

# THE ART OF GOOD BREEDING

*The family team behind Highclere's racing syndicates is responsible for the Queen's bloodstock – but they are also bringing racehorse ownership to a wider audience through the annual yearling parades, held on the estate known to millions as Downton Abbey. By Catriona Gray*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARRY CORY WRIGHT



Clockwise from above: a family photograph of George, Carolyn and Harry Herbert. The Queen and John Warren at Ascot. The yearling parade. The Queen with Henry Herbert, the 7th Earl of Carnarvon, in 1978. Left: Jake Warren and Prince Harry in 2011



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Highclere Stud. Above: the Queen with John Warren and Princess Anne at Ascot this year



Above: Henry Herbert with a young Prince Charles. Below, from top: the Queen with her horse Highclere in 1974. Harbinger, one of the syndicate horses, racing in 2009



**A**cross the Capability Brown parkland, the castellated outline of Highclere rises in the mist, a view familiar to anyone who has watched *Downton Abbey*. Tourists from around the globe flock to the castle to see what life is like for the Carnarvons, and how it compares with the fictional world occupied by the Earl of Grantham and his family. My destination, however, is a short walk south of the Jacobethan mansion, down a long winding driveway, which leads you to the mellow brick buildings of Highclere Stud. On this crisp October day, it is tranquil save for an occasional whinny from one of the elegant equine residents who are peering out from the quadrangle of loose boxes, curious at the influx of visitors.

For I'm not the only arrival on this sunny morning: the stud is filling up with an assortment of people, some clad in wellingtons and Barbour, others in city attire. We are all here for the yearling parades, the annual opportunity to see and invest in the newest equine talent purchased by Highclere Thoroughbred Racing. To those in the know, these have become some of the most respected syndicates in flat racing since Harry Herbert, the younger brother of the 8th Earl of Carnarvon, founded it 25 years ago.

Tall, charismatic and eloquent, Herbert is the perfect frontman for the business, which he runs with his brother-in-law, John Warren, the bloodstock advisor to Her Majesty the Queen, a post that was formerly held by Herbert's father, the 7th Earl of Carnarvon. 'It's lovely having that continuity,' says Herbert. 'We all speak the same horsey language.'

The venture is a family affair: Herbert's sister Carolyn is married to Warren and the couple run the stud, assisted by their son Jake (a close friend of Prince Harry who lives nearby with his wife Zoe and their twin daughters), since much of Warren's time is spent overseeing the monarch's stables.

'Managing the Queen's horses is a bit like running a boarding-school – there's always someone in trouble or some little problem that we're trying to deal with,' says Warren, who is perched on a sofa in the stud's office, one eye focused upon a television screen that is showing a fixture in which one of the Royal horses

is running. 'Her Majesty reads the *Racing Post* every day and I give her updates two or three times a week. She enjoys the journey of ownership – from breeding and the foal being born, right down to choosing the right trainer and jockey.'

'The process is like a jigsaw puzzle where everything needs to be pieced together, and that intrigues her. It's an inexact science, so you've got to use your knowledge and information to make decisions, which is part of the fun.'

The Queen has about 20 brood mares, and approximately 15 thoroughbreds of each age group – foals, yearlings, two-year-olds and three-year-olds – and takes a



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From left: Jake Warren, Chica and Harry Herbert, and John, Zoe and Carolyn Warren

keen interest in their progress. When she turned 91 earlier this year, she chose to have her birthday dinner at Highclere Castle, after watching her horses compete at Newbury, the famous racecourse just a few miles down the road.

Racing, of course, is known as the sport of kings principally because of the prohibitive cost of thoroughbred ownership – but the emergence of syndicates has allowed a much wider demographic to share in the excitement. Highclere has led the way, consistently finding exceptional colts and fillies, which are then sent to selected yards for training. Each autumn, the new yearlings are shown in the stud's yard so prospective investors can decide which of them to back.

Members also get tickets to racedays and regular updates on their animals, and there are plenty of social events where people can meet one another. Elizabeth Hurley, Heston Blumenthal and Victoria Pendleton have all bought into the Highclere syndicates, as has *Downton's* Lord Grantham – or rather, the actor Hugh Bonneville.

'A lot of people have said in the past that they thought it might be too exclusive for them to get involved with, but it's completely the opposite,' emphasises Warren. 'The more people we get on board the better. It broadens the range of horses we can buy, and you never know where the next winner will come from.'

Seated alongside Warren in the wood-panelled office, Herbert gestures at the framed equestrian photographs lining the walls. 'That horse over there was the Derby winner, this one won at Ascot, and that was a world-record breaker,' he says, pointing proudly. 'Getting to those big races is so hard to achieve, but we manage to produce

Right: the Queen with Princess Anne and Henry Herbert in 1988



very good results without having the deepest pockets.'

Indeed, the syndicates have been extraordinarily successful, producing seven European champions and one world champion. At Royal Ascot alone, it has entered 90 runners since its inception, even though getting to the event, as Herbert says, 'is the equivalent of competing in the Olympics.'

'Racing is a huge industry,' he continues. 'In the UK, you've got 100,000 individuals directly employed by it and nearly a million acres of the countryside are taken up by thoroughbred breeding and competing. It's such an integral part of Britain's heritage, and I love how we are helping more people to share in that. When your horse wins at Ascot, in front of 70,000 spectators and against opponents that are the product of immense power and wealth, that's an incredible feeling. It's absolutely intoxicating.' □  
For details of the Highclere Thoroughbred Racing syndicates, visit [www.highclereracing.co.uk](http://www.highclereracing.co.uk).