

# Learning to DRIVE Part 2

In the second part of our three part feature on learning to drive with Christine and Douglas McLeod, we find out about their initial fears of driving a new pony and their next plan for training together.



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Douglas learning about carriage maintenance

Bennington Carriages Academy, they were hooked. After much soul searching they found the perfect pony for them in Joey, who came highly recommended from Sonny Hillier and had the opportunity to try him out for size at the next 'Try Driving' day. "Buying him was the easiest decision we have ever made," said Christine.

Here, we follow Christine and Douglas into the world of carriage driving and how they are progressing together now they have Joey.

## Joey at home

"When looking for a pony, we tried to be realistic as we are complete novices when it comes to carriage driving and we wanted a pony we could all learn together with. We were very much led by Sue (Mart) and her expertise," said Christine, who found both Sue and Sonny Hillier to be open and honest

about Joey. "The most important thing for us is that we did not rush or be pushed into it and had time to consider what we were buying. We did not want to be over, or under-horsed and we had a few boxes to tick off so that we could find our perfect match," continued Christine.

They could have bought an older schoolmaster who would tick all their boxes but they felt that by the time they were ready to get out competing it would be unfair on the horse. "Joey's temperament is second to none and despite being only six years old he is very mature. We felt that we would all be able to progress together as he lacks any competition experience, like us!" said Christine.

Sonny Hillier broke Joey in and it is obvious he was started correctly in the way he handled being driven by novice drivers like Christine and

Douglas. "Finding Joey was like winning the lottery for us, he is just such a nice person to be around and such a kind personality. He just fitted into our lives like putting a glove on and it is like he has always been here," Christine added. Joey is kept with Christine's mum and dad and can often be found looking in the kitchen window.

His field companion is a one eyed ex trotter who also has a cataract on his remaining eye. In a testament to Joey's temperament, he took it upon himself to act as a guide horse and encourages his field companion to follow him around the field. "We had to change things round a bit with regards to keeping the trailer and carriage, but we are very fortunate to be able to keep him there."

Duties are split evenly between Christine and Douglas, as well as Christine's mum and dad helping out in the mornings. "As Joey is like a big dog I feel quite happy and at ease letting my mum and dad handle him. I do a lot of the grooming and tack cleaning, whereas Douglas enjoys the more hands on jobs like carriage and trailer maintenance. We split the poo picking and work as a team together," said Christine.

The pair never felt like they had any bonding issues to overcome as Joey is so giving: "He gives back twice what we give him and he is very forgiving if we get something wrong when driving, he just stands patiently and waits for us to sort it out. I am a big believe in fate and he is truly meant to be with us," Christine added.

## Investing in the future

Instead of jumping straight in at the deep end, Christine and Douglas have



Driving off for cones practise



Between Joey's ears

been investing time and money into lessons this year, in order for them to be fully prepared for competitions next year. Alongside lessons, they have also been out and about watching at Royal Windsor and Sandringham to name a few. "Everyone is so helpful no matter what level you go to. The more you do the deeper it gets, Sue did warn us!" laughed Christine.

The pair also attended the sponsored drive at Grimsthorpe Castle, a first outing for them with Joey, who thoroughly enjoyed his day out and coped incredibly well with all the other horse and ponies attending and went around the whole course. The plans for next year have started and Christine and Douglas will be aiming to compete at club shows and

events as part of Midland Carriage Driving. Currently they are learning dressage tests and enjoying having fun at cones courses. "I'd love to do marathon," admitted Christine, who is also planning a long weekend in Norfolk with Douglas and Joey later this year.

Sue's experience and advice has been invaluable for Christine and Douglas. "She is just very good at tuning in to get her point across so you understand and has so much patience. The set up at Bennington is impeccable and there is no such thing as a bad or wrong question," said Christine, who added: "This interest has grown from a hobby to a passion and we are really excited about getting out and about next year."

### From the trainer:

#### Sue Mart of Bennington Carriages

Joey was a blank canvas but the foundation and training was there," began Sue, who soon implemented a structured training plan for Christine and Douglas after they bought him. Their first sessions included going in straight lines and keeping a nice rhythm, as well as reiterating the importance of keeping driving safe. "Joey needed miles on the clock and now he can progress at the same time as Christine and Douglas. We started with baby steps but now they are learning dressage tests and practising cones," added Sue.

Going to competitions, watching and observing has been a real learning curve for Christine and Douglas, with Sue believing it to be an important step for their progression, as well as using videos to report back on their progress. "They are both very good at videoing what they have done at home and bringing it here to show me; it is a very useful tool," said Sue, who also runs training camps where they can work through a plan and look at achieving what they set out to do by the end of the camp.

As Christine and Douglas' confidence soars, Sue sets more

progressive goals for them all. "I am always at the other end of the phone for advice too if they need it, it is always good to have that encouragement if you feel you are struggling with something, no matter how big or small it may be."

*I do a lot of the grooming and tack cleaning, whereas Douglas enjoys the more hands on jobs like carriage and trailer maintenance.*



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## A tribute to... Rolls Silver Spirit (Roly) aged 24yrs

Sue Denney was heartbroken to report that she lost her beloved and popular Roly on Tuesday 5th April 2016 after 16 years together.

Sue purchased Roly in March 2000 as a spare to go with her pair of ponies and was trained on Ballaugh Beach on the Isle of Man before coming over to the UK every summer to compete. In September 2000, Roly paired up with Bella to compete in the Manx Masters Driving Trials which they duly won and after missing a year of competition in 2001 due to the foot and mouth outbreak, he came back better than ever in 2002, outpacing both of her other ponies.

"They just could not keep up with him so I decided to compete him single which he did for 10 years at national and international level and at the World Championships. He also did three years at British Scurry and Trials Driving," said Sue.

At his very first event as a single, Roly won his first national dressage test at Hopetoun and after a season learning the job he never looked back and was soon recognised for his outstanding speed and athletic ability around the obstacles, winning 48 marathons and remaining unbeaten in the British Scurry and Trials Driving. He also won 31 British national three day driving trials titles.

Sue said: "Roly was a great ambassador for the British Scurry and Trials driving discipline and won every event both indoor and outdoor on the Isle of Man. He was one in ten million who loved his job and,

like a true showman, came alive at competitions; the louder the crowd the better he went. Roly is the best pony I have ever driven and was totally devoted to me. He kept me going for the last two years when I was not well. RIP my angel pony."

#### Achievements through the years

- 2003:** National points champion
- 2005:** National points champion and National champion; Royal Windsor international driving Grand Prix winner; Team bronze at the World Championships
- 2006:** National points champion and Royal Windsor international driving Grand Prix winner
- 2007:** National points champion and 1st CAIB Compiègne, France
- 2008:** National champion and 1st CAIA Haras, France
- 2009:** National champion and competed at the World Championships
- 2011:** Competed at the World Championships
- 2013:** Competed in the British Scurry and Trials Driving arena challenge winning all three events including the championships
- 2014:** Won all 10 British Scurry and Trials driving events and nine championships; individual, team and overall Gold medal winner at the British Scurry and Trials Driving world championships held at Sandringham; British Scurry and Trials Driving points league champion
- 2015:** Won all three events and three championships for the British Scurry and Trials Driving; won all the Isuzu 4x4 challenges entered