

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 Ahsbahr, 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 marelins 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 youngstock 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

PHOTOS: Susan Finnerty



Horses at Elmshorn, curious about their visitors from Ireland

At last year's WBFSH ceremony at Geneva International, where Cavan man William Kells received his event horse breeder award for Mighty Nice, Günter Schemer was also in the spotlight for breeding Chesall Zimequest, the top showjumping horse of the 2016 WBFSH rankings.

Casall jumped five places to finish fourth in the 2016 show jumping sire rankings, while Contendro I was the leading sire in the eventing division.

This year's rankings see the Holsteiner Verband in third (eventing) and sixth (show jumping) places in the studbook rankings. The KWPN has

WHAT THEY SAID

"Even though we Holsteiner breeders have been trailblazers or trendsetters on many topics, we will not jump [on] any bandwagon. For some of you, progress might seem a bit sluggish sometimes, but, let's face it, bustling activity just for its own sake has never achieved anything" – **Thies Beuck**, Holsteiner Verband chairman.

"You have to be critical of your own mares" – **Prof. Dr. Hartwig Schmidt**.

"Nowadays buyers don't ask about mare reports, but if she was in sport" – **Gérard Muffels**.

"It's easier to sell the super horse, and it must be the super horse, for €10 million than one for €5,000. You need 20 times the coffee and schnapps to sell the €5,000 horse! A big price is no deal [problem], they want the super horse" – **Harm Thormählen**.

traditionally ruled the show jumping rankings, yet it is the meteoric rise of other Benelux studbooks such as the BWP, sBs and Zangersheide that was the most remarked-on feature of the various farm visits.

An over-reliance on certain bloodlines – it is estimated that Cor de la Bryere appears in 80% of Holsteiner bloodlines, while Casall and his stallion sons are so popular that they now account for 40% of recent covering statistics is one issue facing Holsteiner breeders.

This and other factors, such as changing global markets, are of some concern to breeders, so it was interesting to note the Verband chairman Thies Beuck's comment in the foreword of its inspections catalogue.

It seems the farmer-breeder of the Holstein region has more in common with Irish breeders than perhaps either realised.

FROM FARM TO FAME

Two days at the colt inspections and Elite auction completed, it was on to the next part of the trip; a series of farm visits. And as it turned out, the itinerary proved tailor-made as it matched up with the top stories from Neumunster.

There was little time for celebrating their Casall filly Catharina's top price



Elmshorn, the former German state stud, now operated by the Holsteiner Verband

of €150,000 at the Elite auction the previous day for the Schmidt family as they were up at 6.30am to prepare for the Teagasc group's arrival.

Like all the stud farms we visited, the yard, featuring a 250-year-old traditional horse barn, was immaculate. German owners evidently take great pride in presentation, with important

details like multi-generation pedigree cards on each stable door and finishing touches, such as equine statues and rose beds.

A modest man – some research afterwards revealed Prof. Schmidt had received the Holsteiner Verband's 2009 breeder of the year award for the European medal-winning mare Corradina – the retired scientist has built up an enviable group of Holsteiner mares.

That mission began after his move from southern Germany in 1974 to be closer to the main breeding heartland.

After an early lunch at a restaurant, where the river Elbe backdrop provided a view of a gigantic cargo ship making its way to Europe's second-largest port in Hamburg, it was off to Hof Thormählen.

EYE-CATCHING

An eye-catching sight there is a life-size statue of Capitol I, the work of artist Heike Landherr, which was unveiled at a ceremony in 2008.

The studfarm's owner Harm Thormählen is an even larger-than-life character with a series of paintings including the Hamburg Derby winner Retina and Cor de la Bryere on display in the indoor school.

Harm, who also co-judged this year's *The Irish Field* Breeders Championship, put several horses through their paces in the school including Sandro Junior, the champion colt at this year's inspections, sold the previous evening for €260,000.

Star of the show though was the retired Fein Cera, bred by him. Courtesy of *YouTube*, several of the group later watched her faultless record on the final day at the 2002 World Equestrian Games in Jerez, where Dermott Lennon won a gold medal, with her regular American rider Peter Wyld.

Another statue greeted us on arrival at Elmshorn, where the foundation sire Landgraf, by the imported thoroughbred Ladykiller, stands in front of this training and stallion station.

Gérard Muffels, its Dutch-born manager, was another to give up his Sunday off after the busy Neumunster sessions and obligingly took Casall out of his stable for selfie sessions with his Irish fans.

It was all light years ahead of the stud's original purpose.

Another realisation, on an equine scale, in the run up to Armistice Day was the fact that as many continental bloodlines, as well as the Irish Draught, were affected by war. Studbook rankings battles and selfies are a better path now.

Next week: Final part of Teagasc Tour

jumping against the clock, saying: "They are racing over the fences, that is not good for the horses, not good for the future."

Thormählen also bred the powerhouse that was Capitol I, the WBFSH leading show jumping sire in 2000 and 2001.

A producer of seven Olympic show jumping horses, he also produced household name stallion sons such as Carthago Z, Dobel's Cento and Carthago.

The entertaining character had a barrage of questions aimed at him, replying "Make expensive horses!" when asked what was his next aim.

"But they must be quality with international potential. My wife says I have too many horses, I say not enough. The

mother family, that is most important. A super horse is very, very sensitive. The rider must love the horse and the horse must love fighting for the rider.

"Belgium is the best in the world, three of the top five studbooks are Belgian: BWP is first, then KWPN, the sBs and Zangersheide. The Belgian horse is not so modern [in type] but has lots of scope.

"Breeding must be difficult; if not, it is no fun," he quoted, adding: "If it is easy, then the men with money, they can all do it. Breeding is not easy."

GÉRARD MUFFELS



IT was the calm after the Neumunster flurry at Elmshorn, as all the Elite auction entries, plus their own group of five colts are prepared in advance for several weeks at this former state stud. A mixture of traditional red brick stables overlooking a courtyard and modern American stabling, plus three indoor schools make up the main complex, with the stallions housed in a separate area.

Stud and production fees fund Elmshorn. "We don't get money from Brussels. Every stone, every hair of the tail is funded by breeders. This old place ... it costs a lot of money!"

The star of the stallion barn is of course Casall, retired full-time to stud this summer at a fee of €3,000, after a story-book win on home ground at the Longines Global Tour Grand Prix at Hamburg. Also in the main stallion barn are Cameron Hanley's former horse Livello and one of the few remaining Cor de la Bryere sons: Corrado.

"In Holstein, once a stallion is approved, it's for life. It used to be different, once a colt was not approved at 2.5 years, they had to be

castrated, but that was 100 years ago. The responsibility now is on the stallion owners to say 'I carry on with him or I stop'. The breeders too will decide of course."

The Verband, unlike the KWPN, does not operate a watch list for stallions. "We were a similar system for three years but then, who is using a stallion that is on a watch list?"

There are two thoroughbred stallions currently based at Elmshorn: Ibisco, sire of Fischerincantas, winner of the WBFSH six-year-old title at the WBFSH young horse championships at Le Lion d'Angers in 2015 with Michael Jung. He covered 14 mares this year, while the Winged Love-sired Armand covered just eight.

Another interesting fact from all the farm visits is that youngstock are routinely X-rayed for bone chips and OCD. At Elmshorn, that is done as foals. "Otherwise, you've bought a foal, fed the horse until the age of two and then find a problem.

"Sending mares into sport costs and embryo transfer depends on how much you can spend. That's the point where the Dutch and Belgians are far ahead of the Holstein. Back with Cor de la Bryere, Landgraf ... it was so easy to sell foals from Holstein, even a foal that wasn't even born yet. It was so easy for the breeders to make money, they could ask any price."