

Wessex Heavy Horse Society Bursary – Newsletter Article by Wendy Self – Part 1

Training Day 1.

I could not believe my luck when Tony Baker informed me that I had been chosen to do a Three-day course through the Wessex Heavy Horse Training Bursary. These three days would be tailored to meet the requirements I would want to achieve with Richard Branscombe of Broadwater Farm, Mere, Wiltshire, hopefully being able to learn new skills with Working Heavy Horses would enable me to pass on the skills I've learnt to the students that attend Larkrise Community Farm, where I am Farm Manager. There are a couple of students that work with me on the Carriage Driving, who I know would be gratefully interested in working on the agricultural side of our horses.

So off I went! The first day I was accompanied by a dear friend of mine who was also intrigued with what skills I was hoping to learn; so my friend also booked a day with Richard – in a way I was pleased as I really wasn't sure what to expect. We arrived at Richard's Farm on a very damp and drizzly morning. Richard greeted us at the gate and offered us a cuppa to start whilst planning the day. The shelter of the kitchen was inviting and chatting with Richard first thing, put me and I'm sure my friend Jackie at ease. The company also of Richard's two dogs was pleasing as well; being an owner of two Staffies myself, they also made me feel a little at home.

I was really looking forward to starting my training, so after planning the day's lesson, we went out to a huge barn (with the dogs following) that was holding not only the stables, but the harness stands with a large amount of different working harness and saddles etc, placed on them.

When Richard had asked us what we wanted to gain from that first day, I did request that I was to be treated as a complete novice. Although I had purchased some equipment from him in the past, and 'pretended' to know what I was doing whilst working with my Cob, it was only after reading dozens of books, the realization of having the chance to work with Richard with his practical experience of many years was what led me here in the first place; so down the line of me being a complete novice was where we went.

Richard led us out to the fields where the horses were grazing, the idyllic setting where Richard's Farm is located soon made us forget about the weather. The first field contained a wonderful 17hh Shire, William, whom Richard was training. William obviously trusts Richard who was talking softly to him whilst putting on his head collar. Jackie was then given William to lead in and I followed Richard to fetch Levi, a piebald. The size of these two was certainly not what we were used to (my Cob stands 15hh), so grooming Levi was a real challenge. Standing on 'tip toe' to reach, the harness came next; American D Harness apparently is what we used. Richard expertly explained all about the harness including the size of collar and how to measure one for the horse.

Richard was very patient with us when explaining about the parts of the harness and what they did. He would explain things in what I would call 'manageable bites', which we could both understand and hopefully remember. As the days went on I found this was 'confidence building beyond anything I had imagined!' After the Long Lines had been attached Richard explained about the commands he used for his horses and instructed how to set off into the yards. I could tell Levi was a little confused and reluctant to move, but he did, all be it slowly. We eventually moved out into the field where the Long Lining began, Richard taught us the commands he used for his horses which we also used for Levi.

As the day progressed, Richard taught us how to turn Levi using the Long Lines. We stopped for lunch prepared by Richard himself: soup; a choice of cheeses and warm crusty bread - wonderful! After lunch and with more information to take in, it was back out to the field to work with the Chain Harrow. Both Richard and Levi's patience were boundless and by the close of the day both myself and Jackie began to realize the horse dictates the pace of the work and made us appreciate how hard the farmers and their horses worked 'in the days gone by'. Driving home that evening, Jackie and myself were full of chatter and laughter, reflecting on the day we had and what we had learnt - can't wait for the second session.

Wendy Self