

A family affair



Wendy Peckham pays a visit to Bennington Carriages and finds the business is a real family affair.



Michael Mart with an early Bennington carriage.

In an age when families seem to drift apart and offspring live miles from the parental nest, it is refreshing to witness the closeness of the Mart family – both geographically and in relationship. While father Michael is clearly the leader, and the man with the innovative ideas that set Bennington Carriages on its road to success, he has the good fortune to have his wife, Margaret, and two daughters, Sue and Wendy, not only backing him but also very much involved. The latest family addition, Wendy's son Charlie – who made his entrance in the world just before last year's BHDTA Championships – has already attended board meetings and met many of the company's customers.

Michael Mart is softly spoken and genial, but don't be fooled – his eyes and ears miss nothing and he has a sharp business brain. He started working life as an apprentice press tool maker in Nottingham although, being a 'country boy', he found working in a busy city unrewarding. The day after he finished his apprenticeship he went to work for W B Stubbs, making trucks, trolleys and stable equipment.

Setting up the business

That lasted six months before Michael took the plunge and rented a blacksmith's shop for 10 shillings a week (50 pence in today's money), bought a welding plant from Halfords on the 'never-never', an ex-army van for £15, borrowed £20 from his mother and set up his own business making new roofs for Dutch barns, decorative ironwork and weather vanes, many of which are still in place. His success meant that, before long, Michael was employing his father, Harry, to help with the work.

The family's entry into the horse world started when Sue was about two years-old. "It was the done thing to buy your daughter a pony so we went to look at a Shetland. It was fantastic so we brought it home – and then I think the drugs wore off," Michael said laconically. "It was an evil little b.....!" Undaunted, Michael had the pony broken in and not long after another pony arrived to make an almost matching pair.

Reticent about giving actual dates, Michael confessed that it was 'over 40 years ago' when he visited Stalham market while on holiday in Norfolk. There he espied a lovely bier which he bought, took home and converted into a pairs carriage; the first of many Bennington carriages.

Horse boxes and trailers

The family became members of the BDS and took part in Sunday afternoon rallies. Frank Lowe took them under his wing, becoming a much-loved mentor to Sue – teaching her to drive – and instilling a strong sense of carriage driving etiquette. During this time Michael took part in scurrying, long distance drives and driving trials; he also started to make horse box bodies and trailers although, sadly, the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease in 1967 put an end to that line of manufacture. However, that proved to be carriage driving's cloud with a silver lining as Michael concentrated on carriage building instead.

Thanks to his ability to diversify and through taking part in driving trials Michael met a man whose influence on the sport is unequalled, HRH The Duke of Edinburgh. "At the time," explained Michael,

One small corner of Bennington's impressive showroom.





“team drivers wanted heavy wheels, thinking they made the vehicle more stable. The Duke disagreed and suggested lighter wheels would be much better so I started to make them from aluminium.

“We supplied Prince Philip with several carriages and we’ve held a Royal Warrant since 1979. “We have also been very fortunate in winning orders from Disney World for a Cinderella carriage and also from Petra in Jordan.”

Innovation

Having been involved with driving trials right from its infancy, Michael’s innovative ideas have had a huge effect on the way competitors drive now. Competitors originally used two-wheel vehicles with driver and groom sitting side by side and Michael’s first carriages were based on the rally cart with wooden, wet painted, shafts and steel wheels. He developed the back-step buggy from this original. Carriage making is now the largest part of the Bennington business – they also make beautiful metal furniture for home and garden – but the machinery and skilled craftsmanship is the same for both. Even the upholstery used on presentation carriages is the same as that used for furniture seats.

As carriage designs have evolved so too has Michael’s quest to use the latest technology and materials. He prefers to use British suppliers but admitted that the steel tubes used at Bennington are imported from Switzerland – “they are of better quality, light but strong”. However, he is proud of his strong relationship with British manufacturers and, while not keen to give away too many secrets, feels that it is attention to detail that wins orders. The springs are parabolic and all metal work is shot preened to reduce stress. Thus the metal is prepped before painting first with a zinc primer and then powder coated.

In his effort to keep the weight of a competition carriage as light as possible Michael has developed the use of polyurethane tyres. These are a quarter the weight of traditional rubber tyres and eliminate the risk of rubber parting company with wheel. Much of the research into stresses on metal and seat design is undertaken by Loughborough University. “We’ve used them for about 10 years and become good friends; the Head of Engineering helps solve any problems we encounter.”

Fun Bug

Bennington carriages are a mix of competition and pleasure and cater from donkeys upwards. Despite the economic downturn business is good. “We are very busy,” explained Michael who puts much of the company’s success down to excellent management and loyal staff. A team of nine, plus the family, work together, from ‘Mac’ (Graham Mackinder) and David Durham, who have served a working lifetime with the business, to 16 year-old Alex Walker who has recently been taken on as an apprentice. Other members are Chris Crabb, Simon Clarke, Brigid Braid, Keith Thorold, John Boddy and ‘Boot’.

The big move

Never one to sit on his laurels, Michael initiated a major upheaval when moving the established business from Sparrow Lane in Long Bennington to Authorpe Farm. It was a move that took three years to complete and, looking round at the machinery in the factory, you can understand why. Michael said, “When the lottery first started I was

asked what I would do if I won a million pounds. I said I’d like to buy a little farm, build a workshop and have test facilities. Well, I never won the lottery but I made my dream come true.”

The farm, which sits on the outskirts of the village from whence the business gets its name, offers superb facilities including day stables, a full-size dressage arena, cones course and permanent obstacles. Indoors there is a welcoming reception area integrated into the light and airy showroom which adjoins the factory. Across the yard is a small indoor arena and storage area.

“Relocating the business over such a long period created quite a challenge, especially when it came to moving the large machines and meeting orders but we did it, thanks to a lot of hard work from everyone,” said Sue. She and Wendy compiled a photographic history of the farm’s refurbishment – from the original untidy barns to today’s



A carriage chassis takes shape under David Durham’s skilled hands.

working environment – which they made into an album as a present for Michael; the realisation of his dream.

The move has enabled Sue to develop a training academy at Bennington. She has also qualified as a UKCC Level 2 coach and is on course to complete Level 3. In partnership with Amanda Saville, the ‘Try Driving’ series of lessons continues unabated and plans are in place to run a series of courses through the winter.

High profile marketing of both the sport of carriage driving and their products are all part of an on-going strategy. In the past they have run events such as ‘Strictly Come Driving’ (held twice at Arena UK in conjunction with the BDS) and running a ‘Try Driving’ weekend at the local Belton Horse Trials, where applicants outnumbered places available. Selective sponsorship and regular advertorials in targeted equestrian titles form part of the current campaign.

So what next for Bennington? Quick looks round the room between Michael and his daughters strongly suggest they have ‘something’ up their sleeves. “Let’s just say that new models are being developed and we have major capital investment in new technology,” was all that they were prepared to say. While remaining ‘hands on’ Michael has started to take a step back, handing more of the business over to his very capable daughters. In Charlie, they have a third generation member of the family already with a firm foot in the; there is a bright future ahead for the family, the firm, its employees and carriage driving.