

INTERVIEW MILTON HARRIS

'I did well in life – then I lost it all because of racing'

THERE'S skint and there's skint, but when Milton Harris began his eight-year penance as a racehorse trainer without a licence, he was pretty skint.

"I was literally turning the sofa upside down to see if I could find enough money to buy a loaf of white bread," he says, as his small army of young staff troop into the kitchen for a restorative breakfast of doughnuts and pastries.

Had the taxman known Harris had loose change secreted about his furniture, he might have been minded to impound the offending item and have a good rummage himself, such was the zeal with which Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs pursued the down-at-heel handler for a sizeable chunk of unpaid 'beeswax'. Mercy was a rare and precious commodity at the time, even if Harris expected precious little.

Harris was down and very nearly out, with a burgeoning career halted in mid-flight, the BHA marking him down as a person not "fit and proper" to make a living from racing, and his personal life in tatters, but even as HMRC circled overhead in search of its pound of flesh he clung to the dream that one day he might be back in the winner's enclosure at Cheltenham.

He'd been there before, with the useful novice chaser Paxford Jack in 2002, and he was eager to return, but being declared bankrupt in 2010 had made him persona non grata with the racing authorities, and when he applied for his licence the following year it was not forthcoming. Many refusals later, he was still deemed unfit and improper, marked down as a man whose lack of cash was matched only by his lack of transparency, and the Cheltenham dream slowly receded into the distance.

Until 2018, that is, when the BHA's licensing committee finally relented and restored Harris to his natural condition. He was a trainer again, albeit one with just eight horses in his care and a lot of catching up to do, but now, surrounded by a stable strength of 45 and with 28 winners under his belt already this season, he's back in his element.

The return trip to the hallowed circle at Prestbury Park was delivered by Knight Salute, whose victory in this month's Grade 2 Triumph Hurdle Trial unleashed a flood of pent-up joy and frustration, but this latest ebullient chapter of the Milton Harris story, slowly unfolding in the Wiltshire village of Sutton Veny, pales

Senior features writer **Peter Thomas** meets the trainer back at the top of his game after hitting rock bottom



into normalcy when set against the remarkable, barely plausible history of a man for whom the term 'non-establishment' might have been personally coined.

'I got drunk with Cary Grant on a regular basis'

Harris characterises his long-running struggle with the authorities as a case of himself versus "the Tweeds", the misfit wrestling with those who were born to rule racing. He's not bitter and he recognises most of his own failings in the matter, but it must be hard not to feel under undue scrutiny from the beaks when you've come into the sport via Harris's unlikely, underprivileged and often brutal route.

He was once loaned £50,000 by a generous owner who, perhaps tellingly, required no security or written guarantee from him, just wanting to help him get back in business. When the pair went in front of a panel to explain the sudden influx of cash, the clash of cultures was never so starkly apparent.

"I got Nic [Allen] to come as a witness to one of the hearings," explains Harris. "It was in the middle of summer, and he turned up in flip-flops, shorts and a T-shirt, and Mr and Mrs Tweed were still wearing tweed suits and they couldn't work out how this man could lend me 50 grand, with no paperwork.

"They couldn't understand that somebody would lend you that kind of money on a handshake, and to this day they still think I lied to them, but I didn't. To them I wasn't fit and proper, and not fit and proper is worse than being banned because it's indefinite. I know they have an obligation to protect the sport and I respect that, but it was tough."

Tough is something Harris is used to, and for much of his early life it was

'I got drunk with Cary Grant on a regular basis and dated Belinda Carlisle – my life opened up'

of great benefit to him, perhaps even essential, to be anything but fit and proper. Raised in a council house in Bromsgrove – "I don't remember the council flat I was born in but I remember the house we lived in because my brother burned it down playing with a box of matches" – he was six when his mother walked out of the door, slammed it behind her and never came back.

"I don't know whether she's alive or dead," he shrugs, "and although my dad was around, he was married five times and wouldn't have been the most responsible parent. There comes a time when you either stand up and do your job or you don't, and he never did.

"I remember him going off for weeks and leaving me alone with my dog, a lovely Dalmatian called Chief, but I had a .410 shotgun, I'd go and shoot some pheasants and steal some potatoes from the local farmer, so I'd never go hungry and I'd still go to school, and I couldn't see what the fuss was about, until somebody shopped me and social services got involved."

He lived with his gran, his dad's mum, a hardy woman who always made sure he had a clean pair of shoes and turned up smart for school, but he cut his teeth in some of the less salubrious watering holes of the south-west Midlands, and he learned quickly, as he had to if he were going to survive.

"I grew up in pubs, but they weren't like pubs today," he says with a raised eyebrow. "There were fights, which was okay if they did it outside, but if they started it inside I had to deal with it, so at the age of 14 I could hit a fella round the knees with a baseball bat and drop him, because that's what my dad taught me to do: don't get involved in their argument, just hit them round the knees and drop them and that'll stop it before it starts.

"But everybody was having a bet and that's where I learned about racing. Once a week, on a Saturday, they'd have their Yankees and Union Jacks, and I'd often be sent to put the bets on. I loved animals and I knew about racing, and that's where it started."

Not before a ten-year stint travelling the globe, though. At the age of 18, Harris, feeling trouble

overtaking him, mustered all his meagre funds, flew to Miami, met a roller-blading Scouser on Key Biscayne Boulevard and within hours was on a cruise ship bound for who knew where. He worked on the bars, made his way up the ladder, skimming a profit off the booze (as was the custom) and amassing a tidy sum that would help set him up when he returned to Blighty.

"I discovered women, the world and different cultures," he says. "I got drunk with Cary Grant on a regular basis, I knew Dorothy Lamour and Stewart Granger and dated Belinda Carlisle – my life opened up.

"I took six months off and lived on a beach in the Bahamas, shooting fish with a spear gun for food, but finally I met a girl from Yorkshire in Los Angeles and the time was right to come home."

'We lost the house and everything'

Although Harris and the BHA rarely saw eye to eye during their eight years of conflict, there was one point on which they never differed. Even in the act of refusing his licence application for 2016, the powers-that-be agreed that "there is not now, and has never been, any dispute that Mr Harris is a competent and able trainer".

Now, as he attempts to steer his young stable staff in the right direction, with a fatherly hand on the shoulder and faltering attempts to ban mobile phones and unsuitable boyfriends, he looks every inch the model professional, but back in the day, fresh off the cruise ships and with a new home in the Cotswolds village of Paxford, he was anything but.

"I've always been good with animals, I just like them because they're honest," he explains, "so one day I rang my girlfriend and told her I'd been to Malvern sales and bought four foals, although I didn't have a clue what I was doing. I got them off the box and realised I didn't even have a head collar, so I had to get them in an armlock and lead them away like that, but I had my bit of land and my first horses – and then I became an owner with Mick Easterby."

It's another quantum leap, but the short version is that one of the foals showed an inkling of ability and



Milton Harris with Paddy Brennan at Cheltenham this month before stable star Knight Salute's (below) victory in the Triumph Hurdle Trial

Easterby had just bought her brother (by Alflora out of Rakajack) for 2,300gns and was happy to sell him on to Harris if he'd leave him in the yard

Little did he know that this would entail the new owner – who by this stage had accumulated some working capital thanks to a publishing business he'd set up with a friend – turning up on Easterby's doorstep uninvited on a regular basis and staying the weekend, learning as he went along and eventually training Paxford Jack (for it was he) to land that memorable £29,000 race at Cheltenham.

Harris went from training a few point-to-pointers round a field to earning his full licence – "I didn't know what I was doing, but I was prepared to learn" – and setting up shop at the historic Trafford Bridge yard near Banbury. From there, he became near neighbours to the Hannons at Herridge, before moving to Lambourn where, sadly, the rot set in. He'd regularly mixed with millionaires on the 'White Turf' of St Moritz, but now he was going downhill fast.



STEVE DAVIES



The 62-year-old has a theory that goes some way to explaining how a good man can, very easily, see his life turn bad. He calls it "the wheel". Anybody can get on the wheel, watch their own self-destructive behaviour become an obsession that destroys everything they've worked for, but not everybody can get off it.

"I was on the wheel," he says bluntly, the emotion beginning to well up behind his weathered features. "It wasn't drugs or alcohol, like it often is, but relationships, finances and dreadful decision-making. I did well in life then I lost everything because of racing. I took my eye off everything else because I was trying to train winners, and by the time we got to Lambourn we were

going the wrong way, and I take the blame.

"I had a girl, Nancy, who I lived with for 14 years, a proper girl, a smashing girl, and we lost the house and everything, and after all I've been through there are only two things I regret, two things I've ever loved: there was my dog Charlie, the best friend I've ever had, who died of cancer a few years ago; and Nancy.

"She said to me at the end, when everything had gone wrong, 'You love racing more than you love me.' She was the love of my life but she believed she was always going to be second best, so she left, because I was on the wheel.

"I got off it three years ago and it's a distant memory, but I'm not a fool - I

know it could come back at any time."

By the time he was denied his licence in 2011, the days of dual Grade 2-winning hurdler Mondul - sourced for him in Germany by his old pal Christian von der Recke - and even Chaninbar, an Aintree Grade 3-winning chaser in 2010, seemed a long way behind Harris.

He lived in a caravan near Stratford, rooted round in the sofa when times were at their toughest and brought in meagre funds by looking after a few horses, but through it all he never gave up on the dream.

"I overfaced myself and got in financial difficulty," he confesses. "I was asset-rich but I had a million-pound overdraft, couldn't borrow anything against my property and

hadn't paid my tax liabilities. The timing was bad and I went bankrupt, but it was all my fault.

"Nic offered me jobs, and I was at proper rock bottom, but I wouldn't take them because I knew if I got distracted from my target it would be easy to fade away, and I never stopped wanting to be a trainer.

"I'd given up too much to walk away from it, and I think I've come out of all this a better trainer and a better person. I don't think I'm a better partner because I don't have time for that, which is why I'm single, but I'm a better person."

'I'm sure there are people who still don't like me'

Life looks good now for Harris, or at least a lot better; not extravagant or luxurious, but industrious and centred. He's not consumed, but he's ambitious, with a youthful team, a family if you like, around him and, crucially, some promising young horses in the yard. Pride of place goes to Knight Salute, but Jacamar, Legionar, Danny Whizzbang, Knowwhentoholdem and others are all keeping the pulse racing as he closes in on his target of 40 winners for the season and seeks to restore his reputation.

"When I took horses to Taunton, Paul Nicholls - who I'd known for years - saw me from a distance, got a stride on, came over to me and shook my hand, and that was important to me," he explains. "I'm sure there are some who still don't like me, but you can't change what people think."

The early days of his return were all about hard graft and the return of sympathetic owners, like main patron Mark Adams, but last season yielded 18 winners and this season has seen an upsurge in both quality and quantity, despite a lack of 'serious' money.

"We still don't buy 100-grand horses," he says. "I paid 14 grand for Knight Salute [bound for the Summit Hurdle at Doncaster] and 15 grand for Jacamar [a potential Graded chaser, says his trainer], and we bought six at Newmarket for 100 grand that I didn't have a buyer for, but they're all sold."

Which is where we leave him, back in business, older and a little wiser, respecting the job the authorities had to do and harbouring only a grain of resentment.

"They're like policemen," he says. "Everybody needs a policeman but you don't always want one, so they have a thankless task. I was up against

BIRTHDAYS

George Duffield 75 rider of *User Friendly* & *Giant's Causeway*; **Sir Johnny Weatherby 62** company chairman at *Weatherbys*; **Lady Lloyd-Webber 59** joint owner-breeder of *The Fugue* & *Too Darn Hot*; **Hirofumi Shii 49** rider of *Agnes Digital* & *Vodka*; **Ron Huggins 72** owner of *Double Trigger* & *Double Eclipse*; **Paul Dixon 63** former ROA president & founding *Horsemen's Group* chairman; **Guy Watkins 88** chief executive of the *Hong Kong Jockey Club* 1986-96; **Richard Forristal 41** Irish editor of the *Racing Post*; **Hal Wiggins 79** trainer of *Cielo Gold* & *Rachel Alexandra*; **Didier Prod'homme 66** trainer of *Miraculous* & *Pollyana*; **Richard Shaw 72** trainer of *Wylfa* & *Environment Friend*; **Luke Comer 64** owner-trainer of *Chimes At Midnight* & *Kargali*; **Tim Banfield 52** executive director at *Doncaster* 2016-18; **James Best 31** rider of *Pilgrims Bay* & *Walk In The Mill*; **Tommy Masters 87** rider of *Opera Score* & *Privy Councillor*; **Alan Jones 61** Minehead trainer; **John Dixon 78** Carlisle permit-holder; **Josh Quinn 26** Flat jockey; **David Wonnacott 60** former jump jockey; **Tom Durkin 71** former *Breeders' Cup* & *US Triple Crown* commentator; **John Bishop 55** owner with *David Evans*

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the wall and I accept that there were times when I didn't help myself, so I don't have any axe to grind with them.

"But I'd got to the bottom of the Premier League. I was in the relegation zone but I was in the Premier League, I'd won some nice races and I'd had drinks with the Queen a couple of times, and I'd always hoped my gran would have been proud. I was only going one way - yet ten years later I'm back where I was when it went wrong.

"That's hard to bear, but I've spent my life with chips on my shoulder, feeling like I'm fighting the world, and I hope the chips have got smaller now. Half of me still says fight, but the other half has taught me when to walk away."

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'I'M PROUD OF WHERE WE ARE – BUT IT'S A YOUNG MAN'S SPORT'

The Big Read

Retiring trainer Colin Tizzard recounts his remarkable life and career to senior features writer **Peter Thomas**

WITH his sturdy build, rosy cheeks and rustic tones, Colin Tizzard has the air of a man who was formed many moons ago from the lowland clay of the Blackmore Vale and has remained gratefully rooted in its rolling pastures ever since, forever bucolic and grizzled, untouched by the passing fashions of the decades; but Pauline Tizzard tells a different story, and she should know.

"Actually, he wasn't too bad-looking back then," recalls the woman who married her man 46 years ago and has barely regretted it since. "He had long hair, big collars, wide trousers and platform shoes," she continues, painting a picture that will live long in the memory, whether you like it or not. "I'd say he was definitely the most modern of the Sherborne Farmers."

Some of this may sound like faint praise,
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given that the Sherborne Farmers have never been a byword for progressive liberalism, but Colin seems to have been the leader of the pack, chairman of the Sherborne Young Farmers when Pauline was secretary, and all that 70s garb and aphrodisiacal power clearly turned the young girl's head. It took a while, though.

"We used to say that in Dorset Young Farmers there were three main clubs," explains Colin. "There was Blandford Young Farmers, where all the boys had sports cars; Dorchester Young Farmers, where they all had Ford Capris; and Sherborne Young Farmers, who all had Morris 1300s. That was me. I had a Morris 1300 and Pauline went round with the chaps from Blandford with their sports cars, because she didn't want to go in my dirty motor."

Lesser men might have been deterred by this very public snub, but our hero, although a shy man by his own admission – "I had to have five pints before I could ask a girl to dance" – was made of stern stuff, and he hatched a cunning plan to win his woman over.

"He just kept moving his chair closer to me at the meetings," shrugs Pauline, "and that was that."

So began an enduring rural tale that might have remained confined to the pages of Farmers Weekly had Colin's pioneering streak not steered him away from the Tizzard family's dairy business to become one of Britain's leading jumps trainers and a mainstay of the Racing Post.

Where his siblings milked ever larger herds,

'WE HAD CUE CARD, THISTLECRACK AND NATIVE RIVER, AND THEY MADE OTHER OWNERS THINK WE COULD DO THE JOB'

Tizzard realised that his early exploits in the point-to-point field could pave the way to a new career, and he began to accumulate ever-better horses and build ever-better facilities, shifting his focus from the tired sheds of Venn Farm to the state-of-the-art American barns rising from the earth a few minutes over the hill at Spurles Farm.

Not that Venn had been barren ground for Tizzard. It was at this unprepossessing site in Milborne Port, on the Dorset-Somerset border, that he prepared Cue Card to win the Champion Bumper at the Cheltenham Festival, while the stunning World Hurdle winner Thistlecrack was also housed cheek-by-jowl with the dairy herd as a new force began to emerge in West Country jumping.

At the end of this campaign, Tizzard will officially hand over the training licence to his son Joe. In one sense, what he has achieved is simply an extension of what he was born to in the fertile fields of Somerset; in another, it's a remarkable transformation engineered by a remarkable man.

But before Colin came his father Leslie Tizzard, the man who once kept a handful of cows and pigs in the skittle alley of the Queen's Head pub in Milborne Port, a few fields over from the heart of a modern racing empire at Spurles Farm.

Leslie relocated to a caravan at Venn Farm when his children came along and farmed as a tenant before organising his fellow tenants to buy the land they'd worked. But it was less as a farmer and more as an agricultural expansionist that he started the rise and rise of the Tizzard fortunes.

"We never thought Father was a very good farmer but he was never afraid to borrow money," explains Colin. "We'd find a bloody



Clockwise from main: Colin Tizzard with his prize beef cattle at Venn Farm; with former top-class chaser Cue Card; and at home in the kitchen with his cat

good farm and tell him we should buy it. We'd say it'll cost a million and a half, and he'd go and arrange it because he knew we'd do the work if he talked to the bank manager. That's what we've always done and that's what we'll still do.

"After all, land is land and money's never been cheaper. I remember we bought a farm when Black Monday came along and the variable rate went up to 19 per cent; now you can borrow at two per cent, so why wouldn't you?"

The recent purchase of 3,000 acres of common grazing on Dartmoor – "I know you can't do anything with it, but it was cheap as chips and I see it as my legacy to the family" – is evidence that the Tizzard trait for land accumulation remains intact, but it's the acreage around Milborne Port that has been most significant.

At Venn Farm, the horse-to-cow ratio began to reach a state of imbalance, and the relocation

to Spurles began. The farm provided 500 acres for the conditioning of racehorses, and into the side of the hill was carved the uphill strip that Tizzard still believes has been the foundation of the entire business.

"We've extended it a few times since, put a few more tracks in, some jumping lanes, then another gallop, so we haven't really stopped, and I don't know if there's much more we can do," he reflects. "I think we've got enough facilities here to last us, even if we decide to train more on the Flat."

AS HE utters the word 'Flat', a gentle rumble of disapproval seems to rise up from the surrounding hills, but this is Colin Tizzard speaking, and he's a man used to challenging the status quo in a region known for its ages-old traditions in the fields of hunting, point-to-pointing and jump racing, which have long been his passions. Where once he was a point rider with 21 winners to his name and a bright future in dairy, soon he started to alter the possibilities of what might be achieved.

"When I was 16, Father went to the sales and bought a cheap point-to-pointer," he remembers. "He didn't realise until after he'd bought it that it had never got round before. The

next year he went and bought another one that was even worse, but then they got a little bit better.

"In the same way, I started doing it because of Joe. Things changed when he came along. When he was 15, I went to the May sales and bought a horse called The Jogger, and everyone I met for the next two months told me he'd had a leg the year before, so I went and bought another one, Qualitair Memory, one for two grand, the other for two and a half, and the first year they won four each, including two hunter chases, and I thought it was a piece of cake.

"When I was riding, if we had a busy day on the farm, the horses wouldn't go out, but now we were doing it properly and point-to-point people started sending us horses. But when Joe turned professional and wasn't riding them anymore, it wasn't as much fun, so we decided to take the next step.

"I think everybody who's ever ridden a horse fancies their chances of making a better job of it than the trainer. It's a great thrill, training a winner, no two ways about it, so we put up four stables at Venn, then another eight, pushed the heifers back bit by bit. Then we had Cue Card, then Thistlecrack, then Native River, some of the best horses in their time, and they made other owners think we could do the job."



Pictures: EDWARD WHITAKER (RACINGPOST.COM/PHOTOS)



The Tizzard mantra became well known. “We wanted to be known as racehorse trainers with a few cows, rather than dairy farmers with a few horses,” chimed Colin and Joe, and soon the dairy herd went off to market and the transformation was all but complete. Except that, for more than one reason, Colin couldn’t bear to have a farm without a bovine presence.

It was partly his insistence that the cattle and the horses could co-exist, economically at least, just in case hard times hit either of the two limited companies. But as he stands in the bustling, wet-nosed middle of his herd of boisterous beef cattle, it’s not hard to see that his devotion to the ‘old ways’ has never quite left him.

Our photographer takes his pictures leaning out of the car window, for fear of cow-related injury, but the old “stockman” – “that’s what I still am,” he says proudly – is in his element. It’s all about arses, apparently.

“That’s a Belgian Blue out of a dairy-bred cow, and they always end up having little narrow arses,” he educates us. “These Simmental crosses are more robust, but this one hasn’t got the best arse. I buy the best ones at market, the ones with the best arses, even though they cost a bit more. Look at the backside on that Limousin cross!

‘I’D SAY 60 WINNERS AND £1 MILLION A YEAR IS ABOUT US – THAT’S WHAT WE EXPECT NOW’

“I love these animals, and it all mixes in very well with training racehorses, one supports the other, and beef is a lot less work than dairy. So I go to market on a Friday and if we’ve sold 20 in a week, I buy 20 more to keep the numbers up, have them back here and look after them until they’re ready to sell.

“Dad would have loved all this. In his last few years he’d sit in his house and look out the window at the cows and the horses, telling me he didn’t think much of the one that went up second lot. I bet Mum’s sitting there watching it all now.”

A brother to Gold Cup winner Sizing John trots past in the distance, over the heads of the beef, and the soon-to-be ex-trainer wears the smile of a contented man.

We head back from Spurles Farm on a whistle-stop tour of Milborne Port’s most famous tourist attractions.

“That’s where my mother lives,” he points out, “and that’s the house Joe bought and lived in for five years when he was a jockey and had some spare money – we were keen he didn’t fritter it all away.

“When I got married, I moved into that cottage for the first five years, and both our children were born there. I was earning £25 a week and we paid £5 in rent. I told Father I couldn’t live off that so he put me up a couple of quid.

“I’d say Milborne Port hasn’t changed much. There used to be a big tannery in there [the town was big in the leather glove business, back in the day] and that’s my old infants’ school. That wood across the road [from Venn Farm], it caught on fire on August 20, 1976, the hottest summer anyone can remember, when Kim was born.”

Kim was Colin and Pauline’s daughter, who died two years ago at the age of 43. She was Colin’s “partner”, the rock of the business, the hub of it all, and her death hit him hard, although he’s not emotive about it in the modern vein.

“She’s buried just over there,” he says, as we

stand admiring the ever-youthful Cue Card in his quiet box at the little isolation yard, “so if I’m on my own I walk up and have a little chat to her, about her son Freddie [Gingell, the up-and-coming young rider], how boisterous he’s getting and how I wish she was still around to keep him under control.

“She was everything. I got on better with her than I did with Pauline. She lived it. She’d talk about it and then make it happen. The poor girl getting cancer was a terrible blow, but you’ve got to move on from it.”

There’s time for a quiet moment as we talk about Kim, much missed, and Cue Card, the horse still credited with kick-starting the entire operation with that incredible bumper win (by eight lengths from Al Ferof in 2010) and bolstering it with his later successes in multiple Grade 1 chases.

“I remember when he won on his debut at Fontwell,” says the proud trainer as the 16-year-old pricks his ears, skin still tight and shiny, eyes still bright and lively.

“We went back to the winner’s enclosure and waited for ten minutes for him to come back, and I thought bloody hell, he must have injured himself, but he’d gone round the top bend and Joe couldn’t stop the bugger until halfway down the back.

“He was a super athlete, and I reckon if we cantered him up the gallops for three weeks, he’d still be able to win – that’s how good he is.

“Of course, winning the Gold Cup [with Native River in 2018] was the pinnacle, no two ways about it, but the moment that almost made me have a stroke was the last two furlongs of Cue Card’s Champion Bumper. My neck went tight and I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. At that moment it felt as though the doors had opened and the whole world was in front of us.”

THAT was the dramatic start, but next weekend won’t really be the finish. Colin won’t have his name on the licence any more, and he’s looking forward to Joe finding out what it’s like to make the big decisions, but he’ll still be a partner in the racing yard and the farm, and it’s hard to believe his son will let all that experience be offloaded just yet.

Together they’ve turned the business organically into something that combines the traditions of the Blackmore Vale and the modern methods of getting to the top of jump racing’s slippery pole, to heights unimaginable when Colin set out.

“It’s still traditional but things have changed,” he thinks. “I’d say 60 winners and a million pounds a year is about us – that’s what we expect now. We need to be in the top ten, and when we had those real good horses they put us in the top five, but horses like that need to find you, because you can’t buy them, even with some of the London money we’ve got now.

“It happened over a few years and we were chuffed as hell to be playing in that league and we’re still there, which is something I’m proud of, but I think it’s a young man’s sport.”

He fancies travelling a bit, maybe getting himself a camper van and becoming a hermit on Dartmoor – with his dogs, of course – and Pauline’s adamant that he won’t be allowed to hang around the house cluttering the place up.

“I think you need something to do, otherwise you’ll go stir crazy,” she advises him. “He’d just get in the way, and he knows that, so he still goes up there every morning.”

After 46 years they know each other pretty well, and although the old house at Venn Farm hasn’t been altered much since the yard’s fortunes changed for the better, there’s no sense that Colin’s ‘retirement’ will spark a sudden flurry of home improvement and DIY.

“We’ll be having new lino in the kitchen next week,” he says, “but we don’t really want anything different. I want to be able to walk in and sit down, read the paper and have an argument with Pauline because I haven’t taken my muddy shoes off. That’s all I need.”

RACING POST Sunday

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Peter Chapple-Hyam at home
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Dr Devious's 1992 Derby victory

‘I HAD ANXIETY,
PANIC ATTACKS, I
COULDN'T SPEAK
TO ANYONE. I
CAN CONTROL
IT NOW’

MEGAN RIDGWELL



The Big Read

Senior features writer
Peter Thomas talks to dual
Derby-winning trainer
Peter Chapple-Hyam

IT'S 9.15am and Peter Chapple-Hyam is taking the first puff on his ninth cigarette of the morning. "I like smoking," he shrugs, "but I wouldn't have had as many as this if you hadn't been here." I try not to take it personally.

He drums his fingers on the desk, fiddles with his lighter, twiddles his pen, pours a second cup of coffee and opens the pack of ten to reveal the one remaining ciggie. It's the tail end of his self-imposed ration, but he's taking the shortage well. It's not my fault, apparently. He lives on his nerves, he confesses, although nowhere near as badly as he used to, back in the days when he was the trainer of the moment, with a hundred horses in his yard and a future that seemed boundless.

These days at St Gatien Stables, the population is nothing more than in the mid-20s - even if you include the trainer's dog Lola, a

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Pomeranian/Chihuahua cross the size of a large guinea pig, who is currently sitting on his desk causing a nuisance. Yet if this sounds like the story of a once great man down on his luck, nothing could be further from the truth.

In reality, it's a survivor's tale. Chapple-Hyam is 59 now and quite keen on reaching 90, although he recognises this may be an ambitious figure. There was a time, though, when even 59 seemed a long way off. He was successful, admired and much loved, but he was a victim of mental health trauma in an era when mental health, in so far as it was recognised at all, was cause for mirth and ridicule. Being a "nutter" was funny back then, unless you happened to be the nutter, in which case it was a lonely room with an exit that led to some pretty ugly places.

"From about 2010, I started getting really bad depression and if it hadn't been for that dog, Lillie, the first dog I ever had, I'd have topped myself," he says, nodding in the direction of a photograph of a small, white Jack Russell terrier. "I thought, I can't top myself - who's going to look after her? Otherwise, I really would have

'I JUST BATTLED ON, ALTHOUGH FOR QUITE A FEW YEARS IT WASN'T A NICE TIME TO BE ALIVE'

done it. All I wanted was to feel cold silver against my head and pull the trigger.

"I thought, if this is all I've got to live for, what's the point? But I didn't want to let people down, make more mess for other people to clear up, so I just battled on, although for quite a few years it wasn't a nice time to be alive."

'They took what they wanted and left me with Dr Devious'

For a man fast closing in on 60, Chapple-Hyam still has a good thatch on his roof, but it's rather shorter than the day when Barry Hills offered him a job at Manton, with the proviso that he might want to "get your ****ing hair cut". It's also a rather different colour to the day 30 years ago when, having taken over the reins at the fabled Wiltshire training establishment, he sent out Dr Devious to win the Derby.

"There are pictures of me at Epsom that day, and a good friend of mine saw them and very kindly got in touch to remind me that I really did have brown hair once," he chortles, no more perturbed than the rest of us by the onset of middle age. Perhaps less perturbed, given that he once considered suicide as a means of cutting himself off in his prime.

The son of a wholesale greengrocer from Dudley in the West Midlands, he had boxed a bit in his youth, made the most of the racing blood on his mother's side of the family, learned his trade as an amateur rider with Fred Rimell and joined Hills as a pupil assistant, but he was still only 29 when he sent Rodrigo De Triano and Dr Devious to contest the big 'un at Epsom.

He'd already trained the pair to win the Middle Park and Dewhurst respectively in his first season in charge at Manton, but by the time June 3, 1992 came round, he was sure the 2,000 Guineas hero Rodrigo couldn't win and was left to rely on a horse whose owner had insisted on running him, without success, in the Kentucky Derby on his previous outing, and who, according to legend, had been flown back economy class and spent the night in Frankfurt Zoo with a zebra.

It was still a happy state of affairs, given that when he took over at the yard several leading Newmarket trainers had been given their pick of the inmates. "Everybody came and took what they wanted, and they left Rodrigo and Dr



Peter Chapple-Hyam (right) greets Frankie Dettori and Authorized after they had given him a second Derby victory in 2007

Devious," he recalls with a mischievous grin, then reflects on a day that either made his career or was "the worst thing that could possibly have happened".

"I'd been all for Rodrigo and was watching him through the race," he recalls, "but Lester [Piggott] had it in his head that he couldn't win - he even tried to swap - so I knew he wasn't going to give it a ride, and when [his ex-wife] Jane turned to me and said 'Doctor's going well', I suddenly switched my eyes to him and said, 'God, this wins.'"

The son of Ahonoora was unleashed by John Reid more than a furlong from home and was driven out for a two-length success that propelled Chapple-Hyam into the training stratosphere, although the ride was to prove more turbulent than even he could have imagined.

'If she hadn't turned up, they'd have dragged me away'

"They came to get me from my house, not quite the men in white coats but more or less, three of them," says Chapple-Hyam. He was a dual

Derby-winning trainer by this time, but his mental state was out of control and he'd been identified as a man in need of treatment; that was official and there was no room for argument, even if he put up plenty of resistance.

"I had my little dog, who meant everything to me, and I told them I had to sort her out," he remembers. "They said they didn't care, they could call the police if they had to and I was going with them there and then.

"I said, 'Have you ever seen me fight? I was a good boxer in my day, so two of you will go down before I do, and I mean it. But once the dog's sorted I'll come with you.'"

"They didn't have a straitjacket but they had these things to tie my hands together if I didn't behave. Luckily my secretary Kelly turned up before it got nasty and took the dog, but if she hadn't, they'd have dragged me away."

Chapple-Hyam ended up at what he describes as a "mental hospital" in Bury St Edmunds, although there's probably a more sympathetic name for it these days. Nobody knew he was going there - even Kelly thought he was "just having a few days off" - but he knew all too well.

"I'd been going to counselling, driving over to Bury to meet a lady and talk, and it was working," he says. "I thought I could get through it on my own, but she said I needed more help than they could give me, and I got a letter saying

I should come in for tests at the hospital.

"She'd signed it off and that was that, there was no choice, and I ended up staying for seven days; but I didn't blame her, I blamed myself for letting it get like that."

'I was sleeping on a blow-up mattress on a friend's floor'

Chapple-Hyam's mental issues probably began way back, when he was training at Manton, although he was unaware of it at the time. "I was already struggling with my head at that point but I didn't know what it was," he explains. "I kept getting wound up and light-headed, to the point where I was almost collapsing, so Robert [Sangster, the yard's owner and Jane's stepfather] sent me off for tests, but I kept it to myself as much as I could.

"They thought it might be a lot of things but I never thought I might be 'mental'. No-one really knew what it meant back then, and I felt I could cope because I was young, brave and invincible."

If the pressure cooker of Manton wasn't enough to tip an ambitious but fragile trainer over the edge, then what happened next was pretty much guaranteed to do the job. He got the boot - "we never fell out, but they wanted a yard full of horses and I didn't" - and decided Hong Kong would be a good place to revive a



MARK CRANHAM



Dr Devious (below and left) gave Peter Chapple-Hyam a first Derby victory in 1992; the trainer's two Derby trophies (above) are displayed proudly at home



PHIL SMITH (SPORTING LIFE)

'They said I was mad and moved their horses'

Chapple-Hyam was back at the peak of his game, with the racing world opening up before him. But mental illness makes no distinction between the top and bottom of the food chain, and it was hunting him down.

"I started having anxiety and panic attacks, very bad," he explains. "I just couldn't speak to anyone."

It was the worst kind of sickness for a racehorse trainer to have. Owners wanted to be told what was happening with their horses, and they were hearing nothing, so they left.

"They told me I wasn't communicating, so I tried to explain to them, but that was before all this stuff was popular, so they said I was mad and they moved their horses.

"I was bad, though. I'd come to work, first lot would be ready and I'd have to go home and lie down. If a horse got injured, I'd go to bed and say nothing until four or five days later. I'd explain I had this problem, and owners said, 'It's not our problem, goodbye.' So I quickly went from 80 horses to next to nothing.

"A few close friends knew what I was going through, and the lads here saw it coming, but I didn't feel I could tell anybody because I had to keep up appearances."

'I want to train another Derby winner'

Chapple-Hyam isn't 'over' all his mental health problems, but he has them where he wants them. He admits that the thought of a pesky journalist coming to see him brought on the makings of a panic attack, "but I can control them now, as well as the depression, and I weaned myself off the medication because the more they gave me, the worse I felt."

Now, with long-term partner Sally at his side and a yard peppered with latent talent, he is looking ahead with positivity, albeit recognising that his life might have been easier had he started training in an age where attitudes towards "lunatics" such as himself were more enlightened.

"I love horses, I love training them, and I always have done," he says. "Even at my worst, I'd get up every day just to come to see them. The trouble was, after Authorized, a lot of the 'flockers' came to me, the bad payers with bad horses, the ones who end up blaming you and leaving you in the lurch. I took too many of them on and that's where it started to go downhill financially.

"But I look after everything myself now online, pay all my own bills, do all my own office work, and I enjoy it. I'm in control of my destiny and my mind is focused. I can control my brain and keep everything in check, and I've been able to help plenty of people who were in the same situation as me, but if I went back to 80 horses, I know I'd go back into meltdown again."

He's still good company, fun to be around, still a bit edgy, but his head is in a better place now that numbers are down and personal attention to detail is up, to the point where he's happy to reveal the next big ambition at St Gatien.

"With far fewer horses, it's easier to train individual horses and pick and choose my owners," he says contentedly, "so I'm enjoying life again, hardly drinking, and feeling very ambitious.

"No doubt about it, I want to train another Derby winner. I love the big races and I want one more go at it with one good horse."

career that had begun to weigh heavily on his mind.

"Everything that could go wrong did go wrong," he reflects. "I'd never trained on a track, I didn't speak any Chinese, I had no horses and I started drinking too much, going out at night, getting in at one in the morning, having a shower and going straight to work. I was so stupid, and I knew if I wanted to keep my marriage, we'd have to come home."

They did come home, setting up in 2004 at St Gatien, but he and Jane broke up in 2005 and he found himself sleeping on a friend's floor, "on a blow-up mattress that I had to blow up every night because it had a puncture, then another friend lent me his flat and I started to claw it all back."

The likes of African Dream and Captain Hurricane revitalised Chapple-Hyam's career to a degree, but it was the arrival of Kuwaiti businessman Saleh Al Homaizi in his life that completed the job in pyrotechnic fashion. It may have started with more of a whimper, when the trainer was sent "a horse that he and Imad [Al Sagar] had bought back for £1,000, that I won a couple of races with", but it culminated in the biggest bang imaginable.

"One day I was at the sales and I got a call from [racing manager] Tony Nerses asking me to pick the best five there, and I said the one I liked was the Montjeu," he recalls. "He called

'WITH DR DEVIOUS I WAS HOPEFUL BUT I KNEW AUTHORIZED WOULD WIN. IT WENT AS I EXPECTED'

back saying I could go to 600,000gns. I got him for 400,000gns, felt pretty pleased, then I got home realising I'd just bought a horse in my own name for 400,000gns for people who'd sent me a horse they'd bought back for a grand. Was I mad? But they came up with the money - and that was Authorized."

'The Queen said, "I know what you want, a nice cold beer"'

"I knew the kind of year that was coming, the kind of pressure, but it worked out perfectly for me, because everybody was on about Frankie [Dettori] and no-one wanted to know me," says Chapple-Hyam, recalling a season that exploded at Epsom, when his Racing Post Trophy and Dante winner Authorized lined up as 5-4 favourite for the 2007 Derby.

The charismatic Italian was still searching for his first win in the colts' Classic and the media had well and truly latched on to the story, so Chapple-Hyam was able to relax rather more than usual.

"We won the Woodcote, the second race on the card, with Declaration Of War, and I went back and sat in the car," he says. "Then I walked back, tacked up Authorized in the yard and that was it.

"With Dr Devious I was hopeful but I knew Authorized would win, so the race went as I expected, he cantered home by five lengths, I did a quick interview with Clare Balding, then went up to meet the Queen.

"I remember when Dr Devious won it was very hot and I was sweating profusely, so when she asked if I'd like a glass of champagne, I said I'd love a cold beer. They sent out for a beer and when it came back it was boiling. She asked me why I wasn't drinking it, and I said, 'It's very warm, ma'am.'

"So this time, fair play to her, she said, 'I know what you want, Peter, a nice cold beer.' And they had one waiting for me. How good was that? And by the time I came down the stairs, Frankie was surrounded and I walked straight past, went to the car, drove home, met Ed Vaughan, David Simcock and a couple of others for a beer and collapsed into bed at about half eight. It was the perfect Derby."

If you're living with a mental health problem, or supporting someone who is, find information and support at the website of mental health charity Mind at mind.org.uk/information-support