

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DRIVING IN THE RDA

In May 1974 the press reported that Prince Phillip had commented that he would like to see disabled children take up driving ponies as an extension of the work of the Riding for the Disabled Association.

However six months earlier the Sandhurst Group of the RDA thought some of their riders were becoming too heavy to ride and made some enquires about driving. The RDA and the British Driving Society (BDS) said "No", but the Group persisted and Mrs Kirkpatrick, a helper with the Group, knew the Chairman of the Donkey Breed Society who had just formed a driving section. Then they approached the late Mrs Nancy Pethick who, with Mrs Ellis, continued to try out various types of vehicles and the first practical steps were taken. Various types of Rally Carts were used but all proved awkward for disabled people. Then, with the help of the late Mr Barney Thornley, a retired civil engineer, the first box-type vehicle was designed with a rear loading ramp.

The RDA, realising that in order to forestall anyone with perhaps more enthusiasm than common sense and practical experience from setting up a separate scheme, decided to take driving under its wing and Mrs Pethick was asked to pioneer a train scheme.

At its meeting in March 1975 Council resolved to amend the Association's Constitution to include Carriage Driving, to permit Member Groups to apply for consent to amend their constitutions to include Carriage Driving if they so wished, and to appoint a Committee to advise and exercise general control over the driving section.

The first meeting of the Carriage Driving Committee was held on July 15th 1975 under the Chairmanship of Mrs D Stewart who continued until January 1978 when Mrs Raw became Chairman.

The idea of a small pony-drawn vehicle for those confined to wheelchairs is not new; a vehicle of this type was in existence in about 1870 and can still be seen at Arlington Court in North Devon.

At first the Driving Section was divided into two – teaching people over 18 to drive a horse/pony drawn vehicle, and taking disabled people for a pleasure drive in a vehicle with a competent coach in charge of the animal.

In March 1982 the Committee sought Council approval to abolish the separate sections and to lower the age limit to 14 years. It was felt that children at special schools would be able to have 2 years driving with an RDA Group and then, when they left school at 16, they might be sufficiently experienced to join a BDS Group if they were unable to continue with RDA. In May 2000 the age limit was lowered again to 12, in order to allow more people the opportunity to Carriage Drive.

Driving gives an enormous amount of pleasure to disabled people whose activities can be limited by their age, weight and the nature of their disability but who welcome and opportunity to enjoy an activity with animals.

It has been found that when driving many disabled people are much happier and more independent in their wheelchairs and most vehicles are now fitted with a rear ramp and a side step for ambulant people. The majority of carriages can easily accommodate a wheelchair and a single seat for the CD Coach who has a second set of reins.

Wheelchairs are secured by a quick release locking bar. Safety is of paramount importance and there is a strict safety code for all Groups which must be adhered to. All ponies and donkeys are subjected to a stringent test of good behaviour before being used for disabled drivers.

When the weather gets too cold many of the Groups hold their sessions in an indoor school and thus have a marvellous opportunity to improve driving skills with simple dressage tests and modified gymkhana games.

Driving will never become as widespread as riding for disabled people as it is an expensive sport. The special vehicles cost between £500 and £4000 and places where driving can be enjoyed are limited, due to space requirements. The ratio of helpers needed for driving compared to riding is also greater. Disabled people will not gain the same physical benefit of improved muscle control and balance as riders do but they will all gain a sense of achievement and this is so important. The cynics and medical researchers will continue to ask questions about progress and improvement but this is beside the point when anything that gives happiness, enjoyment and occupation is a therapy.