

HARTPURY 2015: 19th July

Ten weeks after Abigail & Roisin qualified at the Regional Championships at Oaklands College, Team Saturday, including honorary members Jenny & Cathy, geared up again, for the National Championships at Hartpury College, although judging by the dense email traffic between us on this alone, Kirsty & I hadn't really wound down. Of the 9 people – the above plus Jacqui, Lizzie & Fiona – involved only 2 had been before, Roisin in 2011 aged 7 when she rode Silver, & Kirsty as a helper in 2003 & 4, but this was her first time in charge. We debutantes had also been novices at the Regionals in May: a new experience, which both excited and made us all slightly nervous. Lolly was also making her debut.

A couple of weeks before Hartpury we set up a low budget & reduced countryside challenge course in the top field. Abbie & I had fun taking props from & back to the school. We 'test drove' our course, with Abbie as the pony & me as the sole helper. She was well behaved, didn't attempt to cow kick, buck or gallop off up the field, but she wasn't too impressed when I asked how her girth was umpteenth times.

They say "seeing is believing". Now I've seen & been behind the scenes I really understand & appreciate just how much admin, planning, organising & preparing goes into getting riders, helpers & ponies ready for both the Regionals & the Nationals. The list of requirements, supplies & accessories for our ponies when they travel & stay away overnight is lengthy to say the least. We did leave the kitchen sink behind, but did take a wheelbarrow. Thanks to Gayl, Ann, Eileen & Denise who regularly updated our list we didn't forget anything for the ponies.

Lolly & Muscadeu's deluxe spa treatments started with a bath on Friday, then, for several hours on Saturday morning, we set to work with buckets, water carriers, a teapot, a hose, Jacqui's super shampoo, elbow grease & jaw work. They both looked somewhat forlorn & resigned when yet more water came their way, although at one point quite a bit of it went Lizzie's way. Lolly, usually the most patient, pliant & placid of ponies decided enough was enough and craftily shifted herself onto the hose to stop its flow of water. By the end they were transformed from their workaday appearances to looking fit & ready for the red carpet. At the appointed hour of 2.30pm, "suited, booted" & boxed, they set off with Mr Banks & Jenny. Several hours later we rendezvoused at Hartpury, the journey for some being quicker & more direct than for others.

Sadly Muscadeu was not able to compete, due to an issue with his vaccinations prior to him joining the Centre, meaning he couldn't be unloaded at Hartpury. Our options were to take Muscadeu & Lolly home Saturday evening, easily rejected, or to stable them overnight at a nearby farm commissioned for this purpose. Off they trotted, still in Mr Banks' box. Thus, their working weekend for which they had a 4* wash & brush-up & club class travel became a mini break, a Jolly for Lolly! Jacqui & Jenny, their devoted & adoring grooms for the weekend, checked on them at midnight Saturday then again a few hours later: they were in fine fettle.

Whilst we were discussing using Lolly to compete & how Muscadeu would be up the road without her, the kindness of strangers intervened. Katy Downing, stable manager for the weekend & RDA Youth Co-ordinator, overheard our deliberations & immediately offered us her Fell pony (Waverhead) Ted: they'd just returned from giving an apparently, according to Liz, marvellous & entertaining display of side saddle riding & theatrical dressage to music. We all Fell in love in Ted in an instant.

Sunday morning arrived in no time at all: I discovered each day has two 6'o clocks. I went for a walk around the showground & campus with my camera. As some riders had to compete soon after 8am

there were already quite a few people tending to their ponies: mucking out, feeding, washing, grooming, schooling etc. I'm glad I did so because that half hour or so keeps returning to me: it's the Before & After atmosphere of a place, which reminded me of my childhood & teenage summers on the Kent coast where I grew up.

We were joined by Cathy, Lizzie & Fiona who came to help for the day, plus Abigail, Roisin & their families. Abigail & Roisin received & absorbed the news about Muscadeu well. I was taken by their composure, & was even more impressed by how they coped with riding a 'strange' pony within about an hour of first meeting him. Katy & Ted aren't part of an RDA Group, but with only one quick walk of the countryside challenge course for Katy, & none for Ted, they went into the ring, with Abigail riding & Jenny & Lizzie helping, without any outward sign of being complete novices. And, they both did brilliantly.

Bearing in mind the circumstances Abigail & Roisin did very well: Abigail also had to handle a sudden switch of ponies at the Regionals in May. They said they enjoyed themselves, which was the main thing. Just being at the Nationals was a positive experience for them & a significant achievement, with only 11 other riders from across the different RDA Regions in their class.

The weekend was interesting, tiring, challenging & eventful. Ultimately, it was special, joining hundreds of riders & their ponies from across the country together with hundreds more helpers all with a common cause, purpose & passion. It's easy to exist in a Bromham bubble, albeit a "small is beautiful" one: being at Hartpury was a reminder that we're part of something bigger than ourselves, that every day every week there are thousands of people uplifted by their experience of riding &/or helping at an RDA centre.

"Tally Ho" until Hartpury 2016!

Pauline Evans
Sunday 26.7.15 (a week later)