

Elisabeth Curtis Centre Riding for the Disabled

Charity No. 1137217; Company No. 7302917



*The late Charles Stock (centre) with Patrick and Sandra
at ECC's 25th Anniversary in 2008 (See page 3)*



RDA

It's what you **can** do that counts

Chairman's Report

I would like to start this note by thanking our Honorary Life President, Mr Derek Woods, for his very generous donation of £5,300. We are very grateful for Derek's wonderful support and generosity. His donations now total many thousands of pounds, which have been invaluable in funding our recent refurbishments.

Secondly, I would like to thank Julia Greenwood for all her hard work on the Management Committee and on our Tuesday morning session. Julia is taking a break from the Centre, but we hope to welcome her back again soon.

Sadly Kate Knaggs has decided to leave the Centre. We would like to thank Kate for all the time that she has given to the Centre.

Wednesday 9th December, saw the annual Volunteers' Christmas dinner, this time at The Pheasant on Kimbolton Road. Our thanks to Ros for organising the evening, and to our fundraising group for arranging the raffle. Thank you to everyone who came along. We hope you enjoyed the evening.

In the last newsletter, I told you about our award from the Aviva Community Fund. We have used this award to purchase new riding hats. Our thanks go to RK Harrison for nominating us, and RB Equestrian for ordering the hats for us. Luckily they all fitted in my car!

I would also like to say a special thank you to Ruud. Ruud is a Tuesday evening volunteer and our membership secretary. He also spends a lot of his time working on various maintenance and improvement projects at the Centre. He has been a great help to me, while I have been finding my feet.

Thanks also go to our wonderful grooms, Ann and Gayl. The winter is not an easy time of year with it's never-ending mud, but we really do appreciate their hard work.

Our Management Committee has been shrinking over the past few months, so if you are interested in becoming more involved in the running of the Centre, please do let me know. Alternatively, if joining a committee is not for you, but you have a particular skill or area of expertise, and would like to help on something specific, again please do let me know.

Donations

- Following an evening of Carol Singing, the Parklands Resident's Association sent us a donation of £240. Many thanks to them for organising this event, and for their continued support.
- Our thanks also go to the Riverside Singers for their donation of £200 following their Annual Christmas Concert.
- Thank you to Barbara Bellamy and her family for their donation of £250. Barbara volunteered for a short time on a Tuesday morning, and since then, has been keen to support the Centre any way that she can.
- Our thanks also go to All in One Dry Cleaners in Kempston, and their customers, who raised £132.85 over Christmas, and will be continuing to collect on our behalf.
- Thank you to the families of Roisin McLoughlin, and Phoenix Hendicott for their donations. Roisin and Phoenix both ride on a Saturday morning.
- Thank you to the Bromham Show Committee for their donation of £100, and for their continued support.

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Contributions to the next newsletter

We always welcome articles and suggestions for the newsletter, maybe you would like to share what you enjoy about coming to the Centre? The next newsletter will be out in June, so if you could let me have any contributions by the middle of May....

Victoria

Charles Stock (28-11-1926 - 13-02-2016)

It is with great sadness that I write to tell everyone about the death of one of our founder members. Charles had an interesting life. During WW2 he was in the army in Egypt and was bodyguard to Montgomery. After the war he settled down to married life with Margaret and became a baker. They went on to have a daughter, Charlotte. Charlotte married Trevor and they had two children, Will and India, of whom Charles and Margaret were immensely proud. Sadly Margaret died last year.

Charles was a volunteer at the Centre from the very beginning. He would usually be the first to arrive and would get the ponies in and give them their breakfast. (This was before we had our wonderful grooms.) Charles would then help with the grooming and tacking up and then lead or side-walk during the session, if required. If he could be spared from the riding session, he would be doing maintenance work or gardening.

“Charles was a valued member of the Management committee and we had great fun in organising a couple of sponsored rides starting at the Robeson’s in Tyringham. Needless to say, Charles had great fun making the signs for those.” (Liz)

“His long connection with the Shire Horse Society gave him a love of being around horses and this transferred to all the work he did for ECC. He was an important part of equipping the stables when they were built and before that when the wooden stables were in the school. He was really involved with the work of clearing the ground to create the Sensory Garden and worked tirelessly with others to make the area so attractive for riding out. As a helper on Thursday mornings, he was always there to support me as Instructor and all the other helpers. He fed us with doughnuts in summer and mince pies in winter as he was a baker. He had a great sense of humour and could play tricks on us all. I have some lovely photos of him leading ponies out on rides. The riders looked for him and were always greeted with a smile.” (Judy)

It seems that Charles loved everything about the Centre, and the Centre loved him. I have talked to a number of people who knew Charles and it seemed that within a few minutes of recalling him, they were all chuckling. He was definitely a “character”. He was known for his jokes - really terrible jokes - and for being a very ‘happy go lucky’ sort of person. Everybody remembered the doughnuts!

Charles worked with us as a volunteer until he was 82, apart from a few years in Norfolk. Some of his handiwork can still be seen around the Centre - the post box in the school and the ‘real’ post box in the Sensory Ride. The pond, the squirrels, the horse shoes and stirrups were all his ideas. The Centre is a less colourful place without him and he will be remembered with great affection.

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In the early days of the Centre Charles (right) holds Dusty whilst Eileen is presented with a cheque from the President of the Kempston Lions.

(Taken from an old press cutting - picture quality not all it should be!)

BEHIND THE SCENES: Training as an RDA Group Coach

Liz is the County Coach (CC). This means she oversees, encourages and supports the training of ECC Group Coaches (GC), if not their actual training. Her role shadows the various stages the trainee follows. The first is spending a morning together explaining the log book and trying to establish a genuine interest before registering them at National Office. She also explains how “the system” and the East Region work, gives any other relevant information, encourages them to attend County and Regional training days, and to look at the Training Resource section of the RDA website in order to keep abreast of things.

CC does assessments on the trainee’s progress, with suggestions and pointers where improvements could be made, then a final assessment before recommending GC to the Regional Coach, and presenting this to them when achieved.

Trainees are volunteers first: leading and side-helping; getting to know the ponies and riders likes and dislikes; learning Risk Assessment and Health and Safety requirements, the capabilities of other volunteers and how ECC “do” things; and taking First Aid and Safeguarding courses. They then take sessions under supervision.

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Are Liz and J.J. sharing a joke?

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There are many things to learn:

- Planning and adaptability.
- Mounting riders.
- How best to communicate with riders.
- Which pony will give the various abilities the best ride.
- To keep things simple.
- Thinking of new ideas and games that may work.
- Keeping the interest of riders and volunteers.
- To be observant at all times, “to have eyes in the back of your head” Briefing and debriefing; suggesting or asking at the start of a ride, if a response is possible, what riders would like to do, and, at the end, asking them if they enjoyed it and what they liked best; drill rides.
- About Grades, Dressage, Long Distance, Show Jumping and Vaulting, even if not all are applicable to ECC.
- Look at the different ways ponies move – smooth, choppy, idle, etc.

The training timescale very much depends on the trainee; some take 4-5 years, others less time, on average 2 years. The occasional very good ones are fast-tracked. A minimum of 20 hours coaching and 3 satisfactory assessments is recommended before they can be ready.

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BEHIND THE SCENES: Training as an RDA Group Coach (contd)

A horsey background is not essential, but it does help. If without one, a trainee must learn to be confident with/around ponies, and how to handle them with skill, so that in an emergency they can cope. They do need to be a good communicator with able-bodied and non able-bodied people, to show empathy without being emotional, to be observant, to show confidence without cockiness, to be prepared to learn and to keep on learning, and to gain more and more experience. And, last but not least, to have (and keep) a good sense of humour!

Now read about Gina's training.....

Pauline Evans

BEHIND THE SCENES: Gina's training as an RDA Group Coach

Gina joined ECC in April 2015. She is training under Liz, and takes the Monday and Wednesday sessions. She was introduced to ECC by Sam, who rides at the Wilstead riding centre where Hannah, Gina's daughter works. On hearing about what we do, she thought it was worth looking into. She "likes a challenge", this one being to learn how to work with riders with different disabilities.

Gina has a horsey background, as a rider and a groom, of over 40 years. She started riding at a riding school at 13. After her third lesson she was asked to work there, and at 16 she was made head girl. Then she became a working pupil at an eventing yard, but decided after a year that she wanted to work with show jumpers. She did this for the next 10 years, followed by working as a part-time groom at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in Potters Bar. After a complete career change in the late 1990s she qualified as a counsellor in 2002.

This background and experience are useful for her RDA training. The breadth of her counselling work in the voluntary sector - working with autistic clients, physically disabled clients, Childline, and running courses - has given her general people management skills and the ability to be flexible, adaptable, resourceful and to think on her feet.

In 10 months of training, Gina has learnt many things, such as how to physically handle the riders, how they benefit from riding. She has learnt more about different disabilities, which type of pony is needed for RDA work and the varied reasons volunteers have for helping. Each session has a before and an after. At home, Gina writes a session plan with adaptability in mind, based on her Risk Assessment, the riders' abilities and available ponies.

At ECC, she does various checks: Health & Safety; the appropriate tack and any special equipment to be taken to the stable block; notes in the diary about absent riders and/or helpers; notes from Gayl and Ann about the ponies; if she is planning to go outside, the ground underfoot. She also helps to groom and tack up the ponies and checks their tack once they are in the school.

Afterwards, once the ponies have been turned out, Gina has a debriefing with Liz and the helpers. This is a useful time together, to exchange hints, tips and information about riders and ponies. There are several tasks and checks to do before locking up and leaving - filling out her log book, writing riders' reports and a self-assessment; ensuring the bits are clean and the tack is correct and neat in the tack room; checking the hats are in order; sweeping the gallery, apron and mounting block; emptying the pooh barrow and any full rubbish bins plus generally tidying up.

Gina is now helping in our quest to find the elusive "perfect" RDA pony (Lolly was our last success, in June 2014). She follows up leads that Kirsty gives her. In January she joined Liz and Pauline on her debut Horse Shop.

On her RDA experience so far, Gina has liked "All of it", which echoes the recent response of a rider when she asked him what he had liked most about his ride.

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Gina loves helping people. She also loves horses. Combined, they equal “THE BEST.” Because all the ponies are special, Gina loves them all. She has two favourites: Bonny for “her beauty and sense of humour” and Storm because he has a quirky character.

Charlotte, who has only been helping, on a Monday, since September 2015, will be having a log book talk with Liz during the February half term. Gina’s advice to Charlotte about the training experience is short and sweet, “ENJOY IT.” Meanwhile, Gina’s training continues and her sense of humour with it!

Pauline Evans



Gina (left) and Pauline enjoying themselves at the last Quiz Night

The BT Volunteers Clean up!

Our supporters come in all shapes and sizes. Some like to help with the riding sessions; some like to work on the admin side; some like to do fundraising or gardening and maintenance work. Some just give money - yippee! All of these people are very important to the Centre. But every now and then we get some volunteers who are obviously bonkers.

Imagine giving up your cosy office for the day and instead spending your time in a wind-swept, muddy field with a saw or a pair of loppers in your hand, at the end of November! Yes, this is what 15 members of the BT Legal Team did! They trudged up the hill and sorted out parts of our site that most of you never even see. They hacked and snipped at huge amounts of brambles and blackthorn that had invaded our fields and were threatening to take over. It was not exactly a walk in the park.

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There was mud and vicious, spiky things everywhere, to say nothing of ponies and electric fences. I hope James' foot has recovered and that the young man who didn't step quite high enough over the electric fence didn't sustain any permanent damage? It was a good job Tina was on hand with hot drinks and chocolate biscuits.

To be serious for a moment, the vegetation growing over the fences at the top of Golf Hill and down the side towards the Circular ride was becoming a real nuisance and if left unchecked would take over our vital grazing. The BT team did an amazing job in clearing up our boundaries and we thank them heartily. They worked very hard and remained cheerful despite the conditions - a great bunch of people! If you ever feel a bout of insanity coming on again, we would be delighted to have you back!

Jan



The BT volunteers take a well-earned break!

Hunting for ponies

That's a bit of an ambiguous headline, isn't it? Of course I'm meaning the Centre's continuing hunt for suitable ponies for our work. We haven't seemed to have a settled full stable now since Sunny left us and we have been seriously looking, ever since then.

So here is the process we have to go through before a pony, such as our lovely Lolly, becomes one of our herd.

Height - the pony ideally has to be within a height range of 14 to 15.1 hh. (Ponies are measured in "hands" and each hand is 4 inches – please don't ask me for metric, I'm too old-school). This is a range that will cover the height, disability and weight of our riders at the Centre. Too tall a pony can be a problem for helpers and a short one would be too crowded.

Age – it is unusual to find a pony under 9 years old who would be settled enough for the job. We also like our ponies to have had a "life" – to have perhaps gone to local shows to compete, or have done pony club, etc, all of which will make them calmer in different situations. The exception to the age rule was Sunny, who came to us at 6 years old and behaved as though he was 16. Once a pony gets to 16 years old, it tends to start getting problems, just as we do, with aging. We also start to reduce the weight for our older ponies, or those with health problems, so they become less useful for some of our riders. This means we are ideally looking at ponies between the ages of 9 to 15 years old. We will take "loan" ponies outside these parameters, if they are suitable, though.

Temperament – the most important requirement in our ponies – they don't need to look wonderful (provided there's nothing that will affect them physically) but they must absolutely have the right unflappable nature that we want. Many ponies are advertised as "bombproof", which they can never be – all ponies can, in a certain situation, react, so we take that with a pinch of salt.

What about the seller? We have not had the best experiences with dealers, so we check their reputation on the internet and with other horse owners – their ponies often sound ideal, until you read that they have been reported to Trading Standards, sued in court, etc for mis-describing – then we steer clear.

Provided that a pony has all the essentials, as above, we go to see them, mob-handed, as it were. The ideal is 5 people – a leader, two side walkers, a rider who can take the role of a disabled person and an observer. (Trying to negotiate the diaries of all the busy people at the Centre to find a suitable day is a task in itself and often ponies are sold before we get there.) We ideally need to see the pony brought in from the field, tacked up and ridden before we start to try them. The normal checks for any pony are made and we then will gradually introduce the 4 people involved with the pony, as above, and whilst walking, we will see how the pony reacts to different situations – unbalanced rider, bean bags, shouts, etc. So – if it's one of the rare ponies who is fine with all of the above and it's for sale, we have to get an agreement with the owner that it will have a trial period, to see how it settles to the work. This can be a problem, as owners are understandably not always happy at the delay incurred and there is always a chance of injury, which would affect the sale. We ask for this as, if we buy a pony and it proves to be unsuitable, we really don't have facilities to keep it in work and re-sell. If it is a pony offered for loan, new RDA regulations state that we need to get it passed by a vet before it comes to the yard. We have to pay for this, whether the pony passes the vetting or not.

After all this, if the pony proves to be happy with the work, then it becomes a member of our very special pony group at the Elisabeth Curtis Centre.

Now the hard work of the grooms starts to gradually settle them into the herd with our existing ponies, without disruption and possible injury.

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The story doesn't end there, however – sometimes ponies can change – they become bored with the work, or, after some months of settling in, can show a change in character that makes them unsuitable. We then need to move them on and the long hunt begins for another.

Hands up who thought it was simple or easy? And if you do and have suitable skills, why haven't you volunteered to help?

Kirsty Brogden

Something For the “Young at Heart”

“All Aboard the SKYLARK”

Unless you were a hippo, otter or eel, this was not a day to gladden the heart, or even to be outdoors. It was a day to stay in bed with a book, watch TV, drink hot chocolate, eat bread and butter pudding with custard, knit, write stories or learn Old Norse. It was another wet and miserable day. In fact it hadn't stopped raining for days.

Locally, planks of wood, various tools and nails were in short supply. All round the area people were beavering away in their garden sheds measuring, sawing and hammering in a solitary but also communal frenzy of building arks for the Great Flood which would surely soon arrive.

The stream running down one side of Chestnut Avenue had risen to well above the level of the road: the speed humps were underwater, and the post box at the end of the road was about to disappear. The little white ducks that live on the pond in the sensory garden were last seen bobbing away on a small wave.

Before conditions had become this bad, Gayl and Ann had decided to bring the ponies in from their already very wet and muddy fields. They were now dry, safe, sound and snug in their stables.

Unfortunately, for

Gayl and Ann though, this act of foresight and mercy meant that they were now stuck at the Centre, as were their eight dogs.

However, with two empty stables at their disposal, spare rugs in the tack room, cushions, portable heaters, plenty of tea, coffee, cuppa soup, crackers and dog biscuits, plus a shared sense of humour, they would be fine for a while. This time together would be a perfect opportunity for them to practise their latest musical routine, to be performed on Sunday 6th December, with two of their dogs, Spike and Nova. It was during one such rehearsal, with “Rudolf the Red Rosed Reindeer”* playing loud and clear in the school and the rain thundering on to the corrugated roof masking all other sounds, that the ponies were woken from their slumbers or day-dreams of a dry sunny summer's day by the following: “*Plip plop. Plip plop. Drip drop. Drip drop. Plop plip. Plop plip. Drop drip. Drop drip.*

Hark! Listen! Listen to the rain. Listen to the pouring rain. Listen to it fall. And with every drop of rain can you hear the call?

“ALL ABOARD THE SKYLARK.”

Magically, they were all now wearing their rugs and their stable doors were open, as was the main door between the stable block and yard. There at the gate, also magically transformed, was the Centre's tractor with its trailer attached and enlarged to accommodate them all. There too were Gayl and Ann's other six dogs, plus the owl and the pussycat, Hereward and the Lone Ranger (see “The Moonlit Mill”) already on board. Once the ponies were settled their rugs became buoyancy aids and the SKYLARK was ready to set off on its voyage of discovery, first down Chestnut Avenue then right on to the Old Northampton Road, which it followed until Bromham watermill.

With a sharp right turn on Bromham Bridge, the SKYLARK swooped on to the swollen, sweeping, swiftly-flowing river.

It was soon swept out of sight, its final destination unknown. With all the locks open on the length of the River Great Ouse, to ease the floodwater's passage, who knows where the *SKYLARK* ended its journey. Perhaps it came out in The Wash!

“ALL ABOARD THE SKYLARK”

*A few weeks later: on Sunday.6th December they performed their pairs' routine and came 2nd out of 7 teams. G and A wore antlers, had red-tipped noses and tinsel draped round their shoulders. The judges said they'd included some different moves – G and A touched noses to finish - and made them laugh.

(Inspired by a very wet day on Wednesday 28/10/15 when my visit to Carol's yard was cancelled and talking to Gayl on a Wednesday soon afterwards.)

Pauline Evans

Fundraising

Sat 21 November: Autumn Fair at Kempston Church End.
Raised total of £499.02. In addition, £30 for Toy Shop/Notelets sales not all taken at Autumn Fair. Hire of Hall £20.

Sat 5 December: Budgens Collection. Raised £230.50.

Sat 5 December Biddenham Xmas Fair. Raised £26 with Ros' jewellery.

Sat 5 December: Handbags & Gladrags Sale at The Ship, Bromham Road.
Collecting box stolen from The Ship. Ongoing.

Wed 9 December: Volunteers' Christmas Dinner. Raffle raised £105.

Wed 16 December: Carol Singing organised by Parklands Residents Association. Raised £240.
Many thanks to PRA.

Sat 20 February: Quiz at Church End. Took £166 on the door, £166 on raffle, £15 for quilt raffle. Total £347.

Forthcoming Events

Quiz at The Ship, Bromham Road. First half of October 2016.
TBC.

ECC Summer Fair. Date TBC. (June)

Stagsden Open Farm. Date TBC. (June)

Term Dates for Bedfordshire Schools 2016

Thursday 24th March - Spring Term ends

Monday 11th April - Summer Term begins.
(Mon 11th - Bedfordshire Schools Training Day)

Monday 30th May - Friday 3rd June - Half-Term.

Friday 22nd July - Summer Term ends.

Monday 5th September - Autumn Term begins.
(Friday 2nd Bedfordshire Schools Training Day)

Monday 24th October - Friday 28th October - Half-Term

Friday 16th December - Autumn Term ends.

Dates may vary according to session - please check with your Instructor.

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