

# Keeping the skill alive

Georgie Fenn takes a ride in British made driving carriages just 30 minutes from Stamford



If you've ever seen HM The Queen alongside the Duke of Edinburgh in a horse and carriage, chances are it will have been made only 30 minutes up the A1 from Stamford, at Bennington Carriages. In fact, you can still find 95 year old Prince Philip, speeding along in his custom made carriage with all the experience of someone who has been doing it since 1971. Bennington Carriages were awarded their Royal Warrant in 1979 and have been making carriages for the Royals and carriage drivers worldwide for over fifty years now.

You can visit the factory and see this all going on if you make the short trip to Long Bennington. The craftsmanship and sheer skill that goes in to every carriage is remarkable. As with any design, the carriages are constantly evolving to suit their purpose. The competition carriages are getting lighter with aluminium wheels and lighter spokes (a bit like in bicycles) but the exceptional British quality remains the same.

Bennington Carriages is still run under the watchful eye of Sue Mart, daughter of founder Michael Mart. Sue competes herself so she knows what they need to do to keep up with the sport, a sport that still doesn't have enough coverage here in the UK.

Competing in the sport of Horse Driving Trials is sort of similar to the Burghley Horse Trials. The events run over with one or two or three days depending on the level you're competing at. There is a dressage test performed in an arena sized 80x40 or 100x40 just like in British

Eventing, it depends how advanced the test is. The dressage phase consists of movements that a rider would normally perform from a saddle, things like leg yielding, extended trot and canter, so it's amazing that the ponies and carriages are nimble enough to do this in a relatively small arena without a rider telling them what to do. Sue explains how the carriages are evolving, "we have to keep changing the design of the competition carriages to keep up with the performance of the horses," she says. "At the end of the day, the performance of the carriage can give you that winning edge and the lighter the carriage is, then the better the horses can perform."

As well as the dressage phase, in the Horse Driving Trials competitors still have to do roads and tracks (something that has been abolished from British Eventing for being too dangerous) a cross country phase, a veterinary inspection and then the obstacle course which is the final phase. Sue explained that the competition is really popular in Europe, and definitely gaining more popularity here in the UK.

Bennington Carriages produce bespoke competition carriages for competitors worldwide, even the American drivers travel over here to have their carriages made. "Our American clients often stay at The George in Stamford," says Sue, "they make a bit of a trip out of it while getting their design finalised and then we ship the finished result directly to America for them, it's a big industry."

So how can you get involved? Well you can

visit the factory and take a look around at the mechanical side of putting a carriage together including the upholstery, painting and building work. Then you could give carriage driving a go! Sue offers lessons, gift vouchers and training for absolutely anyone, no prior horse experience is necessary. They're open all year round so if you've been looking for an exciting gift or a new hobby then this is definitely something you should look into.

A young chap called James Baker will be starting at Bennington Carriages as an apprentice after buying his mother a day driving for her birthday and becoming really interested in the company. Sue explained how Bennington Carriages is starting to take on apprentices. As part of the government scheme to teach young people new skills, Bennington will be taking on apprentices who will hopefully learn all aspects of building a carriage to then hopefully pass these skills onto the next generation. James will be learning at Bennington Carriages as well as spending one day a week at Lincoln College gaining his qualifications.

If you're more interested in watching the sport that Prince Philip is so famously fond of then you can see it all in action at Belvoir Castle Two Day Trial on the 10th June. It's free entry and there will be plenty for you to watch and get involved in.

• For more information visit [www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk](http://www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk) and [www.midlandscarriagedriving.co.uk](http://www.midlandscarriagedriving.co.uk)