

# Equestrian royalty in our back yard

Any walker in the area around Maidwell or Hanging Houghton can't have failed to notice a huge upgrade in the quality of horses out and about on exercise – and for that we look to the remarkable event rider Piggy French (real name Georgina – her sister called her "Piggy" when she first saw her and it stuck!). Piggy is just celebrating her first year as a 'local', having moved to a superb new yard in Maidwell in 2013.

Piggy is one of the country's leading riders and a member of the UK's World Class Squad. She has been riding for what feels like forever. Her first big win came in 1996 with her Junior horse, Lloyds Gamble, but it was Rebecca Finch's Flintlock II who was her real breakthrough horse and who took Piggy to her first Badminton in 2003. He was also her team gold medal winning horse at the Young Rider European Championships in 2001 where they finished 4th individually. Piggy went on to become European Silver Medal Winner, Under 25 Champion and a member of the British World Equestrian Games Squad in 2011, to cite but a few accolades.

When we met Piggy, she had just finished another packed eventing season and was at the start of what is euphemistically called a 'quiet time'. That simply means that she is not required to leave the yard at 3am every weekend for some far-flung corner of Britain or Europe to compete her talented horses. Instead she spent her first 'free' weekend dashing over to Ireland to look for some new equine talent to fill her yard! This will be repeated several times in the hope of finding 'the one'.

The new yard is stunning: exquisite, airy stables; washrooms and heat lamp spas (for horses); an arena with surely one of the best views in the county; the tidiest tack room and rug store you will ever see, and some very, very happy horses. Some are still being kept ticking over into the winter, whilst the main campaigners have their downtime for four to six weeks, being mostly turned out and left to 'be horses' with quiet time and no demands made upon them. They come back into training in December to get ready for the first events of the new season in the early spring. Piggy doesn't hunt a lot over the winter but might go out occasionally to 'educate' younger horses.

The move to the yard followed what had been a very difficult time for Piggy, after the two horses she had had in line for the London Olympics both sustained injuries, leaving her absolutely devastated. It's clear that pain is still there, but as a true sportswoman she dusted herself down and got back in the saddle. She credits her beautiful yard with helping to lift the gloom. Above all she gets up in the morning for the 'fab' horses, their 'lovely' owners and the 'good people' who have supported her and helped to re-light the passion.

One extra bit of stardust has been sprinkled by the comedienne Jennifer Saunders, who



Piggy French riding Westwood Mariner at Burghley 2014.

Photo copyright Trevor Holt

has placed her four year old eventer with Piggy. A lovely roan horse, he has grown from a 16.1 to something over 17 hands, so he's preparing to make quite an entrance!

There was more local interest at this year's Burghley three-day event with Piggy and Westwood Mariner (owned by a local syndicate including Lampport's Sue Wood, and known as 'Rooney' in the yard as he's 'super talented but a bit 'wild''). Westwood Mariner finished 14th, and would possibly have been higher had not the big brass band blown their stuff in the arena and exited by the collecting ring just before he went in!

In her last event of this season, Piggy travelled to France for Le Lion D'Angers World Young Horse Championships. She finished in 3rd place on Cooley Dream Extreme in the six-year-old class and 5th in the seven-year-olds class on Carpe Diem IV – both super prospects for the future.

As she reflects on 2014, Piggy is thrilled at the way her team of up-and-coming horses, together with the team of people who work with her to produce and care for these charges, have become truly established. Part of the business of such a yard is to find, bring on and sell young horses – something she finds hugely rewarding when giving these lovely creatures the best possible start to put them in good stead for their future work. Parting with a talented youngster is tough, as Piggy can get very attached to her charges, but it's a business and she still gets huge pleasure from seeing them go on to fulfil their potential.

Piggy also trains rising human stars, with working pupils who come to learn alongside her.

Looking ahead to 2015, Piggy is particularly excited by one horse - Tinka's Time. He's had a lot of time out with an injury but is coming

back slowly and she hopes to get him back on song as she considers him to be one of the best.

So, if you see a particularly beautiful horse wandering down the lanes toward you in the area, take the time to stand and admire – you could be looking at equestrian royalty.

– Kate Calnan

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