

# A 'blazing' day at Bennington

*Wendy Peckham reports on the Bennington Open Day that officially launched the new 'Blaze' competition carriage under a cloudless sky.*

If Sue Mart and her family had spent the week prior to their Open Day praying to the gods for fine weather they must have thought they had won the lottery. Given the somewhat unpredictable skies of the last few months, the day dawned with a sharp frost which soon lifted as the sun shone down – although a chill breeze reminded everyone that it was, after all, still March.

And if two of driving trials' most well known sisters ever look for a second career they wouldn't go far wrong if they chose marketing or event organisation. Everything, down to the finest detail, was in place yet the atmosphere was one of friendly informality. A stream of visitors flocked through the gate all day and enjoyed a wander round the new showroom. A number of trade stands, some representing different aspects of driving from long distance to local driving clubs while others offered opportunity to buy fashion accessories, commission a painting or discuss feed supplements, were housed in a neighbouring building.

A full programme took place in the indoor area while Amanda Saville – ably supported by husband John Nesbit – and Boyd Exell provided advice and inspiration in the two outdoor grass arenas.

## Star of the show

But undoubtedly the star of the show was the new 'Blaze' competition carriage built to Bennington's inimitable style yet with several new features. Officially launched by Michael Mart assisted by Boyd – who had quite a lot of input to the overall design, in particular the seat – the Bennington Blaze is the lightest single competition vehicle produced by the company that is aimed at the 14hh plus market. Competitors will enjoy the lightweight single marathon seat - made from composite material and shaped to allow the driver freedom of movement – while backsteppers will appreciate the angled backstep that puts their weight in the right place. Groom's handles are both removable and adjustable. It will be interesting to see who the first competitors are to drive the 'Blaze' – apart from Sue – this season.



*Boyd Exell and Michael Mart introduce the new Bennington Blaze.*

Outside, Boyd gave several lessons to more experienced drivers and provided a Masterclass in front of an enthusiastic crowd – with Sue driving Steppers Viceroy put to the new carriage – as his 'guinea pig' while novices lined up to 'Try Driving' with Amanda and John.

The 'Try Driving' initiative has proved so popular that events are running at Bennington once a month, providing welcome continuity to their growing legion of fans.

## Driving Academy

The Mart family has spent nearly two years since their move in 2008, renovating and preparing the premises at Moor Lane in preparation for this day and to open their Driving Academy and facilities. The latter boasts, as well as the aforementioned schooling arenas, a cones course, purpose built obstacles and a water splash as well as day boxes and ample hard standing for horseboxes. The main showroom is spacious, offering a one-stop shop experience with a full range of accessories, and every comfort for customers is provided, including toilets and showers that a five-star hotel would be proud of.

The icing on the cake has been Sue's success at becoming a qualified UKcc Level 2 coach, allowing her to spend more time giving lessons. The fact that her two-day assessment took place during the week before the Open Day added some pressure to finalising arrangements but her achievement has given an added polish to the Academy.

## With a little help...

Reflecting on the day Sue commented, "I'm really thrilled with the support we have had today. It's all come together with the help of family, friends and staff. The focus has been on launching the Bennington Blaze although Boyd and Amanda have been fundamental to today's success."

The day ended with an exciting mini-competition between some 'Try Driving' students. With Amanda and John taking turns as co-pilots, their students whizzed round the cones-cum-obstacle course – thanks to those generous hearted little ponies who faced a five-hour journey back home to Scotland that night. After an initial round, two students had tied for first place on an identical score so a new course was devised; they swapped ponies and set off again. Jane Kempton, who had travelled all the way from Winchester in Hampshire, ran out the victor a clear three seconds ahead of her rival Hilary Mellows from Radcliffe-on-Trent.



*Left: The new Bennington showroom. Right: A novice whip taking the reins for the first time, as part of the 'Try driving' initiative with John Nesbit and the Bennington Fun Bug.*