



BICTON ARENA

Behind the scenes at the Horse Trials – by Helen West

I competed for many years and like the majority of riders never gave much thought to the behind the scenes organisation of the events I attended, or appreciated just how much blood, sweat and tears go into hosting an event. Living in the South West of England invariably meant that my alarm would go off at 3.00am on the morning of an event and my immediate thoughts surrounded staying awake to reach the nearest fuel station and fill the lorry up, buy coffee and stock up on pro-plus. My head would then be consumed with thoughts surrounding the horses I was riding, how long I needed to warm them up for, how long I had to walk the cross country tracks, how expensive it was to enter these events and how much I hoped that my loyal owners would be rewarded with a good performance that day.

When I pulled into the imposing gates and drove up the impressive drive of these magnificent locations that we are so lucky to enjoy in this Sport, I too was guilty of thinking to myself how much money events must make. This makes me shiver just thinking about it, as despite riding for more than one organiser and having a better organisational insight than most riders, I was still under the misguided apprehension that “events make lots of money”!

I started the role as Manager at Bicton in June 2013. The first Horse Trials I organised was in August 2013 and I had no idea. Talk about baptism by fire. I look back now, some seven years later and realise how lucky I was to have so much help and support and the genuine desire for me to succeed in my new role was humbling. Being a competitor myself undoubtedly shaped my objectives in my role as an organiser and it still does.

The “Eventing Community” is a unique family and something that we are especially lucky to experience in our Sport. What I would love to see is greater synergy between all the stakeholder groups within the Sport (riders, owners, organisers, officials, sponsors) as I strongly believe that for our Sport to remain relevant and sustainable in future years to come, this is an essential requirement. Every single person involved in the Sport shares a passion for the Sport which is tangible for all to see. Surely therefore we all share a common goal that we want the Sport to survive for many years to come, and if this is the case, we need to break down the barriers between us and work together for the good of the Sport.

I thought a good starting point would be for me to share my first-hand knowledge of what goes on behind the scenes to put an event on. I will do this in two instalments, as quite frankly there is so much to write about and I worry that you will lose the will to live I do it all at once! I am going to talk about the initial stages of the event preparation, way before I drive up the magnificent drive on the morning of the event having barely slept because I woke up in the middle of the night the night panicking that I told the paramedics the wrong start time and wondering if we will have enough packed lunches for the fence judges. I manage to sleep another hour and then wake again, this time with my course design hat on wondering if the groundline is in place at fence 12 on the Intermediate track and the Christmas trees are where I want them at fence 16 on the BE100 track. My alarm goes off at 5.00am (hey an additional luxurious 2 hours from those riding days) and the day has arrived.



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Instalment One:

Rewind 6 months. I get the team together for an initial “Event Prep Meeting”. The internal team comprises of myself, Beccy, Gemma, Matt and Miranda. We go through what we will be running on which days and Miranda magics up a provisional timetable. This is a vital tool for us as it enables us to see how many dressage judges we will need for example, and on which days we will need the higher listed judges. Most importantly it gives the team a feel for how the event will run i.e. Intermediate and Novice on the first day, Novice and BE100 on the second day, BE100 and BE90 on the third day and we subsequently go off and focus on our specialised areas.

Gemma organises all things dressage related at Bicton and I am extremely thankful that this encompasses the Horse Trials as well. Armed with a provisional timetable, Gemma will then book all the judges we need as well as writers and stewards for every section. This constitutes 8 judges each day, therefore 24 in total and the same for writers and stewards. That is 72 people without factoring in score collectors, who perform the vital role of collecting every sheet from the judges’ cars and making sure they safely get to the scorers.

Beccy focuses on the showjumping phase, as well as coordinating nearly all the volunteers we require. She will book judges for each day, as well as collecting ring stewards and arena party. Beccy will also recruit and allocate volunteers to various roles which include scorers, fence judges, road crossers and the all-important tea run, to mention just a few. Beccy liaises closely with Roger Trivett, who manages cross-country control, and Keith Watkins who manages the start team for us. Between cross-country control and start team we are talking about 24 people over the course of the event and then factor in the all-important cross-country collecting ring stewards which needs an experienced pair each day. Beccy also has the task of booking all accommodation required for officials and volunteers.

We are exceedingly lucky to have a vast bank of volunteers for the Horse Trials, who I remain eternally grateful to. A large part of our volunteer network is cross-country fence judges and I am indebted to Mary McNulty who co-ordinates them for me. If you take an average of numbered obstacles on the cross-country course to be 20 then our requirement for fence judges is 40 each day, which over the duration of the event means 120 people. It is mind blowing to think these people give up their day for free to come and sit in a hopefully sunny, but often cold and wet field to watch us jumping over bits of timber! Please oh please, next time you are walking your cross-country course spare a minute to say “hi” and better still “thank you” to these wonderful people.

Miranda is chief scorer, as well as entries secretary, and during the event will be joined in the sacred scoring hut by between 2 and 4 volunteer scorers (depending on the levels we are running and volume of entries). We run Miranda’s live scoring system throughout the event and she liaises closely with Ian Pearce, our communications guru, to ensure the Wi-Fi connection throughout the site is always working along with the TV screens displaying the scores in the marquee clubhouse. We are fortunate to have an excellent Wi-Fi provision, as well as 4G connection at Bicton so owners and riders can keep up to date with scores by using their phones and looking on eventingscores.co.uk.

I am incredibly fortunate to have such a capable team and you may wonder what is left for me to actually organise. Following our initial Event Prep Meeting I focus on the cross-country side of things in close liaison with Matt. I talked in my last blog about the process I go through to design the cross-country tracks so you will appreciate that I become somewhat consumed with all things cross-country related! The timing of the cross-country build depends on many factors, which I will talk through with Matt and come up with a plan of action. For us as a multi-event site, it very much



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depends on the time of year and the weather. In 2018 we ran Bicton (X) towards the end of October in beautiful sunshine. It had been relatively dry in the build up to this particular event and following the event we had very little ground repairs to do. Our next event was the April International in Spring 2019 and Matt and I could have set the tracks for this pretty much as soon as we wished to. Last year was a completely different story. The October event was the only Horse Trials in the BE calendar left standing in 2019. It was horrifically wet and consequently the damage to the Park was significant. The continued wet winter that followed made ground repairs difficult and subsequently it was not until March 2020 that I started putting fences out for what would have been Bicton (1) in April.

We are in a unique position at Bicton as I am in the enviable position of having complete jurisdiction of the Park. Matt and I work full-time for the Estate which basically means we can put fences out whenever we want to. If the weather is good in the middle of December and I decide it is a good opportunity to put a few fences out, then we can. Christmas may be a small inconvenience to said plan, and I fear our families may have something to say about it! However, we have the ability to be this flexible which makes the venue extremely reactive and dynamic as we are basically “on-site” all year round. This is consistently demonstrated in our ability to put events on at very short notice.

Once I have got my cross-country tracks planned and fence lists completed I can inform Matt of any new fences that might need building. If there is anything permanent that needs building in the Park then weather permitting, we will do that first. Matt will then begin building any new portables and start refurbishing and painting any of the old portables that need some love and attention before they appear in public again. Once the fences are ready, we can place them in the Park, the timing of which I have already said depends on the weather and what else we have going on. With the fences sited, Matt and team can measure and level everything, before spirafixing all fences into the ground. The final 2 weeks prior to the event is when the dressing, flagging and numbering takes place.

It is during the final stages of the build phase that I get carried away with “beautifying” the courses. The birch that we use to stuff the brush fences is often sourced from the commons that the Estate own. This winter my husband Andrew has been out on the common near where we live cutting hundreds of bundles of birch for the April Horse Trials. Thankfully this black birch will keep, and it is now safely in storage at Bicton until we get the green light for the next Horse Trials. Greenery is usually sourced from local tree surgeons working in the area and from the Estate Woodlands department. The fences really come to life once they are dressed. Initially the birch is left full height which is always alarming to anyone wandering around the Park prior to the courses being officially open to walk. I will go around with Matt in the final 48 hours with a tape measure and tell him exactly what height and the shape I want the birch cut.

Dragged back off the cross-country course and into the office I have plenty more to be getting on with. An essential part of running an event is the medical team. The minimum requirement to run under BE rules is 1 Doctor and 2 Paramedics, or 2 Doctors and 1 Paramedic. At Bicton I always run with more than that based on the site-layout, levels, and numbers I am running. Therefore, I book 3 Doctors for Intermediate cross-country day and 2 Doctors for the rest of the event, along with 2 or 3 Paramedics based on a “normal” event (higher provision for BE100 3DE in October). Finding Doctors is becoming increasingly more difficult, largely due to the cost for them to carry their own medical insurance. This cost makes it unviable for them to undertake medical officiating at Horse Trials. Gone are the days whereby your local GP could cover your event. The aftermath of COVID 19 could present further issues on this front.



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The minimum requirement for veterinary provision set by BE is one vet per day. Again, we run with more than this at Bicton with a minimum of two vets each day. Our site is pretty spread out and I do not feel comfortable that if a vet is required out on the cross-country, for example, it leaves a void for the rest of the site. Say a horse arrives on site and has had an accident in the lorry, we would require a vet to the lorry park as soon as possible. As an organiser, it is my responsibility to have adequately risk assessed this potential scenario and make sure appropriate cover is in place.

Following on from the medical and veterinary provision I go through my list of external contractors and make sure those are all booked. These range from public announcements and communications to lorry parking and security; from the horse ambulance to the photographer; from the farrier to the hospitality. I should probably have moved catering up the order somewhat, I know for sure that it would be top of Beccy's list and one that I omitted from her remit earlier. Feeding all the officials and volunteers on site, not to mention owners and riders, is pretty high up there on the list of priorities and one that requires considerable planning.

Beccy also coordinates the hospitality for sponsors so in the months prior to the event, she will be in regular contact with them to find out how many of their guests will be attending the event and on which days. She will need to ascertain details of any dietary requirements and collate a comprehensive list which will constantly change right up until the day of the event. We are very fortunate to have a permanent infrastructure at Bicton which makes running events a great deal easier. We have a permanent toilet and shower block for example, so require considerably less toilets to be hired in for events. Perhaps our biggest asset is the stabling we have, which means we do not have to hire any additional external stabling in for most events. We do hire an additional hospitality marquee for the Horse Trials, so this is something that will be booked and a deposit paid well in advance.

Closer to the event and once the provisional timetable has been tweaked and confirmed, Gemma orders the rosettes, all 240 of them! That is based on our April Horse Trials order and does not include the double clear rosettes we give at BE90 and BE100 level. Now you may think that ordering rosettes is a simple task? Think again! Gemma prides herself on us offering "award-winning" rosettes which are personalised in each section sponsor's colours and have their company name printed on the tails. Gemma must work in close liaison with Beccy here as Beccy has acquired all the section sponsors and very importantly knows who is sponsoring what. Beccy also does an outstanding job of getting prizes sponsored so competitors have a real treat when they go home as prize winners.

Approximately 10 days before the event we place the stationery order with Rosettes Direct. This comprises of all the dressage sheets we will need, the fence judge books, cross-country timecards, medical forms and very importantly the riders' numbers. It is always a headache getting this accurate, but vital that we end up with the right order arriving. Sponsors' names are on the top of the numbers, so like the rosette order, it is essential we get this right. Arguably more important still is ordering the correct quantity of dressage tests and numbers for each section. We are lucky at Bicton as we are based in the Rolle Estate Office and have access to some wonderful technology, one important piece being the printer/photocopier. We have on numerous occasions had to print our own numbers or photocopy additional tests to bail us out. Perhaps the most boring job of the entire process, and one we always seem to get work experience students to do for the July Horse Trials, is checking the stationery order when it arrives. Yes, we actually check to make sure there are two of every single number (one for the front and one for the back of the number bib) and the right amount of dressage score sheets.



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There are many things that are made significantly easier by us being a permanent competition venue, which I take for granted in event preparation. Take the equipment we own as an example. I do not need to worry about hiring showjumps in or dressage boards and markers, and we own all the cross-country portable fences. When we host the International Horse Trials we have raised, continuous dressage boards (which are used for our BD Championships) as well as artificial flowers and purpose-built dressage judges' boxes. We have a permanent café and bar and a permanent show office and scorers hut. Perhaps most importantly, we have the luxury of all-weather surfaces which means I do not need to stress about the going for the showjumping phase and I have the option to put some of the dressage on a surface should the weather dictate. We are also extremely lucky to have the soil profile we do at Bicton which is incredibly free draining and means the cross-country can cope with inclement weather. That said the weather is probably the single most stressful factor in the whole process, quite simply because it is the one thing you cannot control. I tell a lie; we are currently witnessing a pandemic which no one can control, and I am sure you will agree that its consequences are far more dire than the worst British weather we could endure.

I haven't talked about the BE officials and their individual roles, or the timing of their visits. This is something I will do in my next instalment, as I know for sure that when I was competing fulltime I certainly did not realise or fully understand what these entailed. I will also go into the physical site layout and talk about what we each do in the immediate days preceding the event and on-event. In the meantime please stay safe and look after each other in these challenging times.

