Hickstead heralds a new dawn

IT WAS 57 YEARS AGO that the late Douglas Bunn, Master of Hickstead, held the first Derby meeting at his purpose-built international showjumping ground.

2017 heralded a new major sponsor for this event, Al Shira’a Stables LLC, which is based in the heart of Abu Dhabi and was founded by Her Highness Sheikh Fatima Bint Hazza Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, whose company is dedicated to the support and promotion of all horses and equestrian sports.

When Douglas founded Hickstead in 1960, he was then a British team member and chef d’equipe. At the time, he felt there was nothing in the UK to match other venues in Europe – putting British riders at a disadvantage. Hickstead was built to further the interests of international showjumping and within three years it hosted its first European Championship.

What many people do not know is that in 1970, Douglas’ horse Beethoven, ridden by David Broome, won the World Championship at La Baule – to this day, he remains the only British horse to have achieved this.

His son, Edward, explains: “In the old days, whichever country won the World Championship was invited to host the next one – in this case 1974. It was a natural progression for the Nations Cup to precede this, the first one being held in 1971.”

This year, once again it will be held during the popular Longines Royal International Horse Show, which follows on just a month after the Al Shira’a Hickstead Derby Meeting.

A family concern

Hickstead is very much a family concern. Douglas encouraged his children to get involved and it clearly was the right move, with each of them ensuring that his dream lives on.

Standing in the Hickstead commentary box with Lizzie and Edward, overlooking the International Arena, one can see the dedication Edward and his team have put into making this arena one of the world’s most popular and safest equestrian venues.

“The sport is going through change and everyone at Hickstead is very much aware of this and see it as a fresh challenge,” says Lizzie. “It is now a multi-million-pound industry, and showjumping horses’ values have increased enormously. To encourage the top riders to Hickstead, we have to continually invest in the facilities, not least the International Arena.”

This is where Edward comes in. “In the past, when the weather was fine, the footing in the arena was perfect, but when it was wet it turned into a quagmire,” he says. “So we consulted the experts and invested in a new state-of-the-art surface. We put in extra drainage and added a gravel raft and 2,900 tonnes of sand. What we have now achieved is an all-weather surface of grass which is recognised as perhaps the best showjumping arena in the world.”

Hickstead and Olympic course designer Bob Ellis volunteers a dose of high praise: “Edward is a fantastic groundsmen, as you can see by looking at the International Arena – we all wish we could get our lawns looking like this!”

What surprised me when researching this feature is the number of horses that attend the shows. The RHJS has a total influx of more than 3,500 horses during the six days – 32 of which enter the prestigious FEI Nations Cup of Great Britain.

Some are transported via air into Gatwick from as far afield as the USA – logistical planning at its best!

The stable area for these horses has expanded into five fields with more than 1,000 temporary stables; the security bill in the stabling area alone costing nearly £60,000 per year.

The veterinary input is also substantial. Apart from Hickstead’s own dedicated veterinary team, many of the top riders bring their own vets with them as well as the international teams that participate in the Nations Cup. Back-up support is provided also by the course designers to put the safety of the horses first.

Communication is paramount and the vets work from an office close to the International Practice Arena. Radio links to vets working in the outer arenas mean that any emergency, however small, can be dealt with right away.

During the top international events, a vet sits with the course designers, senior judges, paramedic and a doctor monitoring each horse and rider as they jump. They have the power to stop a horse if they feel there are issues relating to any potential injury. The same applies should there be a fall at a jump. There is also a fully-fitted-out horse ambulance on stand-by to deal with any major emergency.

Emily Bunn, Hickstead’s Senior-Vet says: “We even had to sell dad’s extensive wine collection to help with the International Arena development.”

Edward laughs. “Its location is ideal for attracting riders from Europe, being close to cross channel ports and with ease of motorway access.

One of the main reasons Douglas bought Hickstead was because a river ran though the land, which is vital for irrigation of the arenas during dry summer months.

In conclusion, one has to admire Douglas for what he started and what he achieved for international showjumping. The bon ton has been passed on and the good news is that Edward, Lizzie, John, Chloe, Daisy and Charlie Bunn are making sure his traditions continue.

It is a family event designed to attract families to one of the world’s most highly-respected equestrian venues; the Wimbledon of showjumping – a view endorsed by Sir Nick Skelton, double Olympic Gold Medal winner.