



Photographs courtesy of Melissa Wadley

Andrew Barlow, now and HPA steward on Ground 1

# 21 Years of Beginners to Winners

Lucy Wilson takes a trip down memory lane as Kirtlington Park Polo School comes of age

**T**he story of KPPS back in 1993 as an idea cooked up between Melissa Wadley and the late David Heaton-Ellis in between coverts on the hunting field. David had taken up the post of Polo Manager at Kirtlington Park Polo Club, but only on the proviso that he and Melissa could open a polo school. The enterprise began the following year with a modest £5,000 bank loan to buy yard equipment, an extra boost from winning a Young Entrepreneur of the Year Competition and an expertly chosen

motto: 'Beginners to Winners'. Twenty-one years on, the office at Park Farm is still the hub of action, and there's always a biscuit or two in the tin to go accompany a strategic coffee whilst you plan your season ahead with Melissa. Or you can always just turn up for a chat and have a giggle at the last two decades of memories in the three sets of picture frames that decorate the room – one for hunting, one for polo and one for parties!

The school grew from strength to strength in the years that followed and, as

David moved on to pastures new, Melissa remained as proprietor to continue to offer a pathway for people new to the sport. There really isn't anyone Melissa doesn't know in polo, not just in the UK but worldwide – polo has taken her around the globe a good few times over the years. Many familiar polo names that have passed through the office and tack rooms at KPPS over the years, from David Higgins to the late Paul Castle, Roy Prisk, Jamie Peel, Tony Pidgley, John Martin, Sam Gairdner, Corinn Gibbs, Chris Crawford and even *Ten Years Younger* surgeon, Jan Stanek. Melissa recalls, "When Roy [Prisk] arrived he couldn't even ride! He worked so hard though, and he ended up staying with David



David Heaton-Ellis (left) with Martin Fewster (far right)



A young Puff Whiteley playing on Ground 1

and I for quite a while.” Visitors to the school have also included Rowan Atkinson’s son, Benjamin, and even Damian Hurley, son of Liz, who used to come for lessons when he was at school.

Melissa is boundlessly modest about her achievements, whether it be featuring in publications such as *Forbes* magazine, or providing the perfect formula to starting a polo career. However, her motto was really put to the test by Paul Castle. When he took up the sport with KPPS in 1994, Melissa recalls, “He fell off more than he stayed on but he was determined to play high goal within a year – and he did it. The story goes that when Paul applied for his membership at Guards, he went to the interview with a beard and they refused his application. So he went home, shaved, and reapplied!” Castle’s team, Metropolitan, was a regular on the scene at Guards and The Royal Berkshire for many years after.

Former 10 goaler, Lucas Monteverde, spent a season with KPPS playing for David Higgins when he was just starting out in his professional career. Kerry Packer had won a large legal case thanks to David Higgins’ representation (David was then Herbert Smith’s Senior Partner) and, as a thank you, Packer gave Higgins a string of six Ellerston ponies, three brand new saddles and Monteverde to play for his team for the season. Melissa reminisces that, “Lucas was only 16-years-old at the time and was already 4 goals. I remember Nacho Figueras also came to stay around the same time – I really had no idea they would become the players they are today!” That season Higgins played with Heaton-Ellis and Pancho Marin Moreno as well as Monteverde.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are a string of affluent schools on the weekly pony lists, from the smallest of avid polo

learners from The Dragon School in Oxford and Sommerfields, who have been coming for the last 10 years, to the longest standing Kirtlington schools partnership – with Stowe for the last two decades. When asked about the school’s ethos, Melissa simply says, “I want to make it as affordable as possible so everyone can have a go. Kids are the future. Bringing them on with the right ponies is essential.” Bruern Abbey School, just down the road in the village of Chesterton, are the latest addition to KPPS’s pupils. They specialise in children with learning difficulties, Melissa explains, “It has been hugely rewarding seeing the progress and enjoyment the children make when they come to their lessons. Some of the children really struggled with instruction, so to help I bought a few sets of rainbow coloured reins. Now they all know what colour they need to be holding onto for walk, trot and canter.”

Melissa is passionate about her ponies, her dogs, her hunting and her family. Her support network relies on the help of her parents and her sister, Marie-Claire, who helped to build her website, [www.4polo.com](http://www.4polo.com). Her mother, Marian, can often be seen at polo or hunt meets with a picnic to rival Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s seasonal fare – that’s if a hungry Wadley dog doesn’t raid the picnic basket. Her father, Roland, is always on hand to help with repairs and the all-important health and safety paperwork, and there will always be a canine companion ready to greet you at the yard or by the lorry – Melissa’s latest Ridgeback puppy, Hero, has taken to the polo lifestyle like a true professional, already staking his claim on the office sofa and making firm friends with the other dogs based at Kirtlington.



16-year-old Luca Montaverde



Melissa posing for her *Forbes Magazine* photo shoot



Homebreds have been another strong theme in the journey for Melissa. KPPS ponies have going on to varied careers from high goal to essential lesson ponies, and even a show jumping star can be found in KPPS's stud book. David Heaton-Ellis and Melissa began with an Argentine mare called Estrella – one of her fillies, Mia, is still a favourite in the school even now. Of another two fillies out of an Ellerston mare by Andrew Seavill's The Catisfield Kid, the eldest, Ella, went on to be owned and played by Carlos Gracida. Melissa's future showjumping star, Floriana, was a similar combination. By Cameo Reflection and out of Pluma, an Argentine



Wiggy was the apple of Melissa's eye and infamous out hunting



Wiggy, the polo pony turned hunter, when he first arrived

mare Melissa had bought from Vieri Antinori for the school, Floriana's story, as with so many others at KPPS, starts on the hunting field. "I was out on my gelding Wiggy when I spotted Cameo Reflection being hunted by Derek Rickets, and I decided to choose him for Pluma." The latest addition to the school's homebred

string is a striking black gelding called Gosh, out of one of a Kirtlington mare played by David Heaton-Ellis, Picassa. Resident professional and instructor, Chris Crawford, broke him in and helped bring him on before he joined the lesson and hiring string. "He was such a shock! We knew the mare was due to foal, but he just appeared, black as the night with his white star one

Melissa and her mother Marion exploring Chile on horseback





Melissa, in the red number 14, with her team for the Berks and Bucks Draghounds Team Chase the years KPPS started



Gosh, the latest homebred addition to the school string



David Heaton-Ellis winning a trophy on ground 5

morning, so we called him Gosh.”

In the downtime after the summer season, Melissa swaps polo ponies for hunters. There are really only two seasons in Melissa’s year; from polo to hunting and hunting to polo. The autumn meets with the Bicester often feature a few of the school ponies and KPPS friends who aren’t ready to hang up their boots just yet. Melissa is no stranger to team chasing either, and is a regular with The Bicester and Whaddon Chase Hunt. The infamous Wiggy, who was the apple of Melissa’s eye, was with her for nearly twenty years and was originally bought for polo from David Taylor. He was the progeny of an Argentine mare of John Horswell’s, by a Thoroughbred racing stallion. At the time, Taylor ran a transport and meat business and sold Wiggy to Heaton-Ellis, but it was Melissa who discovered his aptitude over a hunting

hedge. There were very few meets when Melissa wasn’t seen adopting the rodeo position as he bucked his way round the first few fields.

Polo never really shuts down at KPPS at the end of the season. Since Heathfield Polo Club formed down the road under the Asker family, the late summer tournaments have always been a great place for all Melissa’s clients to have-a-go at competitive polo, after a summer of instructional chukkas and lessons. Handily, the Club also has a covered indoor arena, in which the schools have been able to continue their weekly lessons in preparation for all the fixtures and SUPA tournaments for the past decade.

Melissa has always offered more than just an hour on one of her ponies with an HPA Instructor. At Kirtlington there will always be post-chukka asados, hunt balls, trips to the HPA International Day and



David Heaton-Ellis coming of ground two on Picassa having lost a game



Melissa in the pony lines by Ground 1 and 2 in the early years

forays abroad to pretty much anywhere to play polo in the sun or to buy your first four-legged polo accessory as part of the service. When you book your first polo lesson at KPPS, you will also find yourself on the Wadley family guest list for the next Halloween Party or Kirtlington Park Polo Ball. KPPS is a nurturing family environment where anyone can turn up and become immersed in joys of grass roots polo.

Here’s to another 21 years!