

Driving *ambitions*

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In the first of our new series, Sue Mart from Bennington Carriage Driving Academy, a UKCC Level 3 coach, explains what is covered during the early training sessions for a new driver and also shares top tips for improving skills and experience, as well as building confidence.

About Bennington Carriage Driving Academy

The Bennington Carriage Driving Academy offers an extensive range of facilities and training for all levels of driver. A wide range of Try Carriage Driving experiences are available for those new to the sport or for those who would simply like to 'have a go' for the first time.

For more advanced drivers, there are a wide range of facilities to help improve performance and develop skills at our purpose built facility. The centre is set in 10 acres of picturesque countryside and is extensively equipped to help maximise your enjoyment of the sport. Ample parking, wash down facilities, toilets, tea, coffee and kitchen facilities are available, as well as expert advice from Bennington Staff who are always on hand to help.

The Academy is also the home of our showroom, where an extensive range of carriages and accessories are always on display.

Anyone who is new to carriage driving may feel a little apprehensive before their first lesson, but the ethos at Bennington Carriage Driving Academy is for new drivers to enjoy the experience in a safe yet fun environment.

Getting Started

Sue explains how to plan and deliver an effective training session. "Firstly, it is important to understand the client's skills and experience and what they are looking to achieve. This could include previous riding or driving experience. Riders find their natural 'feel' and can adapt more quickly to carriage driving. It is just a matter of keeping their legs still. Some of our clients start with no equestrian experience at all.

"During a starter lesson we begin with learning rein handling techniques on the wooden horse. Practise makes perfect and by using the wooden horse the student can concentrate fully on what they



Learning correct rein technique

are doing without having to focus on what the horse might be doing.

The coachman style of driving takes a little time to master, but once the student has grasped the technique, it can be very rewarding and satisfying. I find that students tend to learn fairly quickly, through repetition and by having a system in

place for the harnessing up and putting to. New pupils are often worried about rein handling, but I encourage them to take our rein handling machine to use and practise

TOP TIP

Think about your driving position; different cushions and foot rests can have a big effect on your sitting position.



with in front of the TV. Going to shows and watching and observing is time well spent. There is an excellent video called 'Between the shafts', which covers all aspects including rein handling.

It is important to practise and relax, not to tense your body.

Mounting and Dismounting

After the rein handling techniques have been mastered, it is time to move on to correct procedures when mounting and dismounting from the carriage. Straight away, I go through procedures for all aspects of harnessing up, putting to and mounting/dismounting from the carriage. This then becomes part of the safety procedure.

When mounting the carriage it is important to have someone at the head of the horse, holding with a lead rein. The driver needs to gather the reins and mount the carriage, making sure that they have a contact and the reins looped over their arm, so that they don't trip up.

When dismounting, make sure there is someone at the horse's head, then dismount out of the carriage stepping out backwards – bottom first and then secure your reins.

For the first few lessons we use our Bennington Fun Bug. This is a four-wheel carriage on pneumatics and doesn't include a turntable, so you feel very safe and it gives confidence to new drivers. The



The Bennington Fun Bug is a four-wheel carriage on pneumatics

As well as fitting the vehicle, it is vital that students learn how to fit a harness in a safe and effective way.

Fun Bug has a double seat, so I can sit next to the driver with double reins for safety.

It is important that pupils have the knowledge and understand of fitting carriages to horses, and this will include balancing a two wheel carriage, and also that they

understand the pros and cons of two versus four wheelers and their purposes.

One day we hope our new drivers will buy their own carriage, so they need to understand the requirements regarding sizing, appropriate weights of carriages, including the rules that apply for British

Carriage Driving or British Driving Society classes. Getting it wrong through lack of knowledge can prove costly.

As well as fitting the vehicle, it is vital that students learn how to fit a harness in a safe and effective way, to ensure both driver and pony remain safe and comfortable.



One to one tuition



Learning to harness up correctly and safely

Getting Driving

We tend to teach sitting alongside the pupil because as this gives reassurance and we can make little adjustments and demonstrate different points that we want to show. During this lesson we will again focus on safety procedures.

You should be enjoying your lesson, so remember to smile while you are driving. It's amazing how much smiling can relax your muscles and that way, you won't be tense in your body.

We use a variety of exercises to improve the pupils skills and help them gain their confidence. Anyone can use these training exercises at home, too, to help polish up their skills.

Accuracy

Use four training domes to mark the points of a circle (north, south, east, west). This is a good test to drive a circle accurately. We start in walk and as the pupil's skill level

develops, move on to trot. You can develop this exercise and increase the degree of difficulty by trying different sizes of circle.

Control

Ask the driver to halt at a given point. This is a great exercise to test your communication with the horse. As with riding, when learning in an enclosed arena, you can become dependent on the walls for support. Therefore, develop the exercise by asking for halt in different parts of the school. Not only can you test for accuracy in the response, but you can also check for straightness.

Rein handling

Drive different shapes and school movements, changes of rein, loops, serpentines. All of these demonstrate control, accuracy, communication and partnership.

Avoiding the rain

If it's a wet horrid day, I set up an exercise with our plastic horse harnessed up and put to a carriage incorrectly. The



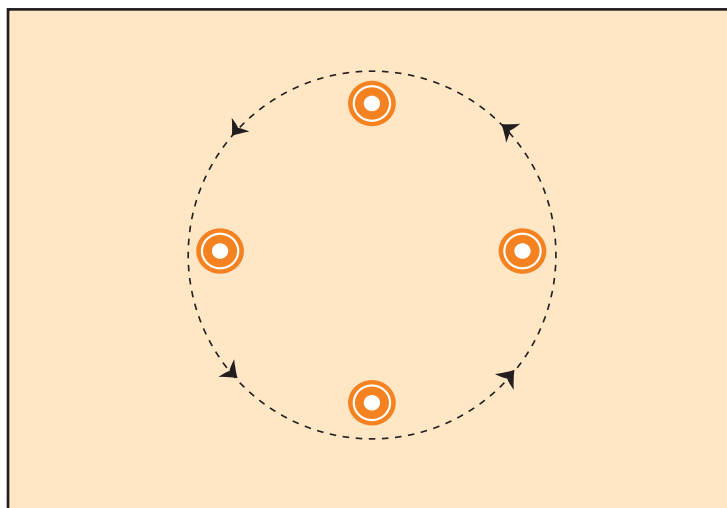
On wet days the plastic horse is used

student identifies the mistakes, then re-harnesses the horse and puts to correctly. This is an excellent exercise, once the training is underway, to test the driver's knowledge and a great way for the pupil to learn and have fun.

During one session, when appropriate, the student would

TOP TIP

Drive as many different safe horses as you can. They are all different and give you a completely different feel.



Practicing the dressage test

arrive and the harness would be in pieces. Their task would be to assemble it and harness up correctly. (Don't panic I wouldn't expect to do this exercise after week one).

As the pupil's skills progress, we check on rein handling and communication skills with the horse, by driving a basic dressage test. This puts together movements that we'd have practised individually into a sequence, and will incorporate a change of rein and transitions at given markers.

The pupil should aim for softness, a lack of tension, staying in an outline and straightness.

TOP TIP

Bring your video camera along and we can record you harnessing up and putting to. You can then watch this at home.

Warming up and cooling down

We always walk for 10 minutes once harnessed up, to warm the horse up, to get him loosened up, get his blood flowing, move his joints and get the horse listening. Once in trot work, we work the horse long and low to stretch the horse's muscles and get him working more correctly from behind. We have an agreed format for our warm up procedure with coach and driver, and know what are our agreed objectives. Again after the session we walk the horse to cool off and stretch the muscles, working the horse in a long and low outline.

And finally

We always review the lesson with the student to ensure that their goals have been met and to discuss progression but always at their own pace. We aim to build confidence in a safe and fun environment.



The horses are warmed up and cooled down with care

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