

# Building dreams thriving businesses

From “surfing on horseback” to precision farming: grant programmes like Cotswolds LEADER help rural economies to flourish, Siân Ellis speaks to one grant recipient



Jive Pony training session

Photo: Sharp Photography



The Jive Pony training barn, constructed by LandMark.

Photo: Bryn Musselwhite



Jive Pony, the first all-female equestrian display team

“It’s like gymnastics and dance on horseback; like surfing on horseback: the horse is the wave and you can’t fight the wave, you’ve got to go with it,” says Rebecca Musselwhite (née Townsend) describing the discipline of equine vaulting.

Undeclared as British Vaulting Champion for seven years when she retired from competitive vaulting, Rebecca spent three years at drama school and then “ran away to Giffords Circus” where she learned to combine her passion for performance and horses. After “three life-changing seasons with Giffords”, in 2005 she set up Jive Pony, the first all-female equestrian display team: wowing spectators at country shows and events with their fast-paced equestrian stunts, and providing equines for film, TV and photographic shoots as well as parties and weddings.

With the help of a Cotswolds LEADER



Jive Pony, the first all-female equestrian display team

grant, Rebecca has just built a new training barn at Moreton-in-Marsh: to enable more people to learn vaulting, performance skills and equine connection training techniques.

“For vaulting you need flexibility, strength, coordination, rhythm, artistic expression and timing,” she says. “All of these skills are brilliant to cultivate in a young person because they are transferable. You’ve got to have the horse at the right pace, the right music, and all your team mates on form. Bringing together all the skills is what makes me so passionate about vaulting and I really hope to share that through the training barn.”

Since January Rebecca has been using the barn to train up a “top secret” vaulting act for Giffords Circus in time for its 20th anniversary ‘Hooley’-themed season kicking off at Easter. A close friend of circus co-founder and driving force

Nell Gifford, who died in December, Rebecca says:

“I worked for Giffords Circus at the very beginning and it inspired me to start my own company. The Hooley, while poignant, is going to be a lot of fun, maintaining that wonder and joyful, wild, exciting feeling of Giffords Circus that was Nell’s *raison d’être*. We want to do the best job we possibly can, to carry Nell’s legacy carefully and present it beautifully.”

From the autumn, after the circus season finishes, Rebecca will begin to offer training to the wider public, aiming to be “fully up and running” from January 2021. There will be a mix of weekend courses and one-to-one

sessions. “The vaulting will probably be geared more towards children, but there is a lot of interest from older people to have a go too.”

Rebecca will also be organising courses in positive reinforcement training: an approach to training animals that encourages positive results and behaviour through rewards and praise (she uses the technique with her own equines at Jive Pony, needless to say). The first course for horses and ponies, run by world-class +R (positive reinforcement) animal trainer Emma Hills, is set for May (2020), and Jive Pony will be taking positively reinforced trained miniature ponies and ‘unicorns’ out to entertain people at events, birthday parties and weddings.

Plus, Rebecca is keen to develop connection training. “Animals have a sense that can detect when somebody needs to be treated gently and we are hoping to build a therapeutic side to the business at the training barn. We’ve got someone doing work on a PhD on connection training here. It’s a really important aspect.”

## Supporting businesses

The new training barn, which the Cotswolds LEADER grant helped to finance, includes a dedicated training space, stables, tack room with washroom facilities and a mezzanine floor to be used as an office and storage space.

“It was on a goal map ten years ago that I wanted to create such a training environment and the LEADER grant has allowed us to realise the kind of cohesive space I dreamed of,” Rebecca says. Having the new facilities and being able to develop business has already enabled her to take on a new member of staff, Daisy Hurley, and pursue more collaborations.

LEADER (part of the Rural Development Programme for England and financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) has been run in the Cotswolds by the Cotswolds Conservation Board. Now closed, with all funds allocated, it has been a great success, says James Webb, LEADER Programme Manager.

“Our grants have supported 56



Jive Pony in action



Jive Pony in action

fantastic rural businesses and created 80 jobs across our region. Collectively, our grants total £1,738,527.”

Funding has supported the construction of new offices, farm shops and an education centre, and equipment ranging from a robotic milking system to a log-drying kiln. Many environmental benefits have been gained, including from investments in high-tech equipment for precision farming that helps to reduce farms’ carbon footprints.

“It’s incredibly satisfying to see investment increasing productivity, creating jobs and growing the Cotswolds economy,” James says. “Whilst it’s a capital programme, at its heart it’s all about people who are passionate about their sector, helping them to take the next step, realise ambitions and, in some cases, fulfil a lifelong dream.

“Looking to the future, the clear message from the business community is that we need a successor to LEADER. The sums of money granted by LEADER are relatively modest compared to other grant schemes and this makes them accessible to micro businesses and start-ups. However they punch above their weight in terms of outputs.” With local staff that understand the needs of local rural businesses, the Cotswolds Conservation Board is well placed to deliver a future programme, James adds.

Rebecca agrees. “The team at Cotswolds LEADER have been really



Photo: Bryn Musselwhite

The Jive Pony training barn, constructed by LandMark.

supportive. I think you should always be responsible for making your own dreams happen, but to have somebody say they believe in your vision and support you makes a huge difference. It makes you want to succeed even more.” ♦

**Visit the Cotswolds LEADER page to discover more local businesses helped by the programme, [www.cotswolds-aonb.org.uk/looking-after/cotswolds-leader/](http://www.cotswolds-aonb.org.uk/looking-after/cotswolds-leader/) Find out more about Jive Pony at [www.jive-pony.co.uk](http://www.jive-pony.co.uk) and why not see the exciting new vaulting act at Giffords Circus – tickets and tour dates at [www.giffordscircus.com](http://www.giffordscircus.com)**

## SUCCESS STORIES

### Cotswolds LEADER programme achievements –

- 56 businesses supported
- 80 new jobs created
- Total grant value of £1,738,527
- Total investment including match funding £4,972,495
- 23 farms supported with investments in high-tech equipment
- Neglected woodlands brought back into management



**For further information on the Cotswolds AONB and the Cotswolds Conservation Board:**  
**Cotswolds Conservation Board**  
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