

Off and RUNNING

Domestic and international buyer interest contributed to a memorable first edition of the Goffs UK Yorton Sale

Words and photos: Emma Berry

In the heady bloodstock boom days of the 1980s, Kentucky breeders doubtless delighted in the arrival at Lexington's Bluegrass Airport of the private plane of Robert Sangster and Vincent O'Brien, along with that of their fierce sales-ring rival Sheikh Mohammed.

Fast-forward almost 40 years and the ruler of Dubai was back at Keeneland, his ardour for the pick of the American yearling crop seemingly undimmed, if his \$16 million outlay is anything to go by. On a 'dark' day between Books 1 and 2 of the September Sale, across the water an auction of a different variety made a successful debut on the scene, albeit at a more accessible level of the market for most.

For this particular event, Dai Walters proved to be the Sheikh Mohammed of the British National Hunt breeding sector, arriving at the inaugural Goffs UK Yorton Sale by helicopter to join reams of visitors from across Britain, a busload of 20 from Ireland and a clutch of French trainers. Walters added five youngsters to his National Hunt string to make him the day's leading buyer (see *Sales Circuit*, page 68) but what must have been most pleasing to the organisers of this commercial experiment was the range of bidders in action within the walls of James and Jean Potter's historic model farm in Welshpool now known as Yorton.

British jump racing has seen an influx of precocious French horses over the last few decades and there was a touch of 'coals to Newcastle' when the first two lots of the sale were bought by young French trainers Gabriel Leenders and

David Cottin. Admittedly, at £26,000 and £22,000 respectively, these were not transactions even close to the six-figures sums which must change hands regularly in the other direction for readymade French talent, but it is a credit to the Yorton Farm team even to have attracted French visitors, let alone for them to have become active participants within the opening minutes of the sale.

Anthony Bromley of Highflyer Bloodstock was also engaged on behalf of leading French jump trainer Francois Nicolle, as well as buying a yearling colt



Prospective buyers view the stock on offer for the inaugural event, the brainchild of Yorton Farm's David Futter, pictured with Tessa Greatrex (inset)

for his longstanding clients Simon Munir and Isaac Souede, who race many of their horses in France.

Racing in Britain has been built over centuries upon solid foundations, but tradition should never scupper the chances of progress. We are of course used to seeing National Hunt stock offered as foals and store horses – formerly as four-year-old stores but now typically three-year-olds. That is progression in itself but it is still not rapid enough to keep up with our friends and rivals across the Channel, where it is not uncommon for youngsters to be tackling obstacles in training at the tender age of two.

Former top-class jump jockey David Cottin, whose ascent in the training ranks is every bit as precocious as the stock he likes to assemble in his stables, said: "There are two-year-olds and some yearlings here and for us there's no point

"It's a credit to the Yorton team even to have attracted French visitors"

in buying unbroken three-year-olds – it's far too late. We want them to be broken in and ridden away at two. We actually break ours in as yearlings and our two-year-olds are already schooling and are quite advanced, especially the ones who will make their debut in March and April

"We have such a good three-year-old programme in France with huge prize-money, so there's no time to lose. Often

the horses you see at the store sales are too big and not the type to race early, but there are some nice horses here for us. We're very familiar with a lot of the pedigrees in the book and we like the Yorton stallions as well."

To that end, the assembling of a catalogue of 38 horses all owned by Yorton Farm, which had either been bred at the stud or pinhooked during French shopping trips, was a job well done. The group of yearlings and two-year-olds was numerically select and handpicked to appeal to fellow racehorse owners or pinhookers. Most of the fillies had the extra lure of being eligible for the Mare Owners' Premium Scheme (MOPS).

Kevin Ross, working the sale with Ben Case, signed for a pair of two-year-olds, a filly and a gelding, both of whom will return to a more traditional store sale. He said: "It's an interesting idea and the horses are very well prepped. They've

Goffs UK Yorton Sale

» managed to get a fantastic crowd here in a lovely setting and it's good to see the French coming over. There are a lot of more forward-looking horses – the type of horse they might like – so it's a good concept and most of them are getting sold, which is the main thing."

Indeed, any sale in the land would settle for a clearance rate of 90% and, held before the onslaught of the main National Hunt season, a decent number of trainers made the trip to Wales, including Nicky Henderson, Warren Greatrex, Nigel Twiston-Davies, Henry Daly and Dan Skelton. The latter picked up a two-year-old by young Haras du Logis stallion Masterstroke, whose obvious appeal across the codes should be in the fact that he is not just a son of Monsun but is out of the Irish Oaks runner-up Melikah, a half-sister to Galileo, Sea The Stars and Black Sam Bellamy.

Gloucestershire-based trainer Fergal O'Brien is open to a new approach of training young jumpers but with a sensible caveat. He said during the sale: "It all depends on the individual. It's like children going to school – some will cope with it better than others. But I think this is a fantastic initiative by Goffs UK and Yorton Stud. When I started with Captain Tim Forster, we used to bring the horses in and break them in as four-year-olds. It was always very hard work but now we're starting more with the three-year-olds. It's evolution, I suppose, and just because we've always done things one way it doesn't mean that's the way we always have to do it."

And that in essence is the mindset which has propelled David Futter, who runs Yorton Farm, to the forefront of a vibrant new way of thinking by some members of the National Hunt breeding community. He has been a driving force behind a revitalised TBA National Hunt Committee, with a particular strength being to look beyond Britain to forge alliances with fellow stud farmers in Ireland and France. Futter's close alliance with Rathbarry Stud has seen regular swapping of stallions and pooling of resources to import French stallions.

One such example is Malinas, who was brought in from Haras de la Hetraie to stand for four seasons at Yorton and has just completed four years at Rathbarry's National Hunt wing, Glenview Stud. Fellow German-bred Gentlewave has just returned to Yorton after switching back to France for two seasons, and he will replace Blue Bresil, who has left Yorton for Glenview. In fact, half of the horses in the Yorton Sale were by stallions associated to the farm.



Trade was topped by two-year-old Prince Des Fichaux, bought for £105,000 by Dai Walters

"I couldn't be more pleased," said James Potter as the sale drew to a close and Dai Walters' helicopter whirred into action in the background. "I'm especially pleased to see a lot of people having come over from France and Ireland. I hope it has been a good advertisement for the farm – the sale of stock from some of our families and by some of our stallions.

"David and the team at Yorton have put a tremendous amount of work into this so it's good to start off with a successful sale like this. I very much hope we will be here again next year and that the sale will get stronger and stronger."

There's no doubt that such an event, just like the now-defunct TBA National Hunt Foal Show before it, provides as much of a social outing for Britain's small

pool of National Hunt breeders as it boosts trade. And that element of fun, as anyone involved in racing should realise, is an important factor.

"We're delighted with the support we've had," said David Futter flanked by his hard-working sons Lester and Riley. "You never know with a new thing like this – it's something different – but we genuinely want this to be exactly what we've had here today.

"We want people to come here, we'll have a party, and they will hopefully see some nice horses that they can buy at the right price. The end-users can perhaps buy them for a little bit less than they might as three-year-olds, and the pinhookers can sell them on. Really it's an opportunity for people to mix and have fun."



Dai Walters, pictured with Nigel Twiston-Davies and Ian Ferguson, spent £230,000 at the sale