

Learning to DRIVE

Photos by Bennington Carriages

In the first of our three part feature on learning to drive, we speak to Christine and Douglas McLeod who took up driving together in 2014 after a break from being involved with horses. In part two and three we explore how they have progressed and goals they have achieved.

Christine and Douglas live in Leicestershire and decided to get back into enjoying horses together and carriage driving seemed to be the perfect option for them, allowing them to both learn something new together at the same time, as well as being safe and fun.

Christine works as a road safety professional and started riding at 11 years old and enjoyed competing in various disciplines including showing and show jumping whereas Douglas, a dentist, was not introduced to horses until after he had completed his studies at 26. He started off with going to a riding school at weekends and soon after purchased his first horse and had a lot of fun attending local events and beach rides. However, due to work commitments the pair had no involvement with horses from 2003 to 2014.

Christine and Douglas both agreed that they needed to be surrounded with like-minded people and to immerse themselves in learning from quality coaches and their vast experience and knowledge. After many hours of research and receiving excellent recommendations, they were led to attend a 'Try Driving' day held at the Bennington Carriages Academy, which was a birthday present for Christine in the spring of 2014.

"It was a brilliant day and ticked so many boxes for us, but we realised that if we intended to do the job properly then our learning curve was going to be immense; we needed it to be fun and as safe as possible, a tricky balance," said Christine.

The pair spent the rest of 2014 going to events and shows to gain a better understanding of the sport and even



Christine and Douglas with Sue and Joey



Christine and Douglas at the Bennington 'Try Driving' day in May 2014

had the option of starting a pony from scratch, but soon realised that this would not be the best option for themselves; yet finding the right one for them was going to be equally as difficult.

After many hours trawling through online adverts and telephone calls, the McLeod's finally found 'Joey' advertised and contacted Sonny Hillier straight away. "Sonny was very open and honest with us and we were under no pressure to buy; we were very concerned not to make a mistake in purchasing the wrong pony for us. However, Sonny came highly recommended so we had confidence that if Joey was not suitable for us he would find a pony that was," said Douglas, who added: "We had waited a long time to be able to get involved with horses again and venture into the world of carriage driving so we needed to get it right."

Douglas and Christine decided to go back to Bennington for another 'Try Driving' day in the spring of 2015 where they enjoyed a "fantastic" day gaining more of an insight into what is involved and building on their previous visit with so much still to learn, but relishing every moment. By coincidence, Sonny was also working with Sue Mart that day and had kindly agreed to bring Joey along for them to try at the end of the day.

"We fell in love with Joey. He was a superstar and buying him was the easiest decision we have ever made; Joey is everything we could have wished for and more and we were so happy to have found our pony at last! Sue agreed to be our coach and it was very evident that the driving bug had well and truly bitten us and we were loving every minute of it," said Christine.



Harnessing up Joey



Douglass with Sue at the Try Driving day

Next on their list was a carriage and they needed one that was versatile. "Bennington is a one stop shop with everything we could need and only one carriage stood out for us in our search, the Bennington Fun Bug rear wheel steering model. It is exceptionally comfortable for us and Joey loves it. Most importantly, we feel safe when using it which is one less thing for us to worry about being novice drivers," said Christine.

Why train with Sue?

Christine and Douglas decided to train with Sue after getting involved and attending two of the 'Try Driving' days at Bennington Carriages Academy. "Know, like and trust comes to mind; Sue is genuinely interested in what we want to achieve and her passion for all aspects and levels of the sport is immense," said Douglas.

Setting goals and challenges has also been important for the McLeod's in order for them to build a foundation strategy into the sport and keep them on track. "Sue is such an excellent communicator and very patient; she pitches our training so that we understand and is quick to find a solution to any challenge when we are struggling," said Christine.

Top Tips for starting out

Even though we are novices in carriage driving, our advice to those starting out would be to go on a 'Try Driving' day or go to different events and talk to people to gain an understanding of the sport and the options you have. You will be amazed at how friendly and helpful carriage drivers are. Also find a trainer that can help you on your adventure and remember that safety comes first but closely followed by lots of fun!



Sue explaining rein and whip handling to Douglas



Progress in March 2015: Christine and Sonny Hillier at Bennington

Introducing the trainer

Sue Mart is the daughter of Bennington Carriages founder Michael Mart and is now the managing director alongside her sister Wendy Palfrey. Bennington Carriages is a family run business which has been established for over 50 years and as well as manufacturing horse drawn carriages for competition and pleasure, they also offer training facilities at their Bennington Carriages Academy. Sue is also a UK CC level three coach.

The Academy's popular 'Try Driving' days give an overview on carriage driving, such as fitting harness, rein handling and having a go at driving. As Christine and

Douglas' coach, she put into place goals that are achievable and came up with a progress plan, whilst ensuring their time driving was safe and enjoyable. They explored the key skills further: harnessing up correctly and safely, safety procedures, further coaching on rein handling and going through various scenarios so they were both prepared for every eventuality.

"They both got really involved with the sport and everything that encompasses driving; they worked together as a team and both learnt to drive together. Once they purchased Joey we would regularly keep in touch with constant feedback

and reporting; it is all about communication and mentoring so that they do not feel like they are alone. They are both really excellent at videoing their driving so we can go over any issues they might be having," said Sue, who also gives handouts and training exercises to do at home and ensures that they are keeping to their progression plan with each session.

In the next issue we hear from Sonny Hillier about how he matches the right pony to the right people, we learn more about Joey and his life with the McLeod's and hear from Sue Mart on the next goal she has set them.

