

# GIVING NEW HOPE

The future can be uncertain for racehorses at the end of their careers, but for 30 years a charity near Lancaster has been helping horses enjoy retirement

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: Milton Haworth

Few sporting occasions can compete with the glamour of a day at the races. The fashions on display among the well-dressed racegoers challenge for attention with the action on the track while the champagne flows and successful punters eagerly collect their winnings.

But there is another side to the sport of kings. Most racehorses never experience the adulation afforded to the very few who make it to the winners' enclosure. The majority ply their trade in modest surroundings, far from the high life of Aintree and Ascot and even in that lower grade, very few of them have the speed or the ability to win a race.

Given that it costs as much to keep a horse that finishes last in the lowest grade race as it does to keep a Grand National winner, having a slow horse in training can very quickly slim down even the fattest wallet.

With around 5,000 horses entering training each year, the turnover in thoroughbreds is pretty high. When their careers end, the very best stallions and mares are packed off to stud to spend their lives enhancing the breed, while for the quality horses not suitable for breeding, there is no shortage of takers to give them a second career in dressage, polo, three-day eventing or similar.

For the rest, though, the future is less certain. Many are





**ABOVE:** Loan horse Oscar with rehabilitation supervisor Charlotte Bewley, at home near Dent in the Yorkshire Dales.

**LEFT:** The horses are trained at a gentle pace at The British Thoroughbred Retraining Centre near Halton

found homes as happy hackers, but others can face more bleak possibilities which is where the British Thoroughbred Retraining Centre (BTRC) steps in.

Tucked away in the foothills of the Pennines, just a few miles east of Lancaster, the BTRC is Britain's oldest and biggest charity dedicated to providing a second chance for racehorses and as it enters its 30th year, it can look back on a history that has given a helping hand to thousands of thoroughbreds.

Although the BTRC does take horses straight from the sport, the bulk of the work done on its

200-acre site is with vulnerable horses, those unfortunates who either lacked the speed or the soundness to make a successful career on the track and whose futures have started to look bleak.

Each new arrival undergoes a detailed check from Gordon Sidlow, the centre's consultant vet, discovering any physical problems and assessing the horse's suitability for the centre's retraining programme.

Horses that successfully complete the retraining are then rehomed on the BTRC's loan programme – the centre never buys or sells horses – with ▶



*'Horses have always been a huge part of my life. My first memory of being on a horse was riding a pony called Bullet at a local riding school. He was probably about as tall as he was wide and had far too much attitude for someone so small'*

the loaner paying a one-off fee to take the horse on a lifetime loan. By retaining ownership, the BTRC ensures that should the loaner fall on hard times or suffer a change of circumstance which means they can no longer keep the horse, it will not become vulnerable again, but return to the centre.

Before letting any horse go out on loan, its new home is checked and, just as importantly, the loaner is assessed for the best possible match of horse and rider.

Charlotte Bewley, head of the rehabilitation programme at the centre, has an obvious deep love of thoroughbreds and as well as working with them every day has one of the BTRC's horses, Oscar, at her own home in the Yorkshire Dales.

The chief executive is Gillian

Carlisle, who previously ran the Hong Kong Jockey Club's Equestrian Affairs at Beas River, including the club's retraining unit before joining the BTRC in 2015. 'Horses have always been a huge part of my life,' Gillian said. 'My first memory of being on a horse was riding a pony called Bullet at a local riding school. He was probably about as tall as he was wide and had far too much attitude for someone so small.'

One lucky horse is Nina, who in her former life was racehorse Meniscus. She is now in the loving care of Judith Mitchell and her daughter Caitlin at their home near Ullswater and has bonded with Judith's other horses, 28-year-old Indy and Missie, 13.

'I come from a non-horsey family but my parents first ▶

**LEFT:**  
Nina, after retraining at BTRC settles into her new home with loaners Caitlin and mum Judith Mitchell of Dacre on the edge of the Lake District

**RIGHT:**  
Chief executive of the BTRC, Gillian Carlisle





The farrier makes sure the horses are well shod

noticed my affinity with horses when I used to cry every time an episode of *Black Beauty* ended,' laughed Judith. 'At five or six I started taking riding lessons at a local riding school and from then on I was totally obsessed.'

'At seven years old we moved to the house in the country with stables and 12 acres of land, it was then I was allowed to have my first pony, a 12.2hh Palomino gelding called Sonny. I was in heaven and Sonny was an absolute saint.'

Judith has missed being able to hack out as Indy retired a couple of years ago due to a field injury so she is really looking forward to hacking Nina around the lovely countryside, with some gorgeous views overlooking Ullswater. 'I may even pluck up enough courage to jump again in our field,' Judith added.

'Nina and Indy have already grown very close, except when it's time to eat, then the chestnut mare attitude surfaces and Nina definitely doesn't want Indy or

Missie anywhere near her. Indy already knows to keep well away.'

'I've always loved the idea of rehoming, having previously adopted Missie, a Shetland from Oaktrees Animal Rescue in Wetheral, and we had started looking for a new horse when I heard about the BTRC,' continued Judith. 'When Molly, Indy's old owner, started working there I thought I could give one of those lovely horses a happy, chilled out home. I completed the paperwork and applied for one.'

'Although I've had many different breeds of horses over the years, I've no previous experience of thoroughbreds. I knew, though, that there would be lots of support at hand from the staff at the centre if and when it is needed.'

'We are so pleased with Nina and, considering she's only been with us a matter of weeks, she has made herself completely at home. She is definitely living her best life already.' 🐾  
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## JOIN THE SYNDICATE

'Lancashire Life' made her racecourse debut in December 2020 and won her first race at Newcastle in October at odds of 50/1. She also finished third at Wolverhampton in the summer and has come fourth on two occasions.

'Lancashire Life' is trained at Lancashire Racing Stables near Garstang by Stella Barclay and her husband Paul Clarkson who are expecting her to improve still further this year.

'She will be back in action in March and the plan is to race her throughout the Turf Season which runs from late March until early November,' Paul said. 'Lancashire Life - whose stable name is Dotty - is a very speedy filly just like her parents who were both sprinters.'

'We feel that although she won over six furlongs (three quarters of a mile) the minimum trip of five furlongs could turn out to be her best trip. As

she gets older she is getting physically stronger which usually means quicker.'

Lancashire Life readers can join a syndicate and take a share of her winnings for just £100 a month. As a part of the syndicate you will receive an owner's badge when she runs, giving you the opportunity to join the trainer and jockey in the parade ring and hopefully the winners' enclosure afterwards.

You will also be able to visit the stables to see her working on the gallops on a regular basis, and be kept up to date with her progress as well as receiving frequent videos of her on the gallops. 'Lancashire Life' won more than £5,000 in owners' prize money during 2021 which is returned to the Members in the form of a dividend.

**For further information contact [paul@lancshireracingstables.co.uk](mailto:paul@lancshireracingstables.co.uk).**



Picture: Paul Mackenzie

Racehorse Lancashire Life at the Lancashire Racing Stables at Barnacre