

Richard Liles of Liles Bet

by Chris Pitt

There's a retail estate in Middleton on the southern section of Leeds' ring road. It's typical of its kind, home to a branch of Iceland, Auto Traders, Caesar's Pizza, units selling carpets, furniture, shoes, wallpaper and fancy goods, with a brand new Asda opposite.

Sitting between St George's Café and a clothing outlet is what used to be a pet shop but for the last 18 months has traded as Liles Bet, just about the only remaining independent bookmaker in Leeds.

Liles Bet is enjoying a renaissance following a decade-long hiatus. Its proprietor, Richard Liles, along with his brother Andrew and their father Graham, owns a number of the shops on the estate on which he now trades, part of the property business the family built up during their ten-year absence from the bookmaking industry.

Graham Liles had opened his first shop in Leeds city centre in 1966 under the name Liles Racing. He'd started his working life as a cooper for Tetley's Brewery before deciding to enter the betting industry.

He'd also worked for a racecourse bookmaker named Alf Emsley before electing to go his own way, acquiring pitches pretty much everywhere from Cheltenham northwards, up as far as Musselburgh and Ayr, trading on course as Graham Liles.

"Andrew and I joined our father's business when we were eighteen," recalls Richard. "At that time he had four shops in the Leeds area and 23 racecourse pitches. We decided to expand the betting shops, to make it big enough to support all three of us. We bought a group in Grimsby, we expanded on the east coast and grew to a reasonable size with 16 shops."

But in 2003 they sold their entire business to Coral and pursued other avenues, which included estate agencies in Spain and Budapest, and a chain of four coffee shops, called Bru Station, in Manchester.

"After a while we all realised we missed the betting industry and we wanted to get back into it in one way or another," says Richard. "I reopened as Liles Bet 18 months ago, opening up two betting shops, the first one in Grimsby, the second one in Leeds. Meanwhile, Andrew joined Stanleybet as their development director and is now their MD.

"I decided I wanted to get back on the



Liles Bet's Richard Liles

Picture: Mary Pitt

racecourse as well so I started buying a few pitches."

Richard made his return at Cheltenham's trials day in January last year and has gradually expanded his portfolio to embrace Cartmel, Perth, Lingfield, Musselburgh (Flat), Ayr (Flat) and, most recently, Sandown. He is also on the reserve list for a pitch at Chelmsford City.

However, he quickly discovered the extent by which things had altered both on-course and off-course during his absence.

"I missed not being in the industry; it was something I knew, something I did well in the past, and I think coming back was a good move," he reflects, "but when you come back into it you realise how much the dynamic of running a betting shop has changed, and how it's changed on the racecourse as well.

"When we had shops before, it was nearly all race by race customers, very busy on horse racing, whereas now it's a lesser percentage on horses, a higher percentage on machines, lottery numbers and sports betting.

"But the biggest challenge is the

expenses. When we sold to Coral we used to pay £10,000 to £12,000 in media costs but now you're looking at the thick end of 30 grand per shop. You've also got the Gambling Commission and local authority fees so the expenses of running a betting shop are much higher.

"It's very hard for an independent these days. There are very few in Leeds, which used to be a stronghold of independent bookmakers, and now I'm the last man standing in Leeds itself."

The Grimsby shop was one that had been included in the original sale to Coral but the family had retained ownership of the property with Coral renting it off them. When Coral moved the licence and handed it back, Richard took the opportunity to test the water and opened as Liles Bet. The shop is located in a residential area but just on the outskirts of the town centre, an area of high competition against Coral, Betfred, William Hill and Ladbrokes.

The Leeds shop was a brand new licence. The majority of customers are regulars, though there is a certain amount of passing trade from the recently opened



Liles Bet Leeds shop interior

Picture: Mary Pitt

Asda and other shops on the estate. But with two Coral outlets and a Betfred within half a mile, the competition is again strong.

Liles Bet's offers include Bags forecast over £20 rounded up to the next full £1; Bags tricasts over £25 rounded up to the next full £5; full odds on dead-heats; double result; no Rule 4 deductions under 15p; all each-way bets on handicap horse races are quarter odds, with treble the odds for one winner in a Lucky 15/31/63. They also offer enhanced odds on Leeds and combined goalscorers.

"As an independent you've got to offer something a little bit different, whether it's service, whether it's offers," says Richard. "We can't compete with the big firms on marketing so it has to be something else, and personal service goes a long way.

"We have TurfTV and work off BTC prices. As soon as I came back one of the first people I called was Howard (Chisholm). I went to see him and he told me what BTC offered. It was a no-brainer. They offer a great service and it gives you a way to compete.

"Opening hours are 8.30am to 9.30pm



Liles Bet Leeds shop screens.

Picture: Mary Pitt

Monday to Saturday, Sunday 9am to 7pm. We are governed by what the major firms do. There's a fine line between what's economically viable and what you have to do to protect your customer base.

"On the racecourse now it's mainly about picking your days. I'm really focusing on the weekends and the festivals."

There are those who complain that today's racecourse betting rings are dead and bookmakers are just playing the exchanges, but Richard does not wholly subscribe to that view.

"There may be some that do but I think the majority of bookmakers don't work that way. The ring has declined midweek and it's a real struggle for bookmakers to make it pay. With the expenses of the betting badge, staff cost and entrance cost, a lot of bookmakers won't go during the week, but having said that, at weekends and at the festivals, there is still decent betting and you can still make a decent living out of it. When you've got business and a strong betting market there's no need to hedge off Betfair. If you've got the figures working in your favour you don't need to be playing an arber and putting everything back on the exchanges.

"I think more racecourses should copy initiatives like Aintree's Becher Chase meeting, when they gave out 42,000 free tickets. They showed the benefits of getting people there. When they do promotions it's good for racing, it's good for sponsorship, it's good for the bookmakers, and there's the knock-on income stream from food and drink. Racecourses have got to start thinking it's worthwhile to get people through the turnstile. It benefits racing; more people get to see how enjoyable racing is."

He says he'll be looking to grow the business during 2015 but feels the focus will be on the racecourse side rather than betting shops.

"It's going to be a difficult year for the shops with the extra FOBT compliance and the increase on duty.

"There is a way forward for the independent but I think with another couple of years of change it'll be interesting to see what happens. At the moment it does seem as though the independents are swimming against the tide. It's very hard for them and that's been shown by the drop in numbers of independents.

"I think it should be pointed out what a valuable asset the independent bookmaker is to the industry and also what value the on-course bookmaker is to the industry. To have a strong on-course market benefits everyone because the whole industry is dependent on the SP return."

Overall, he's glad he came back, as is his father Graham who, although now retired, still accompanies him to the race meetings.

"He tells me where I'm going wrong," grins Richard, while adding "I wouldn't have it any other way!" ■