



A Conversation with

# Bennington Carriages

**It was in October 2008 that I first visited Bennington Carriages and discovered how popular the world of carriage driving was becoming. But it was through a recent feature on John Castle that his connection with Bennington Carriages came to light. So, I have returned to learn more about this intriguing activity and about the royal connection that had involved John Castle, and so met up with Sue Mart.**

“My father founded Bennington Carriages and built the first one in 1962. He was apprenticed with a Nottingham toolmaker but wanted to live in the countryside, so armed with the princely sum of £5 from his father, he set up a little business in Long Bennington to earn a living by making virtually anything in metal. This progressed to building horse boxes. Father met my mother and eventually Wendy and I arrived, and it was

By Mike Beckett

locally considered the done thing to buy your kids a Shetland pony, so two arrived – Dusty and Fusty. They were a little naughty and sharp, so my father decided to build a little carriage that would help towards their control, and that’s really how Bennington Carriages started,” Sue told me. It wasn’t long before Sue and Wendy started taking part in the then new sport of Driving Trials. “It was during these trials that my father noticed that the traditional carriages being used were highly unstable and not really suitable for competitive driving, so he started designing the Bennington range of carriages,” said Sue. Designs became more innovative and the business became increasingly known for quality and excellent customer service. The patron of the sport – HRH The Duke of Edinburgh – awarded Bennington the Royal

Warrant in 1979, and the company proudly retains it today. Many features on today’s carriages were developed by Michael Mart, such as the back-step feature, allowing the groom to stand behind the driver to aid stability, the aluminium wheel that is lighter and stronger than wood and the delayed steering system. Bennington also pioneered carriage powder-coating which delivers great improvement in paint finish and durability. Business continued to prosper with manufacturing for the British monarchy, the Sultan of Brunei and even the Disney Corporation. Sue and Wendy took over the reins of the company and apart from being successful members of Team Bennington and representing Great Britain twice, they have a comprehensive showroom, and also introduced training for newcomers to the sport and pastime of carriage driving. So, I asked Sue about the connection between Bennington



### Carriages and the Duke of Edinburgh.

“The Duke was playing polo at the time, but he saw some carriage driving and became quite involved, in fact to such an extent, that he wrote the rule book for carriage driving. Both my father and the Duke had similar views and out of this came the carriage that we built for the Duke,” Sue explained. This, of course, was the one that John Castle built as a model for the Duke, making it a very local connection. I asked Sue how many different models they produce? “I would have to say that practically every order is pretty well an individual

construction to suit each customer, although we probably have around twelve styles that can be utilised as base models. If you are competing there would be a driver with a back-stepper or navigator behind. This latter position is there to aid stability, particularly when travelling over rough ground and undulating terrain. If you are driving a carriage for leisure purposes then you would probably sit side by side or with front and rear seating. We will have customers who will trade-in their existing carriage for a new one, so we can renovate or update the old one and it will then be purchased by someone that is just starting out

with carriage driving. A bespoke Bennington carriage could cost around £32,000 but often a customer will designate specific requirements such as the colour scheme or a particular feature. Rarely do we produce two the same.”

There are really two sides to carriage driving - the competitive events and the leisure side - both having their respective organisations that can be joined. The UK has around 30 driving clubs dotted around the country. While the carriage driving season is basically a spring/summer period, there is a winter activity with indoor driving that obviously takes place in suitable indoor arenas. These are usually one-day events taking place on a Sunday with dressage and obstacle events. They are becoming quite popular as they are safe and with a known climate each time, and really good for junior drivers with ponies. Carriage driving has many similarities to equestrian events with penalty points and disciplines in much the same vein and all based on time. It is also very much a team challenge and the more in harmony the team operates, the more effective they become. The people who participate in this sport often have had connections with equestrian life – some maybe finding it increasingly difficult as they grow older, but still having the love of being with horses. Starting from an early age often means that this love of horses stays with you, and even when bones begin to ache, carriage driving is still a way of keeping involved. As always, I am grateful for the time given by Sue for me to hear how Bennington Carriages has progressed since my last visit.



**If you would like to have more information and know more, do contact Sue Mart on 01400 281280 or via the website: [www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk](http://www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk) where you can find more details about carriages and carriage driving.**