

Summer Travels

This summer my husband, Mario, and I went to England and Wales, primarily for a family reunion but to also meet up with my girlfriend, Linda, who is originally from the UK and had always wanted to show us her favourite places in England. She has always been very supportive of my horsey endeavours including biking with me to my riding lessons on a farm outside of Ottawa when we were both living in Ottawa as teenagers. These bike trips were an hour long one way. She even held my hand as I lay unconscious on the ground after being thrown from a horse during a lesson. Could be why she herself never took up riding.

Knowing my interest she planned a road trip to the Black Mountains where little hairy Shetlands roam, a day at the Royal Welsh Fair, and readily agreed to drive us to my carriage driving lesson in the Nottingham area - a 3 hour drive from our accommodations in the Hereford area. No easy thing - during our trip, my husband acted as navigator and with the aid of a SatNav (GPS), Linda who has driven in England before was able to focus on driving the often narrow roads and the confusing roundabouts.

We were extraordinarily lucky with the weather during our trip and enjoyed many days of sunshine. Who knew you could get a sunburn in England and Wales.

We drove to the Black Mountains to climb Hay Bluff (straddles the English and Welsh border at the northern tip of the Black Mountains with an elevation of 2221 ft). Unfortunately we were only able to climb about two thirds of it before we could no longer ignore our screaming calf muscles (at least I couldn't). The horses and sheep who graze on the hill side provided a ready excuse to stop and catch our breath. I was surprised to see how small Shetlands were.





This fellow below was by himself and scratching his face on a rocky outcrop.



We visited the Royal Welsh Fair where Welsh agricultural products are celebrated and promoted. Like many other countries there is a big push to purchase local produce and products. The fair is on for four days and we were there the day the Welsh ponies and cobs were being shown and some of the driving classes were being held. Among the many other activities and events, 374 pony/horse classes were held over the 4 days.



Above is 8 yr old Cargarsar Silver Shadow who won the Welsh Section C class and was the 2013 Welsh Driving Champion.

Below is a 7 yr old Welsh Cob x Hackney cross named Maylands Magpie who won two Private Driving Classes as well as being named 2013 Private Driving Champion. I did not know what private driving meant and did a little quick googling.



Apparently, it is "the showing side of the sport, and focuses on traditional turnout with judging requirements varying according to class. The classes available include exercise vehicle, pleasure driving, open private driving, light-trade turnout and concours d'elegance. In the concours d'elegance, normal judging criteria do not apply as horses and carriages are not closely inspected. Here, places are awarded according to which turnout the judge deems to create the most pleasing picture from afar. The pleasure driving class, suitable for novice competitors, requires the horse or pony to be suitable for family driving with the emphasis of the judging placed on the driver and groom, along with the horses' way of going."

Unfortunately we were unable to attend the side saddle classes which would have been fun to watch.

The following day we drove to the Nottingham area where we did not have the time to see Robin Hood's Oak Tree but did have a lovely lunch at Reindeer Inn before arriving at Bennington Carriages for my driving lesson. Back home, a couple of months before leaving I was talking to Wendy Huckabone about our upcoming trip and she suggested that I check to see if there were any "try driving days" at carriage driving farms in England. I checked out some websites and finally contacted and booked a lesson with Sue Mart at Bennington Carriages on her 10 acre farm where she and her family operate a driving academy, carriage building facility and showroom. Sue Mart is a UKCC Level 3 Coach who along with her sister represented Britain in the 2009 FEI World Combined Pony Driving Championship in Groeven, Germany

We arrived early and were offered refreshments in their beautiful showroom. I had brought my driving gloves and she had a selection of helmets to select from to wear. We discussed what I was looking for from this lesson and I explained that I was relatively new to the sport and was looking to improve my rein handling. We went out to a large outbuilding housing many carriages and decided to hitch the Fun Bug for the lesson. Hearing the name of the vehicle, I told Sue that my neighbour down the road had a Fun Bug. She remembered Wendy right away who had purchased a modified Fun Bug from them.

We went to groom and harness my lesson pony, Dillon. The groom asked me to guess the pony's age and then revealed that he was 23 years old. I learnt later that Sue had won International Single Pony at the Royal Windsor in 2003 with him. He certainly was fit and energetic.



After warming up, the first exercise Sue asked me to do was to keep the carriage in the mowed area of a very large figure eight cut in the grass. I thought the concept was a very good training tool and easy to recreate. She advised me to keep better contact with the outside rein. She said that last week she had drivers doing this exercise with one hand!

Next, she had me drive Dillon in and out of a line of trees. The focus was to keep his pace smooth and regular and to flow.



She had me try this several times to get a feel for flowing between the trees. The picture below shows an unsuccessful attempt. Definitely no flow happening here.



We then moved on to the cones. Of course, I first insisted that the cones could not accommodate the width of the vehicle. We did them initially at a walk and then twice at a trot. I was pleased that we only knocked one ball off. My husband who was taking the pictures noted that I often hugged the cone on my right.



And then we trotted on over to complete a marathon hazard that was set up. She explained the ins and outs of driving a hazard and we finished by going through a simple water hazard. At the end of our 90 minute lesson, we drove around the perimeter of a large field on a hill and Dillon enjoyed a good canter up the hill with no difficulty.



We returned to the barn where he was unhitched, unharnessed, washed down and rewarded with a apple and let out with his buddies.

Sue is very friendly, easy to talk to and we thoroughly enjoyed our visit there. I would highly recommend a visit and/or lesson at Bennington Carriages.

(While I was finishing up my lesson, my husband found a different type of horsepower on the farm which he probably prefers.)

