

Pony power

Five years ago in the spring of 1990 Pat Burgess stood in a field in a corner of the magnificent 14,500-acre Wilton estate and recognised the perfect site on which to build the very special riding centre she envisaged.

Pat came to England in 1964 from South Africa and was involved with the British eventing team throughout the 1980s. She had started the Riding for The Disabled Association's Wilton group in 1975 in the Earl of Pembroke's indoor riding school set in the grounds of Wilton House, but such was her success that by 1990 the available facilities were no longer adequate.

Luckily, Pat was able to negotiate a long term leasehold on her chosen site just outside Wilton park with the trustees of the Wilton estate, paying a peppercorn rent. A building appeal was launched in April 1990 and thanks to the enormous generosity of local people, had reached its target of £180,000 by the end of 1991.

Construction of the Pembroke centre began that autumn and by September 1991 the superb purpose-built riding complex was in use. It was officially opened by Mrs Majorie Langford, the national chairman of the RDA, on May 13 1992.

As the RDA is a nationally registered charity totally funded by voluntary contributions, without

the willing band of physiotherapists, instructors and helpers giving their services free the work of the group would not be possible.

Annual running costs exceed £15,000. This has to be raised by means of local support and by the helpers. The same 80 volunteers are also involved with the regular riding sessions, caring for the horses and ponies and attending the riders needs whilst another 40 come when necessary to maintain the complex.

Having heard so many stories about Pat's equestrian achievements, I initially found the prospect of meeting her to be quite awesome, but I needn't have worried as her easy-going, hospitable manner soon put me at my ease. Pat's charisma has moulded a very happy atmosphere at Wilton so that even when she is away coaching basic jumping for eventing, which often entails travelling the length and breadth of the country, her spirit still seems to live on at Wilton.

The riding sessions are held on Wednesday to Saturday from 10 am to 3 pm in school term-time. All of the 15 horses and ponies are either donated or on loan. The 250 children and adults who ride at Wilton may suffer from a wide variety of physical, emotional and mental disabilities. The 160 child riders attend special or first schools in neighbouring towns and ride on a fortnightly basis, whilst some of the

Simon Watkinson
finds a dedicated team
of volunteers at the
RDA's Pembroke
Centre.

adults can only ride when time and transport permits.

As well as being a means of improving balance and coordination by non-weight bearing exercises, riding provides an opportunity for the disabled to experience the otherwise forgotten feeling of momentum. Being essentially pleasurable, it is also a great confidence booster for all concerned and it enables those with learning difficulties

Right: A young rider is led along the woodland trail

to form a relationship with an animal; to meet and talk to others with disabilities; to learn to ride; and to acquire skills that will stimulate and motivate them to succeed in life. The key to the great success of the RDA lies in the caring spirit of all the volunteers, which has an inner healing effect on the riders.

Sessions normally last about 40 minutes and, weather permitting, entail a scenic walk on a trail which initially winds around the back of the school past a bank on which wild flowers intermingle with lavender, poppies and shrub: The horse then passes the outdoor arena and continues to a gate into a wood

where ash, beech, horse chestnut, oak and conifer exude the subtle fragrances reminiscent of a walk through the Black Forest.

Once out of the trees, the route meanders on the edge of a vast expanse of tilled land which in summer is ablaze with the bright yellow of rape seed. Three hundred yards further along this same trail is a view, through a gap in a large wood, of Salisbury Cathedral's spire rising majestically in the sky. Ten minutes later after a short trot, the horse momentarily speeds up, sensing that a rest cannot be far away. Once a rider has been helped down from the saddle in the riding school, there is a chance to chat with friends over a cup of coffee in the club room or out on the terrace.

Giving selflessly some of their time, those who help to run the 620 or so RDA groups in the UK and the 37 overseas affiliated groups exemplify the best in human nature. In helping the less fortunate to get back into the saddle and speed up the psychological and physical process of progressing along the long and laborious road to recovery, the fruits of Pat's dream have bestowed an invaluable gift on society as a whole. □

*The Wilton Group meets at:
The Pembroke Centre
Home Farm Lane, Wilton
Salisbury (Tel: 01722 744822)*



Photo - Emma Rasch