

## The British Grooms Association - 2009 National Equine Forum



**Introduction is a 90 sec movie – showing grooms at work.**

These are just a few of our proud members. They are all grooms and they care for their horses daily with passion, dedication and professionalism. Being a groom is not just a job, it is a vocation.

Six years ago, Graham Suggett invited me to come and present to the Forum on the topic ‘A groom for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’. I nervously presented to you my dream about how grooms should achieve more recognition, support and respect than they were currently receiving. I suggested the creation of an annual groom’s prize and the formation of a representative membership body.

It was thanks to this opportunity that you the Forum gave me, that I am proud to say that we are now in the 6th year of the Kuster BEF Groom Award and in May 2007 I launched the British Grooms Association – the world’s only Professional Association for equine grooms. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you Chairman and the Forum, for allowing grooms to have a voice for the first time.

I always believed that the hardworking heroes and heroines of our industry deserved their own Association. In 2006 I discovered UnLtd – the Foundation for Social Entrepreneurs. They believed in my vision and were shocked at the lack of modernisation of the working conditions in our industry and I subsequently won £25,000 worth of funding - this enabled me to create the BGA.

### **What we have done?**

The BGA has over 700 members to date. We have developed a comprehensive website which is jam packed with dedicated advice and guidance for both grooms, employers and parents.

With support from Lantra we have developed the Equine Skills CV scheme, which is giving grooms the opportunity to gain a recognised job title – they no longer have to be termed just as a ‘groom’... they can be endorsed by their employer to become either a Foundation, Intermediate, Advanced or Elite groom. Interestingly to date the highest take up of a level is the Elite – just showing how many grooms crave the recognition that they rightly deserve for their years of knowledge and experience.

This introduction of the ‘appraisal’ into the work place is just one example of how the BGA is working with employers to try and modernise. We received pro bono support from Law Works and have a downloadable ‘Contract of Employment’ on our website for all to use and since launch we have handled well over 100 direct enquiries from employers. We are proud that they choose to call us for help, but also acutely aware that there is little other support for them in the industry.

We strongly believe that to achieve the long overdue ‘Social Change’, we MUST work with the employers and not against them – this is a core aim of the Association.

But of course we are also there for our 700+ members. In our 22 months we have directly helped approximately 200 enquires with issues ranging from bullying to queries regarding pay, holiday and general working conditions.

Our members receive the quarterly magazine, British Grooms, which contains educational and informative articles solely focusing on grooms and their environment. Some of our members have even become more involved and are practicing their journalistic skills – a chance for some CPD.

One of the things that has shocked us since we launched is the amount of phone calls we have received from grooms who have been injured in the workplace and have not been insured. So many of them have been freelance and so received no Statutory Sick Pay, resulting in debt and increased stress. Thanks to the support of South Essex Insurance Brokers, we can now offer members the opportunity to insure themselves and their livelihood at exceptionally reasonable rates.

The BGA has represented grooms as a real voice since its launch and we are pleased that we are taking steps towards becoming a BEF Associate Member Body. This will mean that Great Britain is the leading nation in the support and development for its grooms – surely this will give us the edge in the lead up to 2012 and beyond.

At the BGA our work is carried out by me – the Chief Executive and also Chief envelope stuffer, our Voluntary Board of Directors, Magazine Editor and since January 2009 we now have a group of 15 BGA members who are uber keen and have become our Area Reps. My vision for the Association always saw that in time it would give grooms the chance to become more involved and act as a real voice for their fellow colleagues.

So as you can see, much has been achieved in the past 22 months and I have not even mentioned negotiating LGV funding on behalf of our members, the countless media stories we have generated, the community that is beginning to build throughout our membership and the members freelance adverts that are our highest viewed page on the website!

## **So what is the future?**

At the BGA we work under five aims and have exciting projects linked with each:

### *Aim 1: To offer dedicated support and advice to grooms*

Working with our solicitors we are currently developing more in depth SOS advice, including case studies and guides for freelance grooms including templates for their accounts and contracts.

We are also working with a small group of parents to create a more in depth help page. We are aware that so many are nervous about allowing their child to work as a groom and we want to build their knowledge and confidence.

### *Aim 2: To increase groom's skills recognition and job status*

We want to continue to increase media surrounding grooms and their unique skill level. Maybe Horse and Hound could help us here by denoting one page a month, specifically talking to and promoting grooms?

We are linking further with recruitment agencies and colleges to encourage an increased use of the Equine Skills CV. The agencies support the idea of the 'levels' of a groom becoming more uniform and in turn receiving greater recognition with the emergence of a career ladder.

*Aim 3: Achieve modernisation of grooms' working conditions*

We are currently developing an Equestrian Employers' Handbook. This will be a real support for employers to help them to deal with scenarios ranging from hiring and disciplinary procedures, to pregnancies... all queries that we have received since our launch.

We also aim to highlight good employment practice via our website and media case studies. It is important for the employers to understand and embrace the idea of modernising their employment practices – recruitment of staff is an expensive process, it makes good business sense to motivate and retain those that work for you, rather than exploit and demoralise and so need to start over again.

*Aim 4: Build a sense of community in the groom's population*

We are working towards establishing Regional Networks, encouraging mentoring and support for the younger ones in the workplace. Moving forward we hope to work closer with the BEF Member Bodies to help build our membership promotion.

*Aim 5: Contribute towards the stabilisation of the recruitment and retention issues in the equestrian workforce*

Six years ago I raised the issue –

- Too few young people are coming into the industry, and gaining the right experience to become top grooms.
- and
- Too many experienced grooms are leaving the industry due to poor working conditions, and lack of career development.

I honestly believe that this situation is equally as bad now, as it was six years ago. When I talk at a college, out of a usual audience of approximately 80 students, all who are studying ND's and HND's there are barely any who want to work hands on with horses as a groom. "What do you want to do?" I ask in exasperation ... they shrug their shoulders.. but what they do know is that they don't want to become a groom.

At the other end, we have received so many emails from individuals who are no longer grooms and stopped doing the job that they loved due to poor employment conditions and an endless lack of respect. Our attrition of members sadly is high; we ask everyone who falls out of membership their reason for leaving, nearly 80% are no longer a groom.

We still have not got any real research for the general side of the industry – i.e. all those that fall under the BEF and not the racing sector. Lantra have offered to carry out a research project into grooms and equestrian employment trends, but they can't fund it. We will be working towards finding some funding from somewhere to carry out this crucial piece of work.

Aim 4 of the BHIC Horse Strategy clearly recommends this, along with many other very much needed modernisations. However, should we, the Association that is funded by the poorest individuals in the industry really be responsible for funding these developments?

We hope to work with the BEF to develop literature promoting the career as a groom, maybe together we can change the perception from the young, that in actual fact it is a good job that teaches you some excellent skills. We all know that a good groom is an excellent time keeper, team player, dedicated, loyal, hardworking and has a high attention to detail – surely these are the attributes that any employer in any other industry would desire. I think the job as a groom is at the worst a fantastic training opportunity for future life – it never did me any harm!

With 2012 just around the corner we hope to work closely with the HOOOF Project, ensuring that the 'working with horses and career as a groom' options are well promoted. It is no good getting everyone in London riding without also concentrating on this, because that means that you will need more horse and ponies and so more grooms to look after them. 2012 provides our industry a chance to create a real Legacy that WILL make a difference to us all – let's hope that in three and half years time when I ask 80 college students, their hands all shoot up in the air, because they all want to do the exciting job of a groom.

The BGA must continue to grow. Our membership is ok, but not great. We really need 4000 members to be truly self sufficient. We could not exist without the generous support of our sponsors – all who have believed in our existence and aims from day one.

To date, despite having been financially supported by UnLtd and our corporates, we have not received one penny from the 'Industry'.

In the past six years I have watched the British Horseracing Authority develop a superb recruitment and retention project – CareersinRacing. Morag Gray who oversees this work and sits on the BHA Board says "Make no mistake, stable staff and their welfare, recruitment and retention is key to the success of our industry and is very high on the BHA's agenda."

Racing is literally racing ahead...

The BGA, a little Association which is essentially funded by its members has a big responsibility. Is it right that we must fund and instigate all future development for our grooms, employers and essentially the stabilisation of our workforce? We are doing it.. but we need help.

UnLtd funded me to achieve my ambition because they saw the need for a sharp modernisation in the employment practices in our industry. We stand alone in this area as almost all other sectors have modernised and the substandard and illegal working practices that are far too common in ours are things of the past. I believe as an industry we have a moral obligation to modernise and I look forward to coming and presenting to this Forum in 2015 to celebrate this achievement!