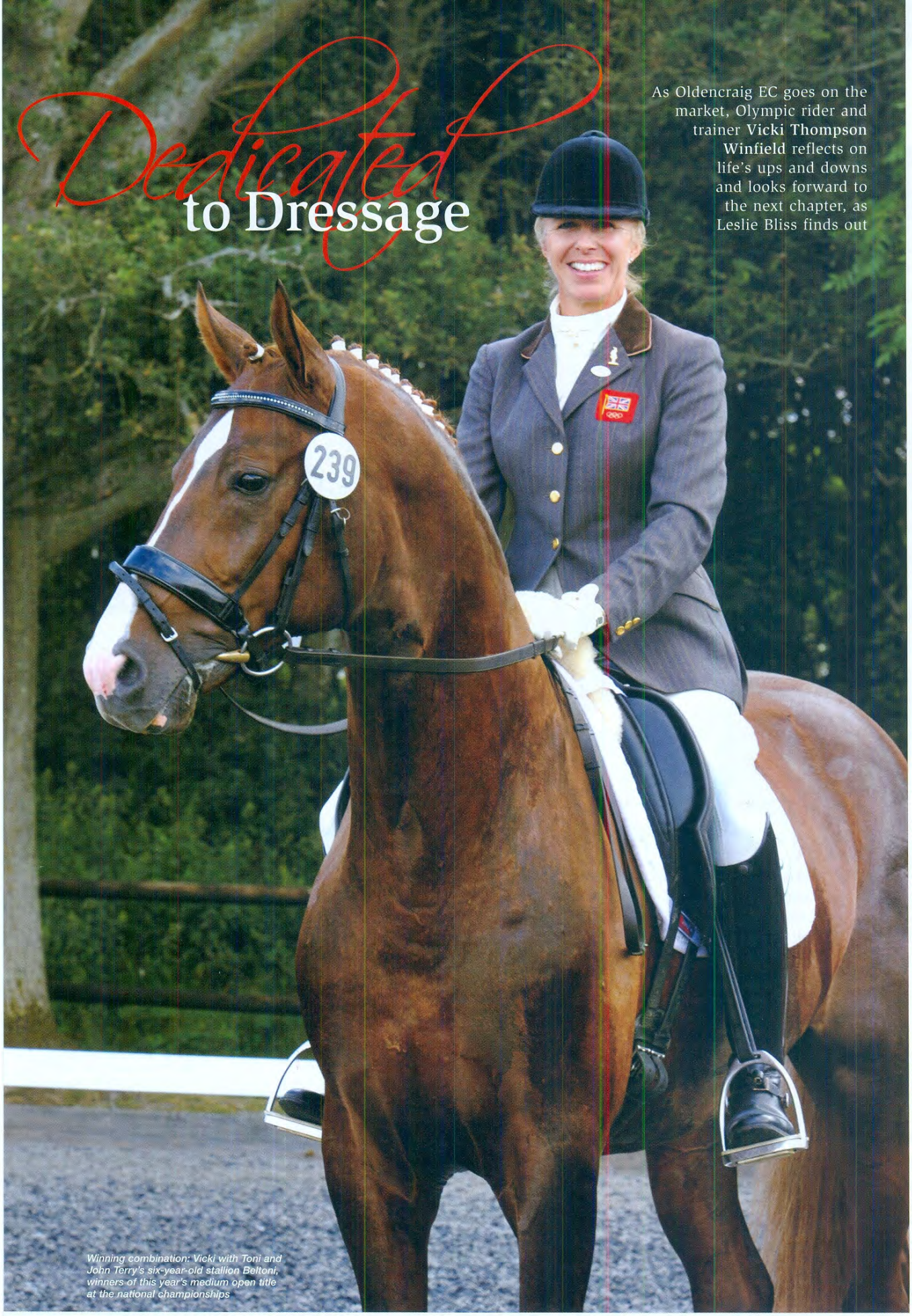
Dedicated to Dressage

As Oldencraig EC goes on the market, Olympic rider and trainer **Vicki Thompson Winfield** reflects on life's ups and downs and looks forward to the next chapter, as Leslie Bliss finds out



Winning combination: Vicki with Toni and John Terry's six-year-old stallion Beltoni, winners of this year's medium open title at the national championships

"If I have a day off, I spend time with my horses. It gives me a buzz and keeps me fit"

Vicki with Oldencraig's advanced rider and instructor Kirsten Fox

Vicki Thompson Winfield has been one of the most smartly turned out riders on the dressage circuit for many years with her trim figure, impeccably tailored outfits and manicured nails, so it is no surprise that her home, Oldencraig Equestrian Centre, near Lingfield in Surrey, is equally as immaculate.

Her surroundings haven't always been as salubrious however. There was a time in the early 1990s when Vicki was living in a mobile home near Horsham in West Sussex, looking after her octogenarian trainer Franz Rochowansky, former chief rider at the Spanish Riding School.

Known as "Rocky", he trained Vicki for more than 20 years, and watched her represent Britain at the 1995 European Championships, winning gold in the inaugural pas-de-deux competition Tour d'Europe, and as a team member at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, both with Enfant.

"Rocky was a tremendous influence," says Vicki, who is nigh-on impossible to photograph riding in anything but the most classically correct seat.

Vicki had her first taste of luxury when successful businessman Wayne Channon, whom she trained from prelim to grand prix level, built a state-of-the-art equestrian complex with her design input at Exfold Farm in West Sussex. When the Channons moved to Belgium, Vicki made arrangements to relocate herself, Rocky and the horses, but she found out the night before moving that her new home was not going to be available.

Luck would have it that Vicki had met her husband-to-be Ian Winfield at a mutual friend's BBQ not long before and knew he had just bought Oldencraig. The situation was desperate as she had to leave the yard immediately as it was 2000 and the country was in the middle of the foot & mouth crisis with a livestock movement ban coming into force the next day.

Dressage mentor: Franz Rochowansky, former chief rider at the Spanish Riding School

"I said to Ian 'Can I come?'. He was busy painting the stables. He asked: 'When?'. I replied 'This afternoon!'

"I arrived when the paint was still wet. I brought five horses with me, but told him I had four," she says with a mischievous smile.

But that was not all. It was a year Vicki won't forget. She went back to living with her parents: "My father died that spring. He was "Mr Fix It" and a great support."

Her run of bad luck continued.

"I sent Rocky to America so he didn't have to go through all the turmoil of the move, but he was taken ill. It was a drama to get him well enough to come home. He died in October, just after his 90th birthday. It was hard to lose both my dad and Rocky," she says.

The reason it proved so traumatic was made worse as Vicki struggled to raise the £10,000 to pay for Rocky's transport home.

Ian Winfield with Toni Terry, one of Oldencraig's high profile clients

Looking ahead to the future: Vicki and Ian married in 2008

"It was a difficult time. Ian and his friends helped me most and lent me the money to bring Rocky back. They were a wonderful support, especially for people I had known such a short time," says Vicki and also recalls the kindness shown by two prominent figures from the dressage world. "The others who offered help were Lady March and Dr Wilfried Bechtolsheimer. It made me realise who my friends were."

Again, it was Ian who lent her the money to pay the hotel bill for Rocky's wake.

"My life changed direction and I started rebuilding it. It was one of the reasons I got together with Ian and our relationship grew from there," says Vicki, who married Ian in 2008.

Having moved into Oldencraig in 2001, Vicki set about rebuilding not only her life, but also Oldencraig together with Ian. They have since invested a cool £7.5 million, turning what was originally a pig farm into one of the country's most impressive equestrian venues. Apart from the three international-sized outdoor arenas, plus one indoors with seating for 700, 80 air-conditioned stables with rubber matting, solariums, one-mile all-weather gallop and 15 paddocks with post-and-rail fencing, there is an indoor pool and Jacuzzi for staff and clients, conference facilities, bistro that seats 80, bar and B&B. A team of 38 staff keep everything in tip-top condition.

"It was in need of TLC and dragging into the 20th century. Only one building is left in its original framework, which is the stallion block. The rest has been replaced. We cleared fences, replanted fields, redid arenas."

Vicki credits her husband and his military background for much of the work: "It's been Ian's little building project and everything has to be spick and span. I don't mind and understand that. Rocky was the same; strict in the way he liked things done. We have lost staff because of it, but ultimately this is our home. We expect the livery business to be the standard we like in our personal life. It doesn't always fit with everyone. We've done much so that we can bring out the best in clients and horses. We possibly don't get it right all the time, but that is our aim," she says.

It has certainly attracted a varied clientele from dedicated housewives to City bankers, lawyers and QCs. The most high profile customers are footballers' other halves Toni Terry and Abi Clancy and here another of Ian's past professions as a bodyguard for celebrities has come in useful.

"They like the fact that Ian has a security background and understands their requirements," she says. "Everybody has one aim: to ride better and train horses in a fun group environment. Toni's dad Alan Poole came here with his horse and initially Toni came to watch him," says Vicki, who has taught Toni for the past two years and competes successfully on Toni and John Terry's exciting international prospect Beltoni.

"Abi started coming a year ago as Toni's friend. Both have enough talent to be good riders and it is fun as a trainer to work with them," she says.

But it's not all about celebrities. "I'm excited that Jill Tims, who has been training with me for five years, should be ready to do her first grand prix at the end of the year."

Her own horse Papillon will hopefully also be set to start in grand prix in the autumn: "You never know with horses and I never make long-term plans as you have to be flexible."

She applies the same motto to her life in general: "Officially, I own six horses, but Ian says it's 60. With Ian, everything is always for sale. The reason Oldencraig is for sale is because Ian wants to do other things. He's great at building things and is now 'under-challenged' here."

But there's no way Vicki will give up dressage: "It's a way of life. If I have a day off, I spend time with my horses. It gives me a buzz and keeps me fit. I love to work with horses, to be around them and help them and their riders enjoy each other, developing understanding and communication at all the different levels. It's hard work, but fun and rewarding. It doesn't have to be about winning that red rosette."