

# Event rider to organiser

Joanne Sindall meets eventer, **Vicky Laing**, to talk about her new role as organiser of the Brigstock Horse Trials, breaking into the show-jumping world and her exciting new breeding project... when she finds the time!



MARK FAIRHURST

**V**icky and her parents, David and Mary moved into the impressive Fermyn Woods Hall Estate at Brigstock eight years ago. They not only gave the run-down estate some much-needed tender loving care, but also revived the popular Brigstock Horse Trials.

You may well ask why Vicky's parents decided to take on such a vast estate that was in need of so much restoration.

"We moved to Fermyn Woods Hall in Hertfordshire, where we lived in a Grade I-listed house, one of those places that you can't even sneeze on without asking permission! It was an endless battle to get anything done," explains Vicky. "Also, with the horses ever-

increasing in numbers we had problems because most of the land was arable and lended out to farmers, so there wasn't an awful lot of grazing space."

There is no danger of arable land on the Fermyn Estate though, as it sits at a modest 350 acres of parkland and comes with a couple of cottages too.

"I live on the estate in a cottage that is separated from the main house by a two-foot alleyway. That all-important two-foot alleyway!" laughs Vicky.

The first Horse Trials ran at Brigstock 40 years ago and was renowned as the last Advanced run before Badminton. The Horse Trials collapsed for a number of years due to the previous tenant becoming too old to keep on top of it. Vicky explains: "We started up the Horse Trials four years ago. It wasn't a priority when we first



moved here, as there were so many other things to do to the place. We always knew we were going to set the cross-country back up again but it was just about doing everything in the right order.”

With the help of organiser Julie Connell, the Laings have successfully relaunched the International horse trials for the past three years.

“Julie has been fantastic; she got us up and running and we couldn’t have done it without her; she is very good at what she does,” Vicky enthuses.

Horses have been Vicky’s passion ever since she can remember and now, aged 28, she is a successful eventer in her own right. But due to previous and recent twists of fate in her eventing career, has decided that this year she would like to take on the demanding role of organiser from Julie.

Vicky has now taken a step back from eventing and decided to join her parents in running the Brigstock Horse Trials. How did her first event this year go?

“This year went really well. We held it on the last weekend of May and were blessed with beautiful weather. We had over 800 starters so we were all very excited.”

The course builder and designer Phillip Herbert does a great job, in keeping with the old parkland. Vicky explains:

“You have got to be capable of jumping ditches when you come here. But it’s a big, bold old-fashioned galloping course. I put in my little suggestions here and there to the design of the cross-country course from

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a rider’s point of view; my dad is an architect so he likes to come up with some designs too.”

So how does Vicky see the event improving with her input?

“I have a list of things that I would like to make better for next year. For example, sorting out the stringing for pedestrians and horses, so you don’t get a clash of them all milling together as it can be dangerous. We also need to sort the stabling out.”

In terms of the actual event, Vicky is happy with the stage they are at in terms of levels.

“I don’t think we could go bigger in the cross-country course and we are not fussed about running an Advanced course at the moment; we like having the one-, two-star and the Intermediate events for now.”

With more than 40 trade stands and over 3,000 people coming through their gates throughout the weekend.

Vicky is conscious that there wasn’t enough going on to keep the spectators occupied.

“We would like to try to do the eventers grand prix next year or have a charity-based competition that involves doing something like a high bar or a ride and jive.”

There are eight people in total that Vicky works alongside in the run-up to the event.

“We all have our list of jobs to do. Next year we now know what we’re doing so we can plan it a bit better and give ourselves more time.”

Vicky learnt on the job this year, taking over the role in January.

“It didn’t give me much time to sort out the dressage judges and plead people to come and be fence judges. That was the hardest part for me. Everyone gets booked up by December ready for the year. So now that we have our lists of contacts I can sleep at night! If I lost that list I think I would cry!” laughs Vicky.

The first trial has certainly made Vicky appreciate all the effort that goes into making an event happen.

“But its just the help and support from everybody involved that we couldn’t do without. We couldn’t do it without the volunteers.” Explains Vicky.

As a family, the Laings are used to holding events; they opened their gardens at their previous address for the public as part of the national →

Below from far left: CIC\*\* Section B; Nick Chandler on C Salerian; Showjumping; Catapult; CIC\*\* Section B; Matthew Heath on Alligator Alley; Water jump CIC\*\* Section B; Sacha Preamble on Cleopatra



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garden scheme. Fermyn Woods Hall also hosts cookery days:

“We have a chef come in and we host a range of fantastic themed days, from Italian days to Mediterranean; we all have a really good time as Dad gets the wine out! It is Mum’s business and she has done a brilliant job with the running of it.”

Vicky has learnt some lessons from this year and is already planning and preparing for the next Brigstock.

“All our volunteers from this year will all go on our Christmas card list with the new dates for next year in their cards. So they can save the date and hopefully we will see them again next year.”

What advice would Vicky give to someone thinking of taking on the demanding role as organiser of horse trials?

“I would recommend lists. It’s about list after list; write everything down and remember the five P’s: ‘Perfect preparation prevents poor performance’ and it works in all terms whether it be organising or riding. I think if you are mad enough to do it then go for it and see what happens!”

Vicky being a former eventer is only

to used to coming to an event as a rider and not knowing to much about how much work goes on behind the scenes to organise Events.

“Riders ring up and go ‘is it okay to change this horse and that horse’ and ‘we really want a later time.’ Everyone thinks they are the only person ringing, but let me assure you that they are not! We have phonecall after phonecall and that gets quite stressful, as it is difficult to try and please everybody! Says Vicky “We do try though!” Vicky adds.

Vicky now appreciates all the preparation involved in event organisation.

“We as organisers are on a short fuse by the time the actual event comes around as we are so exhausted from all the preparation. One little thing can spark you off. Which didn’t happen to me of course! Laughs Vicky.

Vicky has also decided to take her career in another direction; she has decided to concentrate on her favourite phase of eventing – show jumping. Because of some recent accidents, Vicky has been advised that another fall cross-country could result in her shoulder shattering. Therefore,

until a plate in her shoulder is removed after a year or so, she has decided to focus her energy elsewhere.

Vicky is taking her new show-jumping interest very seriously and hopes to climb up the ladder.

“I have sold a few of my event horses and bought myself a couple of show-jumping horses.”

Vicky also has another string to add to her bow in the form of breeding!

“I won’t buy myself another event horse when I do eventually go back to Eventing as I do a lot of breeding now as well and I’m really into that, some of my fous got graded at the futurity gradings not so long ago. So anything that goes eventing from now on will be what I have bred!”

Vicky certainly likes to keep a very busy bee, as she can now add organiser, aspiring show jumping and breeder to her CV! “I will never go to an event as a rider without noticing all the details that I wouldn’t have known about if I hadn’t been involved as an organiser; I urge riders to at least go and volunteer at an event if they haven’t before as it really makes you appreciate what goes on behind the scenes’ 🐾