

Millers Hill

Ah yes,... our turn to have some fun! September 19th saw the Riding Club weekend away at Millers Hill in Armagh. With a gleeful feeling of role reversal, friends and family were organised to mind the children, while the adults giddily packed the cars, horse boxes and trucks with tents, sleeping-bags, rain gear, and of course all the usual tack, - not to mention the horses themselves.

Saturday morning, and the secret convey left Letterkenny heading for Armagh. Along the road other boxes and lorries were spotted, and we speculated mutually whether we were headed for the same place. Someone putting boots on a horse at the garage in Aughnacloy, hmm.... turned out later to be Sharon and John.

Once arrived in Millers Hill, the horses were coaxed out of the boxes and put in their weekend quarters in stalls alongside the spacious arena. Like their owners, the horses quickly recognised old friends and acquaintances, and the chat started up.

The magnificent weather for the time of year, ensured that little time was lost before the first riders were ready and heading out onto the course. With over 30 acres, Millers Hill really gives a feeling of indulgence to the rider. Beautifully situated, the outdoor arena is higher than the rest of the course, and gives a majestic view over the jumps, bridge and lake below. Riders making their way slowly across the arena have the luxury of surveying the course and the progress of the other riders below.

Once out on the course, it became clear there's plenty here for all levels. From novice to expert, whether it's a simple baby jump or triple half-barrels, - the very sight of which would make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck,- it's all here. Heading right from the start, the large field sloped gently down, flattening out at the bottom to allow a good stretch back across to the lane, ideal to get the horses into their first canter. Once across the lane and the real fun started. A series of jumps of varying levels of difficulty stretch for a good half a kilometre or so. For the brave, you could build up some serious speed here. Coming to the end of that run, nice and safe, it was a left, and a steep climb up towards the arena with the lake and bridge to the left.

The purpose-built lake and bridge give opportunity to the more adventurous riders. For the more faint-hearted a gate allows entry. Libby, Nadine, Sharon, Ann and their ilk had no truck with such pathetic behaviour, and entered at speed through a fearsome looking ranch gate jump. The horses eyed the water suspiciously at first, but like their owners, egged on by the example of their friends we soon had them wading around like old hands. Now familiar with the course, we did all again, and then again, and then,... aw look it was a lovely afternoon, we did it one more time, before hunger started to set in.

Back at the centre, horses untacked and returned to the stalls, the gang settled in for the evening. Rather than crashing around in the dark after dinner, someone sensibly suggested that we put the tents up now. We did, and the place started to take on the look of a zany festival-meets-horses event. By now, the day of fresh air was starting to tell, and we were ravenous. Upstairs to the comfortable dining room with a stove blazing in the middle, and the fact that we didn't have to load up the horses for the long drive home was really starting to kick in.

Well fed and well watered, the evening stretched into the night, and the tales got taller, the jumps got bigger, and the falls mightier with the telling,... and what harm? Finally, with the last stragglers down, we fell asleep in various tents, lorries, and arenas, to the sound of snorting horses and the all pervasive smell of horsehite.

An early start, and there was time for a good ride around the course again. Familiar with the terrain, we were all a bit braver now, and tried a few bigger obstacles, and a few good canters, one particularly memorable, in the field with the table jump.

Before we split up for carriage riding, all assembled in the right-hand field for a group photo. Photo taken, Rachel decided the day lacked excitement, and just to check everybody was fully awake decided to lead a spontaneous cavalry-charge up the field. Anyone who might have been in any way doubtful, was wide awake by the time we reached the top hedge!

Carriage-driving, let me tell you, looks very sedate, but is not as easy as you might think. Robert gave each of us a quick introduction to the basics, and then we were off, one at a time around the course in the top arena. Despite great effort and concentration, only one out of our group of eight managed a clear round. Well done Libby.

Then Robert showed us how it's really done, and it was a quick bone-shaking, teeth-rattling, hair-raising trip around and over the bridge. To our ancestors, who had only this as their method of transport,... respect!

To round it all off, the lacrosse sticks came out, and it was time for a game of polo-cross. Let's not dwell on it, but suffice to say that some people knew what they were at, and impressed with their skills, some of us didn't, and didn't, if you know what I mean. Oh well, you have to start somewhere.

And that, was about as much riding, jumping, carriage-driving and polo-crossing that you can squeeze into one weekend. Great fun, great venue, heartfelt thanks to the organisers, and the Crum family.

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