

Building an eastern empire

Eighteen months ago Jamie Railton moved his home and his business 300 miles from Chippenham in Wiltshire to Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk.

Sally Duckett visits Darshams Farm and discovers why the sales consignor undertook the cross-country move and finds that he and partner Louise Collinson are nicely settled in their new abode.

Photography by Trevor Jones



THEY SAY THAT one of the most stressful things in life is moving house but sales consignor Jamie Railton, who had to undertake the double trouble of relocating

both his home and his business 18 months ago, has emerged from the trans-county move from Wiltshire to Suffolk without having to resort to the shrink's consultancy or the bottle. Furthermore, the former NH jockey claims the move was completely positive and one that has positioned his bloodstock sales agency in a far stronger and more adaptable situation than before.

"When I and my wife went our separate ways, my previous base, Tanglin Farm, was put on the market," he explains. "Although I did have an option to take the whole I did not feel that it would be a positive move. I had outgrown the property a long time ago and decided to look elsewhere. I felt that if I wanted to expand I needed to do something radical and find premises that would allow that room for expansion. The logical decision was to move to the Newmarket area as it really is at the centre of the European bloodstock world."

"The logical decision was to move to the Newmarket area as it really is at the centre of the European bloodstock world"

So the horseman looked east for his riches and after an extended property search for his rural idyll during the height of the property boom – no one then envisaged that the words "credit" and "crunch" would become so intertwined – a nod in the right direction sent Railton to find his crock of gold at Darshams Farm at Wetherden, 13 miles east of Bury St. Edmunds. He had found his ideal base, for, as he says: "Darshams really is a pretty special place and in a great location, as we are only half an hour from Newmarket."

Driving to the farm in February to meet its new incumbent, as I left the comfort of the known and trusted world of Newmarket, I started to have my doubts as to the wisdom of Railton's move: what is there east of Newmarket apart from the North Sea? Does England

just come to an abrupt end? Will I encounter hijacking, hooded bandits on the roadside? Will there even be civilization?

The A14-adjacent British Sugar towers at Bury St. Edmunds produced thoughts of an industrialised hinterland, and the tiring road battle with the time-pressured intercontinental lorries in their push for the European ferries at Felixstowe had me looking for the U-turn west. But, after a short time, relief from the A14 came via a slip road to Wetherden and soon a busy commercial world was forgotten as the dual carriageway gave way to single lane roads surrounded by farmland. The self-contained Darshams Farm is located in isolation on one of the few higher points on the landscape, ideally set away from the road down a long apple tree-lined driveway.

"When I got here I knew this was the place," explains Railton. "It used to be a cattle farm and reared pedigree Simmentals. Actually, it is only now that we are here that we are realising quite how well respected the farm had been in the cattle world – it regularly produced the very best show animals and possessed the top blue-blooded pedigrees.

"The farm is 65 acres and is completely



Darshams Farm boasts two all-weather tracks, a 2f circular all-weather canter and a straight 6f which loops around the back of the 65-acre farm



Education: Collinson (far side) and Richard Freeman canter a couple of two-year-olds

horse-fresh land. When my soil analyst came to test the ground before I completed the purchase he said that if I had not been well on the way to buying the property, he would have suggested that I should be!”

On arriving at the farm, Railton, with his new partner and assistant Louise Collinson, literally had to muck in – or rather out: despite the yard being fully concreted and possessing a number of adaptable barns, the former bovine inhabitants had left their mucky marks and the place required a certain amount of shovelling, carting, tidying and polishing before it was ready to receive the 2007 yearling consignment. Since then investment in the property has continued apace and Darshams Farm can now boast 65 stables, an indoor school, two all-weather canterers, a number of nursery paddocks, horse-walkers and lunging pens. The latest accessory is a water treadmill, which has been installed in a conveniently situated trench, previously dug to accommodate the cattle slurry system. The property improvements are all part of Railton’s long-term masterplan.

“It is my intention to create the very best preparation yard in the country, both for the sales and for the race track,” he says. “I like to think that we have done that with the facilities we have put in, and I am very proud of this farm.

“Moving to the area was a logical move as there was not another independent sales agency in the area. All my owners came with me, though, having said that, as many of my clients live abroad it makes sense for them to have their horses based where they are going to be sold.”

Such a huge investment policy could

not occur without frequent calls to an obliging bank manager, and the financial implications of the move east were enough to make a weaker man wince.

“I have had to spend an obscene amount of money and the financial burden is huge,” grimaces Railton. “We have to make sure that we get it right 100 per cent of the time and need to make damn sure that we have good sales on a regular basis. I have had to take a punt and have committed myself to a financial gamble; only history will say whether it pays off or not.”

But pressure shared is pressure halved and Railton describes his partner Louise as a “tower of strength.”

“She is one of the very few women who can mend a fence, drive a tractor, run a 65-horse yard and host a dinner party all in the same day and all to the same high standard. She is a rare bird.

“I am away so much of the time travelling for the sales company and developing that side of the business that



Railton supervises exercise in the water treadmill, which is built in a former slurry drainage trench

Quick Questions

How many cigars do you smoke in a day at the sales?

It depends on the quality of horse I am selling!

What do you write in your book at the sales?

The underbidder – so that I can sell him or her another horse.

Who do you admire in the industry?

Gay O’Callaghan. He has had great pin-hooking success on both sides of the Atlantic, and he and Annette have brought-up five fantastic children – which is no mean feat.

Who do you admire out of the industry?

Muhammed Ali.

Alternative career?

None – I love this job and consider myself lucky to be doing something I really enjoy.

Ambitions?

I am very passionate about bloodstock and am also very ambitious. This passion and desire can make you your own worst enemy and I can be very intense. I am driven to be very successful and don’t like it if I am not. Over the years I have collected a vast library of books explaining how to conquer the world in ten minutes!

If you had been the punter who won the £1 million accumulator in February, what would you have done with it?

It would help – and I mean only help – pay back some of the money owing to the bank.

Do you follow any other sport?

Boxing.

Does Darshams Farm feel like home?

Just. When we first moved here I was immediately away travelling a lot and then busy through the autumn at the sales so it was a while before I got to spend a lot of time here.

Louise really runs the yard. From April I will be looking at yearlings in Europe and America in order to pull together the autumn sales’ consignments. Travelling is a way to broaden and gather clients, but once a month I will also be ►

inspecting the yearlings which I know I will be selling later in the year – that way I get to see them through their development from the early stages.”

The transition of Darshams from cattle yard to racehorse preparation yard has not been lost on Newmarket trainers and the farm pre-trains and spells horses for the likes of Sir Michael Stoute and Jeremy Noseda, and even provides an out-of-training service for South African handler Mike de Kock.

The pre-training business is an ideal way to ensure that staff can continue to be employed out of the sales season, but the main commercial enterprise for Jamie Railton Bloodstock Sales Agency at Darshams continues to be, as it was at Tanglin, the preparation of sales horses for most of the Flat-based sales in Britain. The most important focus, and main money earner, remains the preparation of yearlings to sell in the autumn.

Last year the agency offered 88 yearlings – nine were led out unsold with the remaining 79 sold yearlings averaging 51,447gns, with nine making more than 100,000gns. The agency's top earner was a 480,000gns Dalakhani colt out of Time Honoured, a half-sister to the Group 2 winner Time Allowed and a daughter of the champion three-year-old filly, Time Charter.

Although Darshams Farm has experienced a fundamental change in use from beef stock to bloodstock, one thing has remained constant: the production of quality animals.

The bloodstock business

“I am very competitive and I hate showing horses who are not going to make it into the top end. Last year's sales were okay but nothing special, but the 2006 sales were superb – we had a yearling make 1.2 million guineas and one good result such as that makes all the difference. In 2006 we topped both parts of the Tattersalls October Sale – that takes a bit of doing – but last year, although we were the leading consignor at the Doncaster St. Leger Sale, we dropped down a bit at Tattersalls.

“Every year is different and as an agency you can't be guaranteed to get together a good group of horses every year. Sometimes averages do drop a bit when you start selling numbers and people do use an agency as a culling vehicle.

“We won't accept everything that we are offered to sell and we do tell some people that it might not be the best move for them to send us a horse as it might not be financially viable. I do believe we do the job well but it costs and there is no point someone sending us a horse if it is only going to make £5,000 and I am then going to send them a bill for £3,000. People appreciate the honest approach and many come back the following year.

“That said, often we get people with

one decent horse and one that is not so nice, wanting us to sell them both. It is something you need to agree to do as you have to look after your client. This is a competitive business and in order to get the nice one, you take the lesser model. In a dream world you wouldn't but in reality business does not work like that. Chances are anyway, that if you turn back a lesser horse, its half-brother will win a stakes race a week before the sale!”

Yearling sales 2007

“There was far greater emphasis on sire power and a worrying lack of emphasis on the dam's side. If you look at the big picture and the long-term scheme of things, I do think that it is a worry; after all it is not by accident that the great families consistently turn out good horses.

“Sadly though we are in the position that we have to produce what the market wants, regardless of what I personally think. If the market wants an Acclamation or Invincible Spirit with no pedigree, that is what we provide – mind you both those two stallions have proven that they can upgrade their mares.

“In the US Van Nistelrooy is in the same boat – you can't find a yearling with a good page because there aren't any.”

Sales: the problems

“Overproduction would not be an issue if we had the international buyers that we used to have. The smaller and developing racing nations used to take a percentage of horses up to £20,000 but they don't seem to be buying those horses any more. It might just be due to the strength of sterling but it is something that needs addressing.

“Finding a way of improving the prize-money situation would also help correct the problem as it would become a far more viable proposition for people to have a horse in training. If we want Britain to remain the best racing nation in the world, we have to be competitive in every respect.

“There are also far more people selling horses than buying them, the major sellers are also the major buyers and there are too many people on the wrong side of the fence.”



Autumn prospects: yearlings by Powerscourt (left) and Mizzen Mast

“Selling horses is all about building a trusting relationship and I take a slightly different policy to most in that I believe it is not our job to sell someone a horse, rather to help them buy one”



Selling is the name of the game: Railton at the Goffs breeze-up sale with an Exceed And Excel colt

Private sales

“The US has a much stronger private sale trade of horses of all ages – weanlings, yearlings, juveniles and horses in training. Britain doesn’t have such a robust private market but I would love to develop the farm as a source for private traded stock and have horses available for purchase all year round at Darshams. Then Newmarket-based agents could pop up the road at any time and view horses to buy.”

Breeze-up sales

“All the potential breeze-up horses I buy are on behalf of others, though I try to keep a leg in them and develop syndicates if possible.

“We experienced a bloodbath last year on account of the fact that we bought too many for one sector of the market. The Japanese had looked after us very well in previous years but last year they failed to show up. In 2007 the market changed radically: historically it had survived on foreign buyers but last year it became a domestic show and many of us suffered. In the long run this might turn out to be a good thing as the better horses ended up staying in this country and already the results from last year’s sales have been astronomical.

“Our purchasing power for yearlings for this year’s breeze-up sales was a little reduced and we have instead bought horses who should suit the British racing programme.

“I have a policy of not buying at the sales at which we are selling. If I am selling 30 yearlings it is my job to be standing outside those horses’ boxes and selling them, not sourcing new stock. Historically, many of our breeze-up horses are from the US simply because we are not selling at those sales.

“I also do not buy from our own

consignment as I don’t think it is ethical, which does also mean that other pin-hookers can buy from me with confidence and many have been very successful with stock originally sold by our agency.”

Selling horses

“Selling horses is all about building a trusting relationship and I take a slightly different policy to most in that I believe it is not our job to sell someone a horse, rather to help them buy one. I do believe that is one of our strengths – we understand what individual buyers

want and will show them appropriate horses rather than wasting their time. For instance, I won’t bring out a long-backed thing for Jeremy Nosedo to waste his time looking at.

“Trainers and agents are welcome to the farm to look at the stock before the yearling sales but I am not sure how beneficial it is as sometimes it is not a positive thing – they may just be looking to see which ones they are going to be able to knock off the list! I have to do the best by my owners as well as help out the agents.”

Sales selection

“You have got to be aware of the Darley-Coolmore situation and there is no point in turning up at a sale with yearlings by certain stallions if that sale’s major buyer is not going to buy a horse by those sires, or he is not likely to show up.

“The huge books that stallions are covering is also an important influence. If your yearling is one of 30 at a sale by that stallion and if your horse is not in a foal share or is not one of the three nicest by that sire, then you are going to suffer. So you have to go to a different sale where you are likely to be amongst the best. It’s all a question of picking your sale and that is where using an agency can help make that decision. We can’t guarantee to get it right every time but I like to think we get it right more often than not.

“You are dealing with an animal that is growing and changing all the time – some surprise you and some disappoint you but you have to work with them. Seeing the change in the horses from April to October is one of the reasons for doing the job – but just sometimes they will look the same in October as they did in April!” ■

