

NATIONAL Profile

Maggie Jackman finds out how to make an equestrian centre profitable.

...Ian Winfield



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Ian Winfield never intended to run an equestrian centre; he bought Oldencraig planning to retire. They say you never know what life has in store for you. A Barnardos boy, of unknown mixed race origins, with a dream, Ian was brought up on a council estate in Northamptonshire. On his paper round he would gaze at the big houses and smart cars and told his adopted 'mum' that one day he would have all of that.

To escape from a childhood where he felt a misfit he joined the army: "I admit I went with 'attitude', I thought I could beat the system, but I quickly realised that if you had rank you could tell people what to do so I decided, if you can't beat them join them, from then I changed. My career in the forces has been one of the most influential parts of my life. It teaches you discipline, builds self esteem, trains you in man management, makes you a team motivator and gives you high standards. To succeed you need a fighting spirit."

On leaving the army jobs as bodyguards were attractive, glamorous and well paid. This led Ian into the world of nightclubs. "I looked at the people managing the clubs and promoting the bands and thought, I can do this, and better." His management company named Pigs Might Fly, soon managed nightclubs and looked after the interests of acts including the well-known band, The Drifters; it also included fire-eaters, exotic dancers and club singers.

What else was the club scene in need of? Good, smart efficient doormen. Ian formed Black Tie and supplied them for clubs, film

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they could be year round. The good surfaces meant the riders were happy so they started to come in their droves and the bigger lorries needed access so Ian widened the gates and the drive.

He wanted to attract the best local judges, which the riders like, so heated judges boxes were installed and lunch provided to keep them happy. He employs a show secretary who makes sure riders can get through to someone when they ring for times, to make enquiries or late entries and generally make it easy to come to Oldencraig. He started to attract big regular entries. Improved facilities has meant Ian was allocated top British Dressage shows, in 2002 a Petplan Equine Area Festival and this year the Southern Regional Championships. "These are all good business and increased income, but boy we work hard to make them really good."

What Ian has done is to apply business skills with no sentiment. Most equestrian businesses have sentimentality and self indulgence standing in their way. Every element of Oldencraig has to stand up and pay for itself, or it goes. The business has a thriving livery side and the standards are high which attracts a good clientele. They have top class instruction on hand, weekly competitions, impeccable surfaces, a tack shop, fully alarmed premises including CCTV, washing machines and dryers, internal wash down bays, heated rug room, a high ratio of staff and the horses are well cared for. This results in happy liversies, and a low turnover of clients. "Liversies are the mainstay of the business and they deserve respect. If you are paying for a service in any other sphere of life you expect and demand the best and that is the principal I have applied to our livery service. The price is competitive and the standards are the highest so my livery business is always full with a waiting list."

"My staff are well paid, have good comfortable, warm living accommodation, four lessons a week and work a five and a half day week.

premiers and private receptions. The businessman was emerging and very soon he was buying derelict pubs and clubs and turning them round and selling them. Ian was living in north London and had a girlfriend who was taking riding lessons, so he went with her and loved it. He bought his own horse which he kept at livery at Headley in Surrey. Ian became a keen riding club competitor. He moved his horse to Jennie Franklins' yard near Crawley where he enjoyed show jumping and hunting. By now a self made man he decided to get out of the club scene, which was becoming too full of drugs and violence, and retire to buy somewhere to keep his own horses.

Oldencraig with 30 acres came on the market. It was an existing business so Ian hired a yard manager to run the livery and competition business while he set about refurbishing the house. He admits he made a mistake. "The place was very run down and you soon realise that everything cost thousands not hundreds to put right. Then we got strangles and I suddenly had to become very hands on. I either closed up or I went for broke and applied my standards. I applied the same principles that I would if I was buying a run down club. The first question is what do the punters want. Well the list was never ending but I figured if I'm going to do this it will be the best. I always have in my mind that any improvements add value to the property, but that theory only goes so far."

He invested in good surfaces, floodlighting, hard standing for lorries, but he also wanted income. They ran shows, and the floodlighting meant

This keeps them happy, motivated and improves their skills. However I am a strict disciplinarian and a hard taskmaster. They have to reach my standards and those are very high. They will leave Oldencraig with self discipline and standards that will hold them in good stead all their life."

Clients need to travel horses and so Ian has a horsebox. He will often drive them himself. It is all part of additional services that clients want and are willing to pay for. Equally if a side of the business does not pay it will go and that is what has happened to the riding school at Oldencraig. In its place are horses for sale. Nice, safe good moving horses with good breeding and excellent temperaments. Professional dressage rider and respected trainer Vicky Thomson is Ian's partner. They have developed this side of the business. They help clients to find a horse, and as recommendation is the best form of advertising, word spreads and reputation and business grows. The philosophy is that every part of the property must pay for itself and work everyday of the year.

I kept comparing Oldencraig to a supermarket. You drive in through a smart entrance to park easily in a clean well-lit area. You enter a clean attractive store with smiling efficient staff in tidy uniforms. You are presented with a wide choice of merchandise, attractively arranged and competitively priced. You find additional services, cash point, film developing, and dry cleaning. You are dealt with politely and efficiently and you leave with a desire to return.

Oldencraig is an equestrian success story and Ian Winfield is a remarkable businessman. No longer gazing enviously at the big houses he has succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, his approach to business is one we can all learn from.

