

CHRIS SPURR



Hare and Greyhound, the Square, Comber, Co Down

One section of the pavement on the west side of the Square in Comber is still cobbled, and picked out in the stones are three figures, a hare, a greyhound, and a man, possibly a sportsman. There is also a large white horseshoe in the cobbles, and with a little effort, the name *J Miller* can be read. All this is an example of street art surviving from Victorian times.

The cobbles are outside a house named Aureen, once home to John Miller. The figures are a bit of a mystery, as they could simply be depicting a hunting scene, but there might be a more celebrated background to them. In the 1860s, the most famous greyhound in Ireland was Master McGrath. He was born in Co Waterford in 1866, and was owned by Charles Brownlow, Lord Lurgan. The most prestigious event for greyhounds was the Waterloo Cup, a hare coursing tournament held annually in Lancashire, and called 'the blue riband of the leash'. Master McGrath became the first supreme champion of coursing, winning the Waterloo Cup on three occasions, 1868, 1869, and 1871. His fame was such that Queen Victoria commanded the dog and his owner to come to Windsor Castle for a royal audience.

James Brownlow, brother to Lord Lurgan, was the Agent for Lord Londonderry, and there is a Brownlow Street in Comber, so it is certain that McGrath's fame was known in the town. In the centre of Lurgan, Master McGrath has a statue to his memory. Whether or not he is also commemorated in the cobbles in Comber is debatable, but it is pleasing to think so.

His exploits also live on in the ballad about his triumph. McGrath is pitted against the English champion dog, Rose, a name full of symbolical meaning, at a time when many in Ireland were aspiring to freedom from England. These verses from the song give a flavour of its tone:

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

*As Rose and the Master they both ran along,
"Now I wonder," says Rose, "what took you from your home;
You should have stayed there in your Irish domain,
And not come to gain laurels on Albion's plain."*

*"Well, I know," says McGrath, "we have wild heather bogs
But you'll find in old Ireland there's good men and dogs.
Lead on, bold Britannia, give none of your jaw,
Stuff that up your nostrils," says Master McGrath.*

*Then the hare she went on just as swift as the wind
He was sometimes before her and sometimes behind.
Rose gave the first turn according to law;
But the second was given by Master McGrath.*

*The hare she led on with a wonderful view.
And swift as the wind o'er the green field she flew.
But he jumped on her back and he held up his paw
"Three cheers for old Ireland," says Master McGrath.*