

Walking in the shadow of giants



In the second part of her Teagasc Equine Tour report, **Susan Finnerty** visited several leading Holsteiner breeders

WHAT are the origins of the Holsteiner horse? Interestingly, it was monks from the Uetersen monastery in the Schleswig-Holstein region who first began breeding and recording details of the native horses some 750 years ago. The heavy clay soil of northern Germany required a special type of horse and in common with the history of modern horse breeding, the role of horses changed from agriculture and military purposes to sport horse markets.

An eclectic range of breeds, from baroque to Yorkshire Coach Horse, forged the original Holsteiner horse and from the 19th century, the importation of English thoroughbreds added refinement. From the mid-20th century, the arrival of such foundation thoroughbred sires as Cottage Son, Ladykiller, Sacramento Song and the French import Cor de la Bryère, at both private farms and the State Stud at Elmshorn, brought Holsteiner breeding to a whole new level.

One of the studbook's hallmarks is its meticulously-recorded pedigrees, which began with the quills of Uetersen monks. Georg Ahsbahs, an economist by trade and studbook visionary, urged local farmers to write down their mare's family back in the 19th century and another strength of the Holsteiner system is the carefully-preserved mare,



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or stamm, lines.

Stallion and mare inspections are an integral part of the Holsteiner Verband and one guest inspector was the late Archie Smith-Maxwell. Most noted as the breeder of Jumbo and his phenomenal daughter Headley Britannia, Smith-Maxwell was a noted livestock breeder too. In an interview, which featured in *The Irish Field* back in 2011, he had this to say about his experience at the inspections:

"I do like the Holsteiner. The best are like a quality middleweight, with good feet and even back in the 1950s, breeders knew exactly what they were

aiming for. I was very impressed."

State studs, historically used as breeding stations for cavalry remounts, are a feature on the continent and while that military role has long been consigned to the past, a new lease of life has developed for these often iconic studs in the sport horse breeding and tourism markets.

INTERTWINED

Again, the Holsteiner breed is often intertwined with others as a dozen of its stallions were bought as foundations sires when the Hanoverian's Celle State Stud was set up in 1735.

In 1960, the German government made the decision to dissolve the Holsteiner state stud at Elmshorn, however the site and its then-resident 33 stallions (these at a pre-arranged price) were bought by its own studbook. Now run as a commercial enterprise, its star resident is the Casall, Rolf-Göran Bengtsson's now-retired campaigner.

Its famous 'C' and 'L' lines have dominated Olympic and championship results in recent decades, while the Holsteiner studbook and performers feature prominently in the World Breeding Federation for Sport Horses (WBFSH) rankings too.

Learning from the masters

PROFESSOR DR. HARTWIG SCHMIDT



TWO marelines form the nucleus of this breeder's select band of broodmares. "Some 90% belong to one family and that is 104A. That is the family that can be traced back to one mare in 1824," he says proudly.

"This family is from Retina who won the 1959 Hamburg Derby and was second in 1960, this is one of the great Holstein mares. She was

bred by the brother of my grandmother and then after her sports career sold to Belgium, but they didn't have success breeding her."

Bought by Harm Thormählen's father Rheder, Schmidt acquired lbylle, Retina's last daughter and it is the broodmare descendants of his foundation mare that were paraded in the indoor arena.

"I use the mares that I want to use for breeding from three years on. They are broken in at three and sent to the mare test, but from then on, they go in foal.

"This might be a method of breeding that might not work in the future, but so far it did work. The point is if you send the mares to competition, we would have to send

them until they are eight if we want to test them at the highest level, but if they are doing well at that level, then I can't afford to buy them back. And then they are going on until they are 15 and then it is difficult to get them pregnant, he says, illustrating the choice facing mare owners.

"If I were young, I would use other methods [such as embryo transfer]. In the next decade that, I think, is the new method that is going to work for the top mares.

"We send them to the mares test, that is for comparison with others. We don't learn much in reality, we learn that here.

"I give them to very good riders and then we gather enough information, but

if you are 40 years in the business, you have enough experience to judge!

"I am quite sure which are the interesting ones. If they produced two foals that I don't like, then they are sold."

The breeder of such stars as Corradina, Corland, (both competed at European championship level), Acorado, the Heraldik stallion son Herald and Swiss Olympic team dressage horse Sir, had lots of practical advice and insights for his visitors, pointing out that Corland produced a higher percentage of Grand Prix show jumpers in Holland than Indoctro. He also explained why Contender line mares were such a popular match for the more compact Casall.

HARM THORMÄHLEN



OF 'Dutch genetics!', the former international rider and now breeder-dealer has observed the changes in Irish sport horse breeding.

He spoke first to the group while watching a group of youngster loose schooling in the indoor arena.

"My father was one of the big dealers 50, 60 years ago when the Irish were the best horses in the world. Then the

breeders made a big mistake, breeding costs money so the farmers sold the best and breeding came second. The quality of the Irish horse went down and now the quality [of horse] comes up but not enough.

"The first time I was at Dublin Horse Show 15 years ago, from the young horses maybe you could find three for future international sport, now more come but not enough.

"But the Irish riders are super and this year you won the gold medal at the European championships - congratulations!" says the breeder of John Whitaker's Rio Olympics mare Ornellaia.

He was guarded about the WBFSH young horse championship format of