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Inside the Cotswolds country club where horses are just as welcome as humans

Naunton Downs, near Stow-on-the-Wold, has been called the real deal – and 'everything that Soho Farmhouse is not'

By Anna Tyzack

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For Ben and Sophie Pauling, [next week's Cheltenham Festival](#) is always a rollercoaster of adrenaline, tears and Champagne. This year, however, the stakes are higher for racing's golden couple: Ben, who trains horses for Harry Redknapp, and Sophie, a party planner, are opening a country club, too: for racehorses, mainly, although humans are also welcome.

Expectations are high. Called Naunton Downs, the club, based near Stow-on-the-Wold, will serve members with martinis and lobster rolls, between games of tennis and rounds of golf, while the children's area overlooks that most British of spectacles: racehorses thundering down the gallops.

"It's everything that [Soho Farmhouse](#) is not," claims Will Woodhams, of [Mayfair members' club Fitzdares](#), which will have an outpost at Naunton Downs. "There'll be more mud, more dogs and less yoga – everyone's going to have a brilliant time."

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Especially the horses, who reside in architect-designed stables larger than luxury hotel rooms, with en suite paddocks. “I designed it myself to give them the most chilled-out existence possible – horses perform best when they’re happy,” explains Ben, 38, who has trained more than 500 winners (including two at Cheltenham Festival).

When we meet at his gallops at 7am, Ben doesn’t immediately strike me as the country club type. He has 85 horses in training and has been up for two hours already, liaising with staff, jockeys and vets; later there will be lunch with owners, and this afternoon he’s off racing. He’s hoping to be back in time to put his daughters, Tilia and Isabella, to bed.

If it wasn’t for Sophie, who used to run events for magazines, he admits, the club would be an impossibility.

“Horses take up every second of my time,” Ben says, as he strokes the majestic head of Bowt greatness, who belongs to Harry Redknapp.



Ben and Sophie Pauling say they are devoted to horse training | CREDIT: Alun Callender

Yet when the opportunity arose to build his new yard on an existing golf course amid 60 acres of unspoilt Cotswolds land – close to the Mecca of jump racing at Cheltenham and arguably prettier than that around Chipping Norton – it seemed churlish, he says, not to let his friends enjoy it too.

One can see why Woodhams, who runs Fitzdares for financial backers including Zac and Ben Goldsmith – and where he regularly hosts the Jilly Cooper set, including the likes of Jodie Kidd and society pyjama designer Olivia Von Halle – jumped at the chance to be involved.

There will certainly be plenty of potential clients. During lockdown more than 36,000 people relocated to the Cotswolds, many of them dripping with London money. As well as Naunton Downs, they can visit Jade Holland Cooper, one of the Duchess of Cambridge’s go-to British designers, at her country clothing emporium up the road in Cheltenham.

“We’re not trying to be anything but ourselves,” Sophie explains, as we tour the new clubhouse. “We want to be somewhere where you can meet friends, play tennis, and your children can run wild.”

Before long there will be holiday cottages, wellness spaces, and a kids’ club.

“As much as we love our children, sometimes when you go out for lunch it’s nice for someone else to colour with them,” adds her husband.



Ben and Sophie Pauling | CREDIT: Alun Callender

Unlike the droves of Londoners who arrived in the Cotswolds in their Range Rovers during lockdown, buying up homes for more than £10 million and riling the locals with their double parking, Ben is a dyed-in-the-wool local. His father was a farmer – [he worked Jeremy Clarkson's farm, Diddly Squat](#), and it was his retirement that led to Clarkson taking it on – growing up surrounded by horses and pulling pints at his local.

Ben initially dreamt of being a jump jockey but lost the sight in his right eye in an agricultural accident, when a piece of rusty barbed wire pierced it. “After that it was all about being a trainer,” he says.

Initially, he worked for jump racing champion trainer, Nicky Henderson. His own yard followed in 2013, the year after he married Sophie, with just eight horses belonging to friends and family.

And at first, Ben Pauling Racing could do no wrong: Barters Hill, a gentle bay named after the area where Ben used to race his ponies, put them on the map by winning his first seven races to become one of the best novice hurdlers in the country; in 2017 Willoughby Court was his first Cheltenham Festival winner.

“Everyone cried – we were watching a dream come true,” Sophie says. By the time Le Breuil became their second Cheltenham Festival winner in 2019, Ben Pauling Racing’s owner demographic had expanded to include celebrities and entrepreneurs.

“Harry Redknapp became an owner just before he went on I’m A Celebrity; I was touched that we were one of the first calls he made when he came out of the jungle,” Ben says.

There followed an annus horribilis. A virus worked its way around the yard, sending the horses off form; the following year Covid struck. “When racing started again there were no spectators, so I’d have to call the owners with the results. If it was a win, fine, but dealing with disappointment and frustration when you’re not able to enjoy the spectacle is tough.”

He’s certain the atmosphere at this year’s Festival is going to be more electric than ever. “There’ll be some titanic battles up that famous hill to get the hearts racing.” He has entered six horses this year, including Redknapp’s two.

Naturally, there will be after-parties back at Naunton Downs.

One key difference to Soho Farmhouse is that there are no plans to turn Naunton Downs into a private members’ club. Everyone is welcome; the only VIPs are the racehorse owners, who will be able to watch their animals on the gallops from the warmth and comfort of a glass-fronted lounge, with a glass of Champagne in hand. “I’ll have to suppress the urge to tell them to man up and get outside,” Ben admits. “But I do realise that other people don’t want to be in the rain all day like I do.”

Two Tribes Soho Farmhouse v Naunton Downs