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DRESSAGE

Breeding
future stars

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Below: Dinah with Nicola Buchanan and St Giles Flamboyant, KBIS Young Horse Seven-Year-Old Champion in 2023.

Stately setting for equine aristocrats

Breeding dressage horses with international team potential is not for the faint-hearted. Dr Dinah Ashley-Cooper, the Countess of Shaftesbury, and the powerhouse behind St Giles Stud, shows sparkling enthusiasm for horses and breeding, reports **Helen Triggs**.

Photos: Kevin Sparrow Photography



In just eight years, St Giles' horses have begun to make their mark in competitions and a number of exciting youngsters are waiting in the wings.

The stud has a number of advantages to help Dinah achieve her goals. She is a vet so is able to take on many of the breeding tasks herself such as AI and embryo transfer. As part of the St Giles Estate in Wimborne St Giles, Dorset, the stud has access to 600 acres of good draining chalkland to rear the youngstock and parkland to exercise in. Hay, haylage, oats and straw are all homegrown so provenance is assured. A purpose-built stable complex includes indoor and outdoor schools and also houses the equine dental clinic run by vet Chris Pearce.

However, most breeders haven't also had to take on the task of renovating a previously dilapidated stately home (with her husband Nick, 12th Earl of Shaftesbury) and running a busy events business. St Giles House, built over 400 years ago, had fallen into decline and been uninhabited for 60 years by the end of the 20th century. Starting in 2011, the couple undertook a massive renovation project which has won many awards. The old 17th century riding house and stables have been turned into a sumptuous event and accommodation complex.

Horses have always played a major role in Dinah's life. "I love horses," she says. "They are amazing creatures, they are levellers, teachers of humility, equivalent beings, as well as being





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incredible friends.” As a young girl she was involved with vaulting, a big sport in her native Germany, taking up riding when the family moved to Italy. At 10 she took up dressage while at boarding school where one of her trainers was Klaus Balkenhol. She moved to Hungary and rode with Robert Acs and Aniko Lozinski.

After qualifying as a vet in Germany, Dinah moved to Switzerland to undertake her doctorate and PhD at the Equine Department of the University of Zurich. Monty Roberts was a close friend of her boss and the whole team helped Monty perform clinics in Switzerland. In 2007, she came to the UK where she worked for supervet Noel Fitzpatrick before meeting her husband. They married in 2010 and now have a son and two daughters.

the ground; they need to respect the handler for reasons of safety and good manners.

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Dinah’s heart lies with German breeding. While she was breeding sporadically for over 20 years, it is since her move to St Giles that she has focused on building a strong foundation mare herd. Eight years ago, she was lucky enough to obtain four brood mares from renowned German breeder, Elisabeth Münstermann who has been very influential in German Oldenburg breeding. Dinah’s foundation mare herd includes

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Left: Breeding from top quality mares means Dinah can choose a variety of stallions.

Below: The team with St Giles Dark Magic, (l-r) Robyn Walker, Nicola Buchanan, Dinah, Sophie Price and Liv Spillard.

Donnerhall, Rubinstein, Sandro Hit and Pik Bube bloodlines.

“That was when the stud started properly. We had just moved into the house and I was heavily pregnant with my first daughter. One of the brood mares’ due dates was the same as mine! Luckily I was two weeks late and the foal came two weeks early,” recalls Dinah.

“I’ve stuck with the Oldenburgs and Hanoverians. I’ve been very fortunate to have strong connections with the Oldenburg and Hanoverian societies and they’ve been instrumental in helping me develop my stud. It’s invaluable as they come over and assess our youngstock and hold breeders’ hands as they progress. I’ve made some very close friends in the breeding world in Germany and they are very generous in sharing their knowledge and expertise. And they are brutally honest!

“What’s important is that you know the negative aspects of your mare and understand which to breed from and which not. You have to be incredibly good at self-criticism.” She currently has a herd of six mares and aims to breed three to four foals a year. The youngsters are usually only sold once they have been backed and talented mares are retained. “I’m not good at selling foals; also I would rather breed a Grand Prix horse!” laughs Dinah.

Youngsters will have a full set of x-rays at two-years-old and before selling. Colts are mostly gelded and professional riders looking for a reasonably priced horse could find a talented youngster this way. “I always look to place them with a really good ▶

TEMPERAMENT FIRST

Dinah has a very clear vision of the kind of horses she wants to breed. “Temperament is one of the most important factors,” she says. “After all I have to deal with them myself. The youngsters are all taught boundaries from





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Above: A gallery of talent: (clockwise from top left) Robyn Walker with St Giles Voila; Nicola Buchanan with St Giles Dark Magic; Robyn with St Giles Flamborghini and Nicola with St Giles Discoqueen.

“rider.” Four-year-old gelding St Giles Esquire (Escolar x Millennium) out of a mare bred by Heike Pleines is off to a good start with GP rider Kerry Mackin with 74%+ scores in his first two outings. St Giles Milestone (Millennium x Hohenstein x Weltmeyer) was the reserve champion of his licensing with the BHHS and is now enjoying a competitive riding career in Florida, US, with Holly Taylor. Hannah Biggs is currently successfully campaigning five-year-old St Giles Fortune Cookie (Foundation x Sandro Hit).

“Most of my mares have had exceptional performance tests,” explains Dinah. “Because the quality of the mares is so good, I’m able to play around a bit when choosing stallions. I go looking at stallions each year and go to some smaller studs as well that might not be so well known. It’s really important for me to see a stallion in the flesh so you can see the conformation in a way you can’t in a video. Longevity is one of my main goals as I’m aiming to produce Grand Prix horses.” Franklin has been a popular choice, and

current KBIS Seven-Year-Old Champion St Giles Flamboyant is one of his offspring, out of Fleur De La Coeur M who is proving to be a most exceptional brood mare. Flamboyant gained her ‘Elite’ status as a foal with the Oldenburg society and her State Premium mare status whilst competing in Germany. She has three full siblings coming up the ranks and half-siblings by Dreamboy, Jameson and Escolar. Flamboyant herself has three ET youngsters. >

MEETING IN TESCO

"Some of my horses were produced in Germany but Brexit has made it more difficult. Fortunately, 10 years ago I met [international GP rider] Nicola Buchanan in Tesco in a local town. She looked like a dressage rider so I introduced myself to her and initially she came to train me. She now trains and competes my advanced horses and has become a close friend and business partner.

"Nicola is very structured in her approach and trains along classical principles, always applying the German training scales, having trained with Jonny Hilberath. She ensures that the horses have first rhythm, suppleness, contact and straightness, before asking for collection. Her consistent routine helps keep horses sound as they develop into advanced horses. She is a fantastic rider who now trains with Carl Hester and she's a horse whisperer in her own right!"

Nicola is supported by rider Robyn Walker who trained with the Eilbergs and produces the young horses. She is currently starting Flamborghini's competition career.



Flamborghini is the full sister to Flamboyant and a spitting image in movement and looks. Local GP rider Anna Jesty also helps with training, backing is done by very gutsy Australian small tour rider Holly Coulthard.

Liv Spillard is the stud groom, and the rest of the team is made up of twins, Sophie and Molly Price, and maintenance man, Steve Thorne. The horses in training have a diverse routine with jumping and hacking as part of their training. Backing starts at three years old, with the most talented mares retained for training to Grand Prix. "We're a working farm so they are exposed to farm machinery and they see a lot when we host weddings and music festivals," comments Dinah.

The stud has seven stables, used when the horses are being backed or in competition training. The rest of the time they live out with the youngsters in herds and the advanced horses go out individually with ad lib hay and haylage. St Giles also takes in foals and youngstock as boarders. "Our hay, haylage and soil is analysed every year," explains Dinah "so we know 100% it's up to equine standards. I'm scientific in terms of my approach to nutrition and worming and we



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Above: It's a team effort to produce the horses in training.

Left: Dinah with Dr Chris Pearce and Dr Nicole du Toit who run the Equine Dental Clinic on the St Giles Estate.

Below left: St Giles Flamboyant enjoys a workout on the lawns.

work with really good farriers and vets. I do a lot of the stud work – artificial insemination and embryo transfer and foaling.

"For performance or orthopaedic issues, if necessary, I'll get another vet in."

Dinah has a market in Germany for her horses and regrets that British riders and owners often underestimate the potential of homegrown horses. "They are starting to look more in this country but I would love to be approached more by riders," she says, although she admits to being particular who she sells to. "As a breeder I have respect for my horses and want the best future for them. I do turn some purchasers away if I feel they haven't the right experience or support network to bring out my horse's potential."

She is an intriguing mix of a breeder with a scientific approach to bloodlines and management and yet with a strong emotional involvement with the youngstock she produces. The horses she breeds are ensured the best care and education and are treated like the equine aristocracy they surely are. There's no doubt that the competition world will be seeing more of the St Giles prefix at top level – and who knows, maybe accompanied by a team Union Jack one day. 

