



Heron's Ghyll Newsletter

April 2026

Hi everyone and welcome to the April newsletter. I hope I'm safe in saying that Spring seems to have arrived and recently it's been more like summer! At our second driving day the temperature was in the 20s. Although it's still early in the year, we have had one or two events to report as well as the sad news that Stuart lost his fight against cancer – more about that in Jan's report.

Recent Events

Our first training day at Golden Cross was for volunteers to remind everyone of all the various aspects of carriage driving from harnessing up, loading and safety for drivers and horses.



Susanne setting up a small informative quiz. A big thank you to both Hilary and Susanne for taking everyone through their paces. Also thanks to those who brought the horses to practice on.



Loading with Bella enjoying a brief wheelchair ride!



Michael studying what goes where



Bella, Mia and Buttons



Di, our new carriage driving coach



Wonder what Buttons thinks of it all!

Introducing our two new carriage driving coaches -



Mia Hamilton

A brief outline of me!

Childhood on a Sussex farm – what an idyllic background for a pony-mad little girl you might think... well not quite! My parents were adamant it was a craze which I'd outgrow. My logical response was many attempts at "breaking in" various calves to the idea of being ridden – the result being much bruising and never managing a "voluntary dismount." Eventually I had riding lessons with Cherry Hatton Hall at Benenden Riding Establishment, then in 1971 studied for my BHSAI at Crabbet Park and whilst there I became involved with RDA - three years after its inauguration. I witnessed the magic as well as the therapy which contact with horses gives many disabled people.

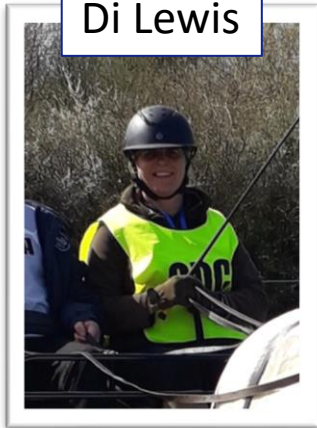
Later, with my own little riding school on the family farm, I had my first experience of carriage driving – but the pony I chose had other ideas and spectacularly demolished his little cart!

My next attempt was more successful as I enlisted the expert help of John Parker to introduce a kind and gentle home-bred pony to harness. Since then many years of driving seem to have gone by in a blink and my tiny miniature Shetland called Dazzle and her daughter Vanda, with the expertise of Sara at Bradbourne, gave me wonderful stand-out memories with their willingness and enthusiasm to throw themselves into all challenges sometimes driving with The Weald Club with occasional excursions to Oaks Club.

Then, last winter I was explaining to a friend how wonderful contact with horses can be for disabled as well as able-bodied people. I never imagined where those comments would lead – last year back-stepping and helping with driving our RDA pony Ollie and this year undertaking my Coach qualification – what a journey!

more over.....

Di Lewis



Di driving her pony Charlie



I'd like to introduce myself as one of the new coaches.

I'm Di Lewis and I have been carriage driving for over 30 years. I started back in my teenage years when I met my good friend Denise McDermott and she had bought 2 unbroken welsh section A stallions, Pip and Flash. Together we broke them in and initially drove them as a tandem as we didn't have a pairs carriage. That was interesting sitting in a 2 wheeler driving a marathon with a clip board in my hand!

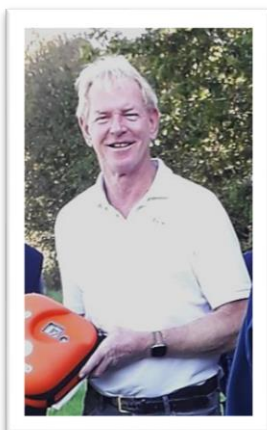
We progressed with the boys to competing all over the country as a pair. They were both such fun. During this time I bought a welsh section D foal from the Builth Wells sales - Charlie. I broke him to both ride and drive and he was my horse of a lifetime. Charlie competed at National level as a single and his career highlight was reserve champion at the indoor finals in 2012. He really was an amazing pony who had an extended trot to die for.

I sadly lost him in 2024 at the grand age of 32 and miss him so much. I don't currently have a horse I ride, but continue my passion for horses by looking after others and back stepping at indoor events.

I have just retired as a police officer after 32 years and saw this as an ideal time to continue with the passions I love, hence the want to become a driving coach.

I have a passion also for dogs and worked with police dogs for 10 years. I am now a trustee for the Thin Blue Paw Foundation which supports retired police dogs. I also run a small dog training and walking business, so I am keeping myself busy! At home I have a daughter Megs, partner Lee and our dogs Maggie and Milo who from time to time you will see me with - both love a fuss so come and say hi. I look forward to coaching and supporting you at your time at Herons Ghyll.

Stuart Higgins (RIP)



Stuart joined us only a few short years ago, and whilst with us, proved invaluable to the group by throwing his enthusiasm and effort into any practical task we set him. Recently he was awarded South East Volunteer of the Year at the 2026 regional meeting, for which he was very proud - a great achievement and a reflection of how the group valued him.

He became very unwell only a few weeks before his death, so his passing has left a huge hole in the group and we are trying to fill the gaps he left. Luckily several have stepped up and so we look ahead now whilst remembering him and all he contributed.

He did want to learn to drive and become a coach, but sadly, this was not to be. His wife, Sue, with whom I am in touch regularly, has very kindly donated many of his beloved books to our book barn which have reflected his many interests and hobbies. Who knew he was a keen dancer in his distant past (!) along with canal boating and steam trains to name but three.

Thanks goes to his wife, Sue, who encouraged him to join us on his retirement and I'm sure with every task we complete we'll be thinking, "I wish Stuart was here to do this!"

Jan



Fundraising

The Bluebell Walk 2026

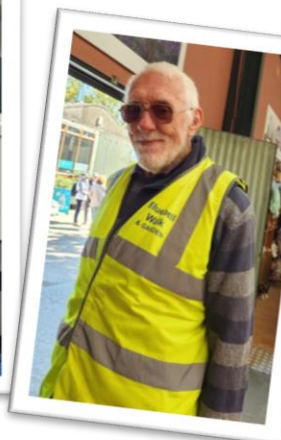
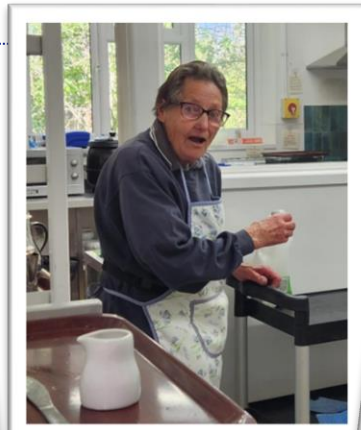


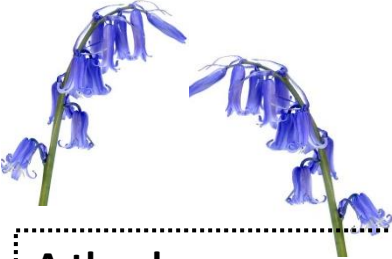
A thank you message from Jo

The Bluebell Walk at Arlington was another successful year. The bluebells were beautiful and fully out and the weather was sunny and warm. We had over 1,200 visitors in 2 days. We provided a fantastic array of food and cakes which people had generously provided. Everyone was busy doing their jobs with a smile and helping each other out. There were so many people involved in so many different roles which made everything run smoothly.

John kindly gave us a donation of £200 which bought us over a fantastic total of over £5,500. Since I have been involved in organising this event over the last 16 years we have raised over £35,000 for RDA!

I would like to personally thank each and every one of you for all your help and support. Jo.





Fundraising



The Bluebell Walk 2026

A thank you message from Jan

Bluebells, Blossoms and Bums on Seats!

What an amazing two days both in terms of effort as well as profit, we had at Bates Green Farm in April. Of course our major thanks must go to John McCutcheon who kindly and generously allows us our two days to man the catering. John was unable to join us for the first day as he was receiving a much deserved award at No.11 Downing Street (his name put forward by Stuart Higgins who sadly passed away before seeing him receive it).

Another major thank you must go to Jo Angear and her trusty team who organized, shopped, cooked and served up all the food for the two days and not forgetting both Mary Major and Karl Walding who both manned the washing up section with help from Liz Major, David Abdy and Gordon Mckenzie. David and the two Johns along with Sue Fragniere managed the distribution and instructions on the mobility scooters whilst meeting and greeting the visitors.

The tombola stand (which made £131.10) was managed and looked after by both Sarah Baverstock and Karen with help from Maureen O'Doherty and Christina Fowden. Thanks to all those who contributed prizes.

A special 'Well Done' must go to the champion table clearer known as Michael O'Doherty who managed his duties all day with ease and efficiency on Thursday and Gordon and David taking up the slack on Friday.

Christine Abdy and Fiona (Charmian's sister) manned the tills both days – I've observed many of the other charities and those girls are, by far, the best at this job!

The paying kiosk at the entrance to the woods had it's ups and downs with the technology, but John Lamberty, David Abdy, Susanne Willis, Hilary Hill and Terry Woods coped splendidly, if at times frustration prevailed with some whispered swearing going on!

As you know we raised a record amount and this is due to Jo's dedication over her 16 years at the kitchen helm. She has decided to step down from this role for 2027 and beyond. She will be a hard act to follow, but anyone interested in taking on this task please let me know.

Jan C