

IN FOCUS ON HICKSTEAD

By Peter Jeffery, *England*

THE ALL ENGLAND JUMPING COURSE – POPULARLY KNOWN AS JUST “HICKSTEAD” – IS FAMOUS THE WORLD OVER. THE ROYAL INTERNATIONAL HORSE SHOW HAS EARNED AN AFFECTIONATE RESPECT WITH EVERYONE DUE TO ITS IMPORTANCE ON THE EQUESTRIAN CALENDAR AND BECAUSE IT IS WELL OVER A CENTURY OLD.

SO BRING THE TWO TOGETHER AND YOU HAVE AN EVENT NOT TO BE MISSED.

THE SHOW, CURRENTLY SPONSORED BY EXCLUSIVE SWISS WATCH MANUFACTURER LONGINES, HAS JUST FINISHED ITS 2010 SIX-DAY PROGRAMME, ATTRACTING LARGE CROWDS TO THE PICTURESQUE SUSSEX SHOW GROUND. FOR THIS IS A TRUE, TRADITIONAL BRITISH HORSE SHOW AND ON A LARGE SCALE – SEVEN ARENAS IN USE EVERY DAY TO HOST MORE THAN 1,000 NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SHOW JUMPERS AND OVER 1,600 OF THE BEST AND MOST ELEGANT SHOW HORSES IN THE COUNTRY.







▲ Will Funnell, Tina Fletcher, Peter Charles & Michael Whitaker won the Nation's Cup for Britain

Hickstead and the Royal International are each unique in their own way. The show because it has spanned two centuries and seen horses adapt from being tools of industry, agriculture and transport to a creature of sport and leisure, and Hickstead because it began as one man's dream and turned into the nearest thing to a living legend...created to improve a sporting performance and growing into the home of British show jumping. And this year has been an extra-important one – Hickstead's 50th anniversary. Douglas Bunn, its creator opened it in 1960. He was himself an international rider and like others, frustrated because when he went abroad both he and his horses found it difficult to adapt to the big flowing courses in Europe. So he decided to found and build his own centre where riders and horses would meet the type of obstacles and courses they would ride over in other countries.

Fittingly, the British round of the Meydan FEI Nations Cup series at this year's show proved just how successful he was. The British team of Tina Fletcher,

Peter Charles, William Funnell and Michael Whitaker triumphed over eight other nations, and over a massive course. Only Whitaker had faults – none of the other three even rolled a pole through the two rounds.

It was a particularly sweet victory for the British team and their new Chef d'Equipe Rob Hoekstra. It was their first victory at Hickstead since 2006, but more important was their contentious relegation last season from the top league, something fought ferociously and eventually successfully by the British Equestrian Federation. Suffice to say, their current standing in the league banishes the threat of relegation this year!

On the last day of the show, veteran Tim Stockdale – who describes himself as "a bit long in the tooth" – clinched any doubt about the quality of British show jumping when he triumphed in the Longines King George V Gold Cup riding Fresh Direct Kalico Bay.

This is a class steeped in show jumping lore. Introduced in 1911, and

with a trophy commissioned directly by the then reigning monarch and show patron, King George V, it has been contested by most of the sport's great riders and bears the names of many of them – Foxhunter and Harry Llewellyn, The Rock and Pierre d'Inzeo, Philco and David Broome, Deister and Paul Schockemöhle, Virtual Village Welham and John Whitaker are just a few.

Winning this trophy – solid gold and worth very much in excess of £250,000 – earned Stockdale a 54,000 Euro purse but also the achievement of an ambition he has held since he was 12 as he beat, amongst others, European champion Kevin Staut.

What Douglas Bunn was, above being a supreme horseman, was an entrepreneur and a man who knew instinctively what would appeal to the masses. Possibly the last example of that was the creation of the Hickstead Eventing Grand Prix, now sponsored by insurer Amlin Plus.

For this invitation-only competition,



Britain's Tim Stockdale who describes himself as "a bit long in the tooth" won the Longines King George V Gold Cup

riders from the two disciplines of show jumping and eventing are pitched head-to-head over a course that not only requires them to negotiate the big obstacles of Hickstead's International Arena, but to actually leave the arena to negotiate a series of cross-country obstacles as well.

It is a searing test for both disciplines, the eventers because the fences come up so fast and the show jumpers because they are not used to going through water or jumping out of an arena. The result is a crowd-puller, especially so this year when eventer Gary Parsonage was going for a fourth win, something not done before.

His time was quick, but he picked up 10 penalties on last year's winner, Peter Street, and had to give way to show jumper Shane Breen and Dorada. Breen, married to Douglas Bunn's daughter, Chloe, was on a roll that day having already won the other feature class, the Bunn Leisure Trophy, on World Cruise, a horse only



▲ The All England Course at Hickstead

▼ Britain's Shane Breen, winner of the Bunn Leisure Trophy



recently returned to work after a two-year lay-off.

This is a show, too, which tends to produce new stars. And so it was for 26-year-old Anna Edwards, daughter of a West Country builder, who runs a small yard of only six horses. She made the journey to Hickstead with her own nine-year-old Unique IX, who was making his first appearance in the International Arena.

Edwards set her target high, and tried her hand at the Old Lodge Queen Elizabeth II Cup, and against all odds won at her first attempt, joining a list of previous winners that has included Pat Smythe, Liz Edgar and American Laura Kraut.

"This is the biggest class I have ever won," she said afterwards. "I have been aiming for this one but to come here and win it is quite unbelievable. It is such a hard competition to win, so to have achieved it is quite fantastic."

Often, however, the stars keep shining, and so it was in the Bunn Leisure Salver class, where former world number one Pius Schwizer and Carlina IV returned one of five clear rounds and then returned to scorch ahead of rivals Robert Whitaker, Mario Stevens, Denis Lynch and Nicolas Delmotte to claim first place. And in the Sky Sports Speed Classic, French challenger Julien Epailard romped home in first place, with only 28 hundredths of a second separating the top three.

The Longines Royal International Horse Show holds a unique place in the British Horse World, not just because of its age, but also because of the diversity of the schedule. Hickstead, unlike many shows, relies on its equine participants for entertainment – no displays or "acts" of any kind. The nearest is a scurry competition, where tiny ponies pull small carriages at breakneck speed around an obstacle course. But even that is classed as driving.

The show, rescued from possible oblivion in 1992 when it was rejected from the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham, because of rising costs, provides not only a career high for the



▲ Pius Schwizer, Switzerland

▼ Scurry competitions entertain the Hickstead crowds



▼ Robert Oliver riding Loughkeen Dancing Lord, The Patey Hats Supreme Hunter Champions





▲ *Martin Clunes, President of the British Horse Society*

show jumpers, it is the ultimate ambition of most serious showing riders, owners and producers. Showing classes – and the expanded schedule caters for most British breeds of horses and ponies – attract the very cream of the equine world.

The show's showing director, Roger Stack – himself a former, top-level rider and producer – sums it up, "the standard at this show is high. Very high. And because of that even a place is something special and a win is, for many, really out of this world! The high standard of the animals means we have the highest standard of judges, and their scrutiny of them is detailed and meticulous. To have a winner here means you have a horse or pony that is very special." And he laughs. "It is not easy for the judges either. At this show we had a ride judge who rode

more than 70 horses in one day and was then able to talk individually to her fellow judge about each one!"

Margaret Shaw, highly respected showing correspondent for the UK's leading equestrian publication, *Horse and Hound*, describes it as "the best of the best." She says: "the best horses always rise to the top and you know that the champions are true champions. The atmosphere is always wonderful. I can't think of another show where I am still at ringside at seven o'clock at night."


First round classes are held in outside rings, with championships decided in the world-famous 4.5 acre International Arena, where the space and turf bring out the best. So it was with leading rider Robert Oliver and Bernie White's heavyweight hunter

Loughkeen Dancing Lord. After standing top of the line in its class, the pair went into the International Arena where the going and the atmosphere produced a stunning performance – and amazing gallop – to earn the Supreme Hunter championship.

Hickstead organiser and show secretary Lizzie Bunn, daughter of Douglas, puts high emphasis on pitting professional against professional and amateur against amateur, all in the interests of fairness. It paid off well for Clare Heseltine where in the amateur riding horse championship her eight-year-old Funtime Frankie – known better to her as "Mr Perfect" – gave her and judge Gregory Goss outstanding rides to clinch the championship.

Hickstead has a continuous policy of improvement, and within days of the show closing, heavy machinery moved on to the hallowed turf of the International Arena – to dig it up! "Most of the riders have had nothing but praise for the going," said director Edward Bunn, "but in recent years we have had times when torrential rain has made the going deep. Two years ago we had to restrict the classes in the Arena and move a lot of them to our big all-weather arena to save it for the main international competitions. We have spent substantial sums of money in improvements, but to maintain our standing worldwide we have decided to take drastic action and install entirely new, high-tech drainage."

The work will include laying new drainage and a gravel raft, before relaying the topsoil, mixed with additional sand, and re-seeding it.

"We are spending about £500,000 on the project, but visitors next season should see nothing different," said Edward. "The new arena will even have the same side-to-side drop of 2.5metres and all the permanent obstacles, including the Derby Bank, will be the same as they have always been." 

All photos courtesy of
Craig Payne
 Website – www.craigpayne.co.uk
 Telephone - +44 1825 791437