

RDA Holidays

Every year our riders and at least one of our helpers have the opportunity to attend the Regional or County holidays. There are also some international holidays. We have included accounts of each.

BARTON CAMP WEEKEND, 21 – 22 SEPTEMBER 2002

After the disappointment of no camp in 2001, because of the foot and mouth restrictions, everyone was looking forward to September 2002. Planning began early in the year and it was decided to hold the camp again at the excellent facilities at Barton Le Clay, Bedfordshire.

Barton-le-Clay. The name makes it sound like an old brick works surrounded by gravel pits, but in fact it's a lovely small county town surrounded by fairly high downs.

Six riders were to take part in the camp – 3 from the Elisabeth Curtis Centre and 3 from the Chiltern Group.

It's to this location that we went for a summer weekend away for some of the children with whom we work. The children were staying for the weekend with some of the parents and some volunteers, sleeping in the village community hall just behind the rectory of the 13th century St. Nicholas church, with the kind permission of Rev Peter Whittaker.

On Friday, we moved four of the horses (Pedro, Jason, Rowan and Sunny) from Bromham, and apart from Sunny deciding that the trailer was not his favourite place to be and fidgeting during the journey, all were settled into their temporary accommodation. On Saturday morning two more ponies, Ben and Poppy, who had been generously loaned for the weekend, joined them.

Saturday was a bright sunny day, which was ideal for the activities planned for the day. Whilst it was warm, it wasn't so hot that it was uncomfortable. The ponies were groomed and tacked up with the aid of the children that would be riding each one, to familiarise them with their pony. Then it was time to hack out in the Autumn sunshine.

Once we got the children mounted, we were off for a trek up to the top of the nearby hills. The trail we went along, is a ramblers path, with trees on either side from the base of the hill, until you get almost to the top where it opens out to open farmed fields on the left on the way up.

The bridleway leads directly from the field up into the hills behind the town and the stiff climb soon left some of the helpers out of breath! The ponies had no trouble and enjoyed the change of scene, but one of our riders became too tired to continue and was taken back by four wheeled transport, whilst a volunteer rode the pony back to base.

The view from the top of these hills is incredible, as you can see for several miles, and the air was so clear that day that we got the children to try to recognise some of the distant landmarks as an unscheduled part of the activity.

We returned home, untacked the ponies and left them to enjoy their lunch and the afternoon off.

In the afternoon, everyone visited Waterhall Farm in Hertfordshire, where we saw lots of visitor-friendly animals. There was also a shed full of farm machinery for the mechanically minded. After a quick cup of tea and a visit to the farm shop, it was time to head back to Barton, arriving about 5pm.

Before supper there was a Treasure Hunt – various items of pony related equipment were hidden in the next-door vicarage and the clever 'Hunters' found everything in much less than the time allowed. After a fish and chip supper, it was time for bed – everyone was weary and the boys fell asleep quickly, but the excitement of the day kept the girls chattering for a while.

The following day, the weather was a different story. It was a bit blustery, but fortunately the rain held off until we were indoors for lunch, when it only drizzled for a short while.

In the morning, the riders were taken for a gentler trek along the base of Barton hills. When we

stopped for a break, the children were put through their paces with some riding and horse control exercises, before we headed back for lunch.

Once we were back our riders dismounted and left the ponies to rest, whilst we had a scavenger hunt, before lunch. The 'most unusual' prize went to the rider who found a hedgehog skull in the churchyard.

In the afternoon we had the gymkhana, the main horsy event in which the horses and riders displayed their skill and aptitude in a variety of races and contests. There wasn't any rider who outshone all others, as all the contestants each won more than one event. (Some cheating may have gone on?) So everyone enjoyed themselves enormously and won lots of rosettes.

Ponies were then untacked and allowed to rest, while we had tea, cakes and a raffle and thanked everyone who had made the weekend such a success. Then it was time for our riders to pack and say goodbye.

We loaded the ponies into their trailers, took down the electric fencing, put the equipment into cars and headed back to Bromham.

We know that both the ponies and riders love the change of scenery of the 'Barton Camp'. For some of them it was their first experience of being away from home and parents and it would not be possible without volunteers like Stu (helper) and Charlotte (organiser) from whose reports this article was written.

Many thanks also to all those who contributed to the success of this weekend camp.

My RDA Holiday in Portugal

by Mary H-S

Back in March 200, I was very privileged to go on a RDA holiday in Portugal. The group consisted of 8 disabled riders from all over the country and six helpers including a nurse, physiotherapist and a riding instructor. Our leader was Lady Rosamund Gladstone.

Our flight was about 3 hours late leaving Gatwick but that did give us time to get to know each other. Our ages ranged from 17 to 61 years and there were just two men in the party.

When we arrived in Lisbon, we were met by two mini buses from the stables, which took us on the 2 and a half hour drive to Milfontes, a small coastal town, north of the Algarve. After a quick unpack and tidy up we had the first lovely evening meal followed by an induction meeting with Sheila who, along with her husband Rob, owned the riding stables.

The next morning we spent getting our boots and chaps disinfected as at home we were at the height of foot and mouth. After lunch we went for our first ride. It was only for 40 minutes. This was to see if we got on well with the horses that had been chosen for us.

The horses are a very old breed called Lusitano, free going and sure-footed. Their shoulder blades are very upright so they have a very short trotting step. My horse was called Joia, which means jewel, and she was a 16 hh grey mare. I was told by Rob to talk to her lots and trust her. I did and we got along fine. It was only at the end of the holiday I was told that, if she hadn't liked me, she would have got very stropky

During our first ride we split into two groups of 7 riders apparently horses run in groups of 7 or 8 within a herd. The countryside was breathtaking; we went up through a eucalyptus forest. We had only gone a short way when one of the horses pretended to bolt. He came cantering up fast carrying his squealing rider. He does this with every group and when he'd done it his sense of humour was satisfied and he settled down behind the leader. We were reassured that the lead horses were trained

to stop any horses that thought they were going to do a runner.

So our holiday continued with the rides increasing by 45 minutes a day until on the fourth day we had worked up to a 3-hour ride. As I have arthritis of the knee and spine it was very tiring. I had to be peeled off the horse at the end of every 3-hour ride and plonked into a chair, but it was worth every ache and pain.

The area that we were riding in is called the Alentejo Region and it is a Hugh National Park. We rode through eucalyptus and cork oak forests, fields full of beautiful wild flowers; they had had the highest spring rainfall for 40 years so the flowers were spectacular. One day we went to see a waterfall, which is usually only there in winter.

Most of the rides were in the mornings and we came back to a delicious lunch, prepared by Fatima and eaten on the verandah. The ride would be discussed after lunch and we would be told what we were going to do the following day. One afternoon Sheila took us up to the school and gave us a classic dressage demonstration.

Throughout the holiday, both horses and riders could not have been better cared for. There were places on the ride where we were met by Rob and Lady Gladstone and usually 2 of the helpers, Sally and Jo the nurse, June and the Physio Mary rode with us. We were told if any of the rides got too much for us, the horse could be ridden back by one of the helpers. This only happened a few times (but not to me!).

On the last day, one of the horses got lame and a trailer was quickly dispatched to collect him. Thank goodness for mobile phones.

Our last two rides were the climax of the holiday. On Friday afternoon we did a 3-hour ride to the beach, then threaded our way through the sand dunes to the edge of the pine forest. To our great surprise, Fatima was there with a field kitchen, a nicely laid table and a huge pot of spaghetti bolognese.

The horses were tethered in the forest overnight, with 2 people from the stables camping with them. We returned to our hotel for the night and were driven back the next day to ride the horses back to the farm.

The rest of the time that week was taken up by sightseeing and going as a party to different restaurants every night – and this was all included in the £550 that the 10-day holiday cost us.

This was the 7th time a holiday in Portugal has been organised by Lady Gladstone. Each year she swears it will be the last.

I just feel very lucky to have been chosen as one of the party. It wouldn't have been possible for me without the encouragement of everyone at the Elisabeth Curtis Centre. It was nice to put into practise everything I've learnt in the school.

It was one of the best experiences of my life and it left me with a huge sense of achievement.

A huge 'Thank you' to them and to the RDA for giving me the confidence to go out and do it.