

Cricklands is in Wales – just across the Severn Bridge. To the credit of the Welsh (or perhaps desperation on the part of the English) road signage is displayed in both languages. The Welsh bits don't look like a language at all - more like random gurgling sounds and rude noises.

The scenery was charming with quaint little Welsh houses, white-washed and with a chimney at each end. The sheep were short and dumpy like the houses. The countryside had the soft velvety look that comes with constant, gentle rain. We arrived without getting lost or blown off the Severn Bridge although the weather forecast promised the really nasty stuff was yet to come. I sent Lindsey a text to let her know we had arrived and observed that it was raining steadily. Her response was as brief as it was unsympathetic. It simply said "It's always raining in Wales".

The Cricklands competition is new on the British Carriage driving calendar. Held at the David Broome Event Centre it was directed by James, son of the famous showjumper. The centre's main arena is blessed with an Olympic surface which is good to start with and then improves with rain.

The newly constructed marathon course was a tribute to the Cricklands committee with beautifully constructed, themed obstacles. A Mine Head complete with miner emerging from the pit in a skip. A Puissance wall display the record breaking heights cleared by famous showjumpers. Rugby goalposts – the surrounding panels decorated with Rugby balls, leeks, sheep and a little table bearing complimentary Welsh cakes which messed up the best approach to A. As a good Kiwi I felt duty bound to remind all and sundry about the [still] disputed try of long ago between the Welsh and the New Zealanders but didn't get much sympathy. The course was run on the circular European system which worked well for spectators and supporters though not so well for competitors - but more about that later. As you can see below, volunteers had a relaxed approach!



Michael worked in beautifully for the dressage and for once I allowed myself to think "We're going to nail this" as we waited for the men in bowler hats to bow and admit us. Uncharacteristically, Michael stepped back in both the halts which was enough to put me back in my box as we were relegated to 3rd place.

My heart went out to the Cricklands Committee as they had obviously worked so hard to make their first National event memorable and the weather seemed a little unjust in the circumstances. Nevertheless marathon day dawned cloudless and although the going was heavy it was driveable. The circuit included a longish drag uphill, multiplied by 7 and it took a very

fit horse to finish well. We finished well – indeed so well that we collected 19.3 penalties for it, having missed the 5km and 300m markers and arrived far too early. Poor Shaun was devastated though it was hardly his fault having only done one previous marathon and I was so discombobulated that I was no help at all. Another lesson learned. Another time sheet designed.

We had experienced our usual "moments" on the course including nearly losing Shaun in the water where we were second fastest, as well as my dropping both reins in the Mine Head obstacle which messed up the steering big time and left me scratching my head about how it happened!

Approaching the Puissance Wall downhill to (F) I mentally blessed Michael for his total lack of jumping ability (or interest), confident there was no risk of him launching himself at it in harness.

The cones course was challenging with lots of twists, a bridge and a tight time. We made the time and had a sudden gust of wind not blown my hat over my eyes at a crucial moment, may have been one of the rare double clear rounds but driving blindfolded is a skill I have yet to acquire. We finished 5th overall – one notch up from Hopetoun.

At the beginning of June Ashfields ran a Club CDE over one day with the whole competition completed in marathon carriage and attire. I had been so taken up with the National calendar that I hadn't realised there was to be a competition on my own door-step and had to grovel my way into a late start. Barry's 13 year old grand-daughter Jade joined us and back-stepped for the dressage and cones but wasn't old enough (or heavy enough for that matter) to do the marathon so it gave me another chance to practice with Shaun. However, his contribution was overshadowed by Jade, an expert plaiter who had Michael looking magnificent with perfectly spaced and numbered plaits and not a hair out of place. (With hindsight, I should have checked up on the colour of the jodhpurs beforehand.



I had also grovelled my way into being allowed to drive the FEI 3* HP4 dressage test as a practice for Sandringham. Maybe it was because we were on home ground and we were both a bit more relaxed about the whole thing but even so, a score of 43.7 penalties had me grinning from ear to ear and boring everybody to death about it. For the non-horsey, in a test of that level of difficulty our score was worth celebrating as the cut-off score to qualify for the World Championship is 65 and under.

And so to Sandringham. Preparations had gone well and Michael was fit and sound. Being asked to do a second run-up in the pre competition vet check came as a shock! The second trot-up had us relegated to the Holding Box as the horse was judged to be unlevel on his near hind leg. Wilf materialised out of the crowd and asked if had left his studs in. The answer was yes. "Then tek 'em out quick! Never trot up an 'orse in studs – it'll mek 'em look lame on this camber" he advised. Barry bolted back to camp on Wilf's electric bike to retrieve the stud spanner and returned heaving and puffing because the keys were still in Wilf's pocket and so he'd been unable to switch the bike on. He would have failed a vet check! In the meantime, I had kept Michael moving, mainly in trot while we waited and wasn't in any condition to pass a vet check myself! "Mek 'im trot flat out" advised Wilf and for good measure gave Michael some sort of unsolicited encouragement which made the horse barge out of the Holding Box and drag me past the Ground Jury at a great rate of knots. (FYI Failure to pass the vet at that stage would have deemed us a non-starter.) The five Jury members filled a voting slip and placed it in a hat. We passed. I nearly passed out with relief.

(Note to the uninitiated. Prior to trot-up TAKE THE STUDS OUT, no matter how small.)

Information for the not so horsey. Studs are metal plugs screwed into the shoes to reduce the possibility of slipping and can vary from slightly less than the thickness of two \$1 coins to a stack of about \$8 worth. I had only put in about \$2 but it was enough to give me a \$1,000 fright!!!

One other item of note. Prior to the start competitors were asked to give some background information for the benefit of the commentator. I submitted the usual blurb, including the fact that my partner, Barry, was on the back. Unfortunately, these details were not updated for the

marathon with the result Shaun assumed the mantle of “partner” in the eyes of many spectators. There must have been a few raised eyebrows as I am nudging 70 and I doubt that Shaun is 30!!



Results: Dressage 2nd. Marathon 9th. Cones 3rd.

Overall result 3rd. State of elation – off the scale!!!

One other little anecdote unrelated to anything horsey. As mentioned in an earlier newsletter, we have a pair of collapsible electric bikes which have been a Godsend for obstacle walking and we frequently use them to ride to Ashfields from Bury Farm. I was recently pedalling my way towards Ashfields at a less than sedate pace when the handlebars collapsed and catapulted me on to concrete paving, across the grass verge and eventually into a large thicket of stinging nettles. I have to say lying there was none too comfortable but as the next stop, (about three feet further on) was an active commercial bee hive I wasn't about to complain. Seems every cloud has a silver lining!!!

Until next time.

Gail, Barry and Michael