of the Extel commentaries, betting shops would be devoid of a lot of action and atmosphere, and perhaps half their attendance.)

Terry's grandmother, Betsy Paine, whom the family buried a few weeks ago, was famous around the Garden and the Strand where she was a flower seller. It is said that she was the model for Bernard

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Shaw's *Pygmalion*. She went to those first rehearsals and was presented to Julie Andrews when it became a musical.

James Keefe, Terry's father, was a fruiterer in Covent Garden. He kept his barrows in Neal's Yard and officially went into the betting business, as a side line, in 1924 when Captain Cuttle won the Derby, and the local bookmaker couldn't pay out. He opened an office over the barrow yard, laid claim to street pitches, and hired an army of runners, one of whom used to keep his change in a pram outside the pub. "They got pinched every week," says Terry. "If a runner lasted two months that was his run of office because the thesis at Bow Street was first time a fiver, second time £10, third time £20 and fourth time 28 days. Well, prison wasn't worth it."

Runners made about £5 a week, plus tips and 'sleepers' - unclaimed winnings. Business boomed in the Thirties. "We had a street pitch in Covent Garden that could take £1000 a week. The runner used to stand outside the tube station or in the pub on the left." And in wartime there was black-market money to be had, and takings, if anything, went up.

"The money would have been more where you had a commodity area such as fruit and vegetables. These were black-market commodities anyhow. During the war we could take £3000 in cash, plus the credit turnover. We still have one man's statement for 1948. He laid out £32,000 in one week, Monday morning to Saturday evening. Where he got it from I never asked him."

Walking down Long Acre towards Drury Lane, Terry points out a rusty fire escape at Banbury Court. "That's where the bookies' runners went up into the shop. It's been pulled down now. One day they put an *observer* in the flats opposite, got a tenant straight. He was there about two weeks with a pair of binoculars and we got done." There was constant pressure on the illegal street bookie. Jobs being scarce, the Keefes had a string of runners to replace the ones who got pinched. But in Scotland, betting was flourishing to such an extent that it was thought to be legal over the border. William Hill and McLauchlan made their fortunes in Scotland at the time.

"But I mean, it caused an industry, didn't it?" says Terry. "And there was another way to look at it. How far this went back to the Home

Office to lay off Scotland as it was causing employment is something that I do not know. There are certain areas today where they lay off something because it's causing employment."

Terry pins up the racing pages in his shop every day, like fresh linen. At 10 o'clock, early on a punters' morning, the first customer comes in and screws up his face at the race card as if it gives him pain to see that forest of form forecast, tips and imponderables again. The newspapers, says Terry Keefe impolitely, are nine tenths of the punter's brain. All morning, what Terry calls stragglers come in, all regular customers, usually making a single long-range bet on the day.

He's convinced that the smooth running of his shop depends on knowing the faces. The presence of a strange face is immediately recognised, and instinctively felt by the staff. "The average customer goes with the area," says Terry. "Let's say a dodgy face walks in, a strange face with a funny kind of money. You get it more with out-of-town dogs - you get a dog out in the sticks running at a provincial track. This face walks in and he asks for £100 on a dog. You

know something's up. You phone the National Sporting League and inform them. Now you're the first link in the chain so you have six other bookmakers to phone and inform that a strange face has been wanting £100 on John's Boy. Them six notify another six and so on. So within five minutes the whole of the betting industry has got the dog. If the man walks out of there, walks five minutes away, and has another £100, the shop's already notified. It's what we call 'buzzing'."

But even if Terry is worried about a big bet, he will never 'hedge' it - off-load some of the risk on to a bigger bookmaker like William Hill's. Each manager in a Keefe shop gets a cut of the profits, so on a big bet he might 'hedge' with the central office, but never outside.

"We have enough reserve to stand by ourselves. It's like you get a day with Piggott riding three winners, and they're all going on his last one and there's one to go and every bet is racing on. Well, it's nothing inspired. They've had a Lester Piggott yankee. But it's what we call mug money. He doesn't know anything. He's not the owner; he's not the trainer, so we ride all of them" ●

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