

## A Conversation with

# Bennington Carriages

What is the link between the Duke of Edinburgh, the Sultan of Brunei, the Rothschild Family and Disney Florida? All famous? Perhaps - but they are certainly all customers of Bennington Carriages.

My conversation today is with the Mart family in Long Bennington. Michael and Margaret, together with their daughters Wendy and Sue, run Bennington Carriages and Bennington Furniture, (the metal furniture side is dining style, conservatory elegance, versatile tables and bedroom comfort). This really nice family has been producing excellent quality products for over 45 years, and has gained a well-deserved reputation for both their furniture and carriages. But their talents do not stop there. Sue and Wendy have followed their parents – both keen and expert carriage drivers – and recently took 3rd place at Windsor Great Park in the National Carriage Driving Championships. So with some trepidation, and little knowledge, I asked Michael and Wendy about their two businesses.

"I was involved in engineering in Nottingham, but felt that I needed to occupy my time with other work. It was during a holiday in Norfolk that I got the idea – actually from an auction where I saw a 'bier' for sale, which is used to carry the coffin for funerals. The idea came to me that I could convert this to be pulled by our pony, so that was how it started!" said Michael. "I paid £25 for it and then, physically pulled it the five miles back to where we were staying! Eventually we got it home, and that was the beginning of the business." The family then acquired another pony and the building of carriages really began. Carriage driving at that time was in its infancy and the Mart family became very much a part of the sport. In the early days it was more commonly known as private driving but as the competitive element entered into the arena, so the



development and sophistication of the carriages began.

One person to take more than a passing interest in the business was HRH Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh. In 1979 the company was given the accolade of the Royal Warrant as carriage builder for the Duke – and in fact still holds the Warrant today. "The Duke of Edinburgh is quite heavily involved in carriage driving and has written rules for the sport," said Michael. "Sue is running the carriage production side, and I still add my ideas to the design and engineering of the units."

Currently there are around 10 different models of Bennington Carriage - plus specials - although nearly every order is tailor made for each customer. New designs and new materials have contributed greatly to the success of the company, and the introduction of aluminium wheels and the engineering of parabolic springs

has brought lightness and stability to the ride. Further technology saw the introduction of a standing platform at the rear - allowing for greater safety at speed when cornering and the addition of disc brakes and delayed steering, affording even more control by the driver. All metals are shot blasted and powder coated, with the accent clearly on high quality for both materials and workmanship.

The units are beautifully crafted and constructed with a genuine care for detail and finish. It is obvious that there is immense pride in what they do at Bennington and the end product is simply a pleasure to look at.

I asked about the people who purchase the carriages. "From all walks of life, with naturally a love of ponies and horses," said Michael. "We have provided carriages for the Rothschild family,

the Sultan of Brunei and even a special Cinderella Wedding Coach for Disney in Florida! My wife and I were invited to Disney, but didn't really want to go. However, they persuaded me and I really enjoyed myself! Our biggest export market is the United States of America where we do have an agent working for us, but we also market in Europe and have an increasing business in the Middle East. We have sold to Jordan - in particular to the lost city of Petra where they found it difficult to access the city through a narrow tunnelled entrance as engine fumes tended to build up and cause problems eroding the rock. It was Princess Anne that actually told her father, and he asked us if we could help. So now they use carriages and the problem is alleviated!"

"If I were to take up carriage driving, apart from the pony or horse, what would I pay for a carriage?" I asked Michael. "Our prices range from £1200 to £10,000 depending upon the specification, materials requested, livery and so forth. To build from start to finish will take about





a month. They do have a long life, and we have some carriages still being used that we built thirty years ago! There are probably in the region of four thousand units built since we started – at least half of them in Britain.” An interesting point is that Sue and Wendy are both competitors and manufacturers, which gives an added perspective when designing and driving carriages. A definite plus factor in my book!

Sue and Wendy (driver and backstepper) have competed for some years in a variety of events, which include dressage, eventing and marathons over a 15-mile course. They are successful and thoroughly enjoy the sport. A major factor in carriage driving is the relationship between driver and ‘engine’ – be it horse or pony. This comes through experience and practice and that special ingredient that only the two of them can share. “We usually enter five or six events each year,” Wendy explained, “and the season runs from May until September. The rest of the year we spend training and, hopefully, trying to perfect our techniques.”

About five years ago, the Mart family realised that there was another market for their collective talents in the form of metal furniture. Although the carriages still are the main business the furniture is steadily catching up, with items for dining

rooms, conservatories, kitchens and bedrooms. Wendy runs this side of the business and judging by the items that I saw in the showroom, there are some wonderful pieces of furniture to ponder over.

So what of the future? “We are moving,” Michael told me, “we have bought land on the outskirts of the village that will give us a new home that will provide the buildings we need and a driving track for our test drives and demonstrations.” Indeed, the new premises will add further dimensions to this already successful business. The viewing of equipment and the many accessories that come with carriage driving will be much easier for the visitor to access.

I was impressed by my visit – a family truly proud of their business, and it shows in their ranges of both carriages and furniture. Do visit them in Sparrow Lane, Long Bennington, Newark, NG23 5DL and their website [www.bennington.co.uk](http://www.bennington.co.uk) or give them a call on 01400-281280. I hope to make a return visit when their new premises are completed and report on the latest news of the Mart Family. My thanks to Michael, Margaret, Wendy and Sue and I certainly wish them every success in the future, both for competitions and for their carriage and furniture businesses.

**By Mike Beckett**