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Midlands Carriage Driving event 2017

# Perfect partners

Christine McLeod reveals why she couldn't have found a more suitable driving pony in Joey, which is why he has found his forever home with Christine and her husband Douglas.

I have been around horses for most of my life, having competed in various ridden disciplines, including showing and showjumping. Douglas started riding at the age of 26, first at a riding school and later buying a horse of his own. After a long break from riding between 2003 and 2014, due to work commitments, we decided it was time to get back into horses.

I had been given a 'try carriage driving' day at Bennington Carriages as a birthday present in the spring of 2014, and I enjoyed it so much I decided I wanted to learn more. Douglas and I spent the rest of 2014 going to carriage driving events, in order to improve our knowledge of the sport. The more we learned, the more eager we were to find ourselves the right pony and get going.

Finding the right pony was easier said than done but after a long search – and trying out many unsuitable ones – Joey actually found us. We did have a pony at that time, but he wasn't right for us, so he went back. On the day he

was returned, I was told Sonny Hillier was selling a pony called Joey, who might be suitable for us. Douglas and I were due to go back to Bennington in the spring of 2015 and by coincidence, Sonny was going to be there. He said he'd bring Joey along for us to try, with no obligation to buy. Sonny was very honest and he was as keen to find the right pony for us as we were.

Mine and Douglas's biggest concern at that time was that we had never owned a carriage driving horse before. Plus, Joey was only five and had only recently been broken to harness. However, on that day at Bennington, when we first tried him out, it was blowing a gale, yet little Joey just trotted around the arena like he owned the place. We fell in love with him immediately so Joey arrived at our place three weeks later and our wonderful journey began.

As novice drivers, Douglas and I didn't want to ruin Joey so we invested a lot of time in lessons with Sue Mart at Bennington to begin with. Sue is an



Christine and Joey at the Midlands Carriage Driving event 2017



Joey at this year's Bennington open day



Christine, Douglas, Joey and Sue Mart at Bennington in 2016



Bennington 2016

his grooming skills, which was judged across all the levels, so it was a lovely confidence boost for us both to get some recognition.

We joined another group – Midlands Carriage Driving – and took part in our first ever two-day event at Onley. All we wanted to do was get round, but we did even better than that – we were placed! We also managed to complete the course at the one-day event at Catton Park last year, as well as taking part in the Grimsthorpe Charity Drive. We were learning so much and having so much fun along the way.

Joey is a bit of a Heinz 57 but there's definitely some Welsh breeding in their somewhere. He has a heart of gold and so many qualities that money just can't buy. It could have been a disaster, with a novice driver taking on a novice



Driving Joey at the Bennington open day

horse, but Joey was very forgiving and with the right help, we took extra care not to do anything that could be detrimental to his training. Also, in some ways, it was better to take on

a pony who hadn't been there and done it, as there is always the risk of discovering your pony 'never did that with the previous owner', which can knock your confidence. We adore him.

incredible teacher and she makes it so much fun. During that first year we got to know Joey better and discovered more about his character. We also spent a lot of time at events, helping behind the scenes, as we were keen to learn as much as we possibly could.

The 2016/2017 season was our first competitive one and we joined West Midlands Carriage Driving group after Sue introduced us to the club. We were made to feel so welcome by everyone and during that first year we took part in a lot of the club's activities, including treasure hunts, lessons, indoor and outdoor trials. It was a big learning curve, but we kept ourselves safe and had lots of fun, winning our fair share of trophies and rosettes along the way.

Joey looked after us so beautifully and in return we looked after him, too – we had a deal. That first season with West Midlands Carriage Driving was a great one where we won the beginners group, as well as best newcomers. Plus, Douglas won second prize for



Tackling the water at Bennington