

The first Irish Carriage Dog Trials 4th/5th September 2010

Mr & Mrs Eamonn Kelly's lovely working farm at Saunders Grove was the venue for the first ever Irish Carriage Dog Trials superbly organised by Maura Reade. A familiar spot to the Irish Carriage Driving contingent, but a welcome treat for the Irish non-drivers and the visiting English. After several weeks of sunshine, the Trials weekend was heralded by some serious rain, but it managed to dwindle to an Irish mist for the Trials Training on Saturday and the competition itself on Sunday.

Some adventures included a trek across the stubble after dark by the campers who'd stayed out too long celebrating their sport in neighbouring Baltinglass so were locked out. And one competitor who thought she was clever to pitch her tent inside a stable to avoid the rain – but then couldn't get out for 45 minutes the next morning as one of the cows decided to give birth against the door!

Anyway, the primary reason for the weekend was to encourage and test the working instincts and abilities of the assembled Dalmatians. This breed was used in Edwardian times to decorate carriages and to guard passengers and their belongings on the road and to protect the horses in the stables at night. As highly efficient hunters, they also kept down the vermin. A versatile breed indeed.

On Saturday a number of Dalmatians were put through their paces in training sessions run by Alison Burgess from England. First there was work on the ground to help focus the dogs in the face of distractions. There was also work emulating search and rescue dog training to illustrate the point that once you've gone from sight, a dog no longer knows where you are and can use only its nose – unless you tell it where you are. Relevant for a handler climbing up onto a carriage in whip or groom position.

In the afternoon there was a circuit of practical sessions closer to the actual trials work. These included a mock vet check carried out by Marie Bailey. As the trials are primarily a test of the dogs' endurance capabilities, all dogs are vetted prior to and after their work to ensure they are fit for the task. Handlers could also work their dog alongside a horse and with a carriage, kindly driven by Dawn O'Donnell.

I was honoured to drive Norma Cook's little donkey Sarah-Jane who went exceptionally well to enable me and my dogs to do a short display of carriage dog work with a traditional vehicle, including some extra exercises that I have found useful out on the road, including retrieving a dropped whip and glove and riding on the carriage in case of a sore paw.

On the trials day itself, six dogs completed bronze or silver tests (6 and 12 miles respectively) with four of these being new competitors qualifying their dogs for the first time. Robert Tapson not only qualified his dog Codot as a Bronze Carriage Dog, he also picked up the Best Conditioned Dog trophy awarded by the veterinary judge Dermot Sparrow. Maura drove her own skewbald Widget to run her dogs Domino and Levi at silver and bronze level respectively, having already qualified them in England in July. Folke Rohrssen and Ali Rummey qualified Uli and Demi as Bronze Carriage Dogs and Celia Gilbert qualified Poppy as a Silver Carriage Dog. Andrea O'Donnell and Paul Stacey also picked up Instinct Certificates for Ruby and Nell for their promising work on the lead.

The trials are also designed for work alongside ridden horses and two road dogs also qualified at silver level. These were Tim Stafford's Todd and my own Fenris for which Sarah Mullins loaned her stunning stallion Yanto. He was a delight to ride. I even got used to him calling excitedly to all the mares around the estate and worked out that so responsive was he that I just needed to ask him politely to stop and he did! Tim rode the lovely Popeye around the same course.

For anyone with a Dalmatian thinking of taking up the sport, do contact Maura. It is such fun for humans and dogs alike. If you're a driver and you're thinking of getting a Dalmatian, do first think

about the traits of the breed before committing yourself to make sure they'll suit you. Dalmatians thrive on human contact and need plenty of interaction and exercise. They are an intelligent, strong minded breed and do not respond well to harsh handling but are, contrary to folklore, relatively easy to train with positive motivational techniques. Finally, with their thin coats they don't like cold or wet and really are a house dog (for them preferably the settee!). Think about the size of your turnout and try to match the dog's paces if possible - Dalmatians come in a range of sizes! And take your training slowly, especially with youngsters. The dog's enjoyment of its work is paramount for the British Carriage Dog Society.

The Society may be found at www.carriagedog.org and you can download a membership form from this site if you'd like to join.

My partner Crosbie and I spent some time in Ireland prior to the trials weekend and were warmly welcomed everywhere we went. We thoroughly enjoyed our time with you and I hope we will be travelling back for the next trials – whenever they may be.

Anne Dickens Kent UK



Ali Rummey from the UK took her Silver Road Dog Demi and qualified her as a Bronze Carriage Dog. Ros English drives Maura Reade's rescue pony Cloud.



Carriage Dog Trials also have dogs competing with ridden horses. At the Irish Trials two UK competitors borrowed horses to do the 20km course to qualify their dogs as Silver Road Dogs. Anne Dickens rode Sarah Mullins' stunning stallion Yanto with her dog Fenris....



Frances Ryan participated in the trials training, but her dog was not ready for work off lead, so she enjoyed a trip around the 10k course with Dawn O'Donnell driving Lady with Pollyanna on the lead for safety.