

“There is nothing so good for the inside of a man as the outside of a horse”

Sue Mart considers the health benefits of carriage driving.

For those of us who have been involved with horses for our whole lives, we often take for granted the therapeutic effect of being around a horse. Those years of teenage angst when we'd cry in our pony's mane or tell it our innermost secrets, the freedom of a good gallop over a stubble field and the lessons learned about caring for another being. As adults there is nothing quite like going for a drive or a ride to blow the cobwebs away or lift us when we've got a touch of the blues. Then there are the physical benefits as well as the mental benefits of working with horses – mucking out can be great for 'thinking time' and a good work out!

No wonder then that equine-assisted therapies are becoming increasingly popular from helping autistic children to learn and retain information to showing corporate leaders how to improve their communication skills. I have been fascinated to discover how carriage driving has been helping children and adults gain, regain and improve mental and physical health.

Fred and Clare Connell came to Bennington in 2011 for a test drive. Fred has no background with horses and although Clare had been around horses most of her life, there hadn't been a horse at their home in Colston Bassett for well over a decade. In early 2012 they attended the 'Driving Back to Sport' programme at the Bennington Driving Academy, run in association with British Carriage Driving, which was intended to introduce new and novice drivers to the fun world of competitive carriage driving. The timing



Charlotte Thomson National Novice Para Champion

could not have been better for them.

Fred and Clare were serving as parish priests in the Vale of Belvoir and the pressures of caring for a large group of rural parishes had taken its toll. Fred had been diagnosed with burn out and given several months sabbatical to recover.

"Initially I thought Clare needed 'someone' to blow up nostrils and rub noses with," says Fred, "so I encouraged her to try driving. Our life balance was seriously out of kilter. It was a whirlwind of weddings, baptisms, services and serving the parishes with little time to just stop and stare. I'd intended to share in this adventure by being the 'bag carrier'. However, after having a go myself I wanted to do a bit more!"

We found a pony (or maybe she found us) and learning to care for and work with Lady Jay gave me a new focus. She brought me back to a state of mindfulness, being in and savouring the moment. Carriage driving helped enormously in my recovery from the burn out and helped me rediscover the joys of life. Here was something Clare and I could share and delight in."

In 2014 Fred suffered a stroke and has now retired from the priesthood, but not the carriage driving. "I'm only just getting



Carriage driving is giving Rachael a new lease of life

started!" he will tell you. "The driving has really helped with the stroke recovery. The physicality of carriage driving has helped me rebuild muscle tone. It has helped me relearn lost motor skills and again given me a focus when it would have been all too easy to give up.

Clare and I did our first competition this year [the Midlands Carriage Driving One Day Event at Belvoir Castle]. Learning and remembering the dressage and cones course was a challenge – my recall isn't what it was before the stroke – but it all helps the reforming of neural pathways. Without the goal of carriage driving with our beloved Lady Jay, I'm not sure I would have made such good progress over the last 12 months."

Clare adds, "Lady Jay was a rescue pony found for us in West Cumbria by Amanda Saville. She's been such a godsend. I actually think she's rescued Fred in return!"

Amanda Saville runs Chariots of Fire (COF) and Sports Driving Unlimited in southern Scotland, and has long been an advocate of carriage driving as a therapeutic sport. The COF training centre specialises in enabling people with special or additional needs to enjoy the fun and challenge of carriage driving. Amanda is trained in a variety of equine assisted therapy methods.

Equine assisted therapy (EAT) is experiential; participants learn about themselves and others through doing activities with horses and then discussing their feelings, behaviours and patterns. Activities are set up to apply certain skills such as non-verbal communication,

assertiveness, creative thinking, problem solving, leadership, taking responsibility, teamwork and relationships, confidence and attitude.

Amanda uses carriage driving in conjunction with EAT to help improve motor skills and to build communication skills and motivation – all of which are vital in helping individuals with specific needs cope with everyday life. She encourages participation in competitive driving because it is one of the few sports where disabled people can compete on an equal basis against their able-bodied peers.

"Being around the horses and on the carriage gives the children and adults we work with the freedom to be themselves. Often they are so constricted by other people's rules and benchmarks," says Amanda. "Horses don't judge and they don't have expectations. For some of the young people who come to us, this is their first experience of being able to care for



Lewis Shaw - driving blind, Amanda is his eyes on the course

something and to come out of their inside world to really participate in the outside world."

Amanda has a heart-warming story about carriage driving for rehabilitation. "we have been working with Rachael who was in a vegetative state after a car accident. When she first came she could do literally nothing – no eye contact, no movement, no communication.

Through working with her on the carriage, her world started to open up again. She began to make eye contact to communicate and then to mouth words. Over time she regained enough use of one hand to hold the reins and she is now able, with assistance, to be in the driving seat and guide the pony where she wants to go. This has been such a breakthrough for her, but also an incredible boost for her family, giving them a lot of hope for her future. This work can be very emotional as well as inspiring!"

Through Sports Driving Unlimited Amanda has also been advising equestrian centres in Spain and Israel who are working with driving for individuals with special needs and Bennington have supplied wheelchair-adapted Fun Bugs to these centres so they can further their activities.

Here at Bennington we work with learners from Rainbow Horses Learning Centre, in the Vale of Belvoir. Rainbow Horses, led by Sue Coombes, provides equine assisted learning for children and young people with autism, social or communication

difficulties and issues related to attachment and trauma. The youngsters that visit us get such a boost from being around Dillon, our teaching pony, and he adapts his behaviour when working with them. He seems to sense that they have different needs.

Horses helping humans is not a new concept and a number of academic studies have been done on the effect of equine facilitated therapy and learning on different groups (adolescents, couples, prison inmates, children on the autistic spectrum) and issues (e.g. depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and mental, physical and behavioural rehabilitation). Studies have shown that working with horses builds confidence and reduces stress; it induces relaxation, builds a sense of community and creates a connection to nature while having fun.

There is no doubt that carriage driving can play a huge role in improving our mental and physical health, both as a sport and through its therapeutic potential. And the daily presence of a horse encourages us to be more mindful and present, which we all need in our busy lives.

Whether you are a youngster in a wheelchair given a new sense of freedom, an experienced horse rider who wants to try an alternative sport or a retiree looking for a new adventure in your autumn years, there is nothing quite like a horse and carriage, as Fred Connell puts it, for a "source of incredible restoration and immense joy".

For more information: Bennington Driving Academy contact Sue Mart www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk Sports Driving Unlimited contact Amanda Saville www.sportsdrivingunlimited.org.uk Rainbow Horse Learning Centre contact Sue Coombes, www.rainbowhorses.co.uk Equine Assisted Learning: www.eagala.org, www.equineassistedqualifications.com, www.horseboyworld.com

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