

An international affair: run by Italian Giovanni Ugolotti and Canadian/British rider Kathryn Robinson, Cranford Stud Eventing is based in the Cotswolds

Nestled in the heart of the Cotswolds is newlyweds Giovanni Ugolotti and Kathryn Robinson's eventing base. *Julie Harding* pays them a visit to get a taste of how this slick operation is run

Access all areas Giovanni Ugolotti & Kathryn Robinson

SECONDS after the wooden entry gate to Empshill Farm clicks shut, a brown cocker spaniel runs across the vast expanse of concrete and offers a tail wag as a greeting. Such a friendly welcome sets the scene for a day at Cranford Stud Eventing, the business run by 35-year-old Italian event rider Giovanni Ugolotti and his Canadian/British wife Kathryn Robinson, 32.

Within a few minutes Giovanni appears, leading the seven-year-old Duke's Sunny Boy

(Sunny), by Duke Of Hearts. The pair has just returned from a 40-minute hack. After a firm handshake, Giovanni, who is known to friends as Gio, pronounced Joe, says: "Kathryn and I do everything with the horses ourselves, from the schooling to hacking. We try to treat them as individuals, rather than an industry."

"I've had to hack Sunny by himself — he goes would up in company."

Gio would be found standing in the 30x65m outdoor school at 8:30am this

morning, lunging the Irish-bred four-year-old Kileannon High Cavalier (Guinness), who he subsequently long-reined along the same nearby lanes. Guinness came in on the Monday before my visit in late January, following a six-week stint in the field after being broken. The work pattern has been the same for the younger Rio, another recent addition to Gio's string.

"One will have to be sold. Our income comes from selling. It's the only way to pay the rent," he explains.

Head girl Sophie Richardson — owner of Roo, the cocker spaniel — is now hosing off Sunny's hooves in the wash bay.

"He's a nice horse, but my favourite is [the now late] Let It Bee," admits Sophie. "I groomed for him at Badminton and the Rio Olympics."

The 17-year-old gelding "BB" was scheduled to go to Badminton again this spring, but died at Burnham Market on 30 March after our visit, collapsing between fences on the advanced cross-country course.

The plan had been for Sophie to compete him in BE100s when the time had come for him to bow out of four-star level.

KATHRYN, who now has four horses to campaign this season, sets off in the same direction that Gio and Sunny had earlier, making for the road between Farmington and Clapton-on-the-Hill. It's largely devoid of traffic and boasts

fantastically steep hills for fitting.

"I've been suffering from chilblains," confesses Kathryn as a parting shot, praising her recent discovery of heated insoles that she found on Amazon.

As BB's metal shoes clop on the concrete, the 17-year-old Stilo Kontika (Tiko), one of the horses who helped to put Gio on the eventing map, is calmly completing some circles on the five-horse walker. The Burgham CIC3* was his final event last season and, now he's stood down from the top level, Sophie has taken him on.

"If I've got time I may compete him in BE100s. He's not so keen on retired life."

Three key members of Gio's 10-strong string aren't here today. His 2018 Badminton ride and potential WEG contender Cult Rewind (Hero), Montelibretti CCI2* winner Duke Of Champion (Pluto) and the intermediate Pro Joe, back in work after a year off for a late castration, are spending two weeks

'Gio and I get on well, despite spending 24 hours a day together. We rarely waste energy arguing'

KATHRYN ROBINSON

THE CV's

● Giovanni, 35

Early days: from 2002 to 2007 Gio was a member of the Italian Army equestrian team, before coming to England in May 2008 when he worked for Andrew Nicholson and rode young horses for Tristram Owers.

Championship teams: represented Italy at the 2013 and 2015 European Championships, and 2014 World Equestrian Games.

Other big results: 12th at Pau CC14* in 2010, won the CC13* at Ballindenisk in 2015, completed his first Badminton in 2016 and was named as first reserve for the Rio Olympic Games.

● Kathryn, 32

Early days: after a grounding with the Woodland Pythchley branch of the Pony Club, Kathryn went to eventer Sam Albert's as a working pupil, before spending a season at Roger Charlton's racing yard and another season at Alan King's.

Championship teams: represented Canada at the 2016 Rio Olympics and 2015 Pan American Games.

Other big results: seventh place in her first CC14* at Pau in 2014, double clear at Badminton in 2016.



at Hartpury College for intense water treadmill fitness work.

"It's a great way to build their muscle without putting strain on their joints," says Gio.

Gio and Kathryn moved into Empshill Farm, which is reached via narrow lanes lined by typical golden Cotswold stone walls, the day after last year's Blenheim International Horse Trials. Instead of celebrating two top-20 placings — Kathryn and BB in the CIC3* Event Rider Masters and Giovanni and Hero in the CC13* — the pair found themselves loading horses and equipment into their new lorry for the eight-mile trip from their old base, Eddy Stibbe's Lavender Hill Stud in Naunton, to the historic village of Farmington.

Empshill Farm, where the couple rents 16 looseboxes, belongs to the Tew family. Additionally, it boasts ample neat post-and-rail fenced turnout paddocks, a lunge pen and a 1.2-mile gallop.

"We love it here, and hope to stay for a long time," says Gio, now boiling the kettle in the kitchen/tack room as Chikka and Mini, Kathryn's part-pug and jack russell dogs, warm themselves at the base of the radiator.



'He's a real character': head girl Sophie Richardson prepares Castello 236

GIO grew up in Parma and remains employed by the Italian Army, which he joined at 18. It was his mother, Sada, who introduced him to horses. "My mum was a happy hacker. She took me to the local pony club, but I was scared and didn't like it at first," he reveals in a light Italian accent.

After his arrival in England, Gio rode out for Andrew Nicholson and was handed the reins on the Kivi's former ride Stormhill Kossack. A little later, Gio took on Bruvver from Mark Todd.

"That arrangement led to my getting to know Varenna Allen and Mary Bathurst, who bought into [his retired four-star ride] Oplitas. Mary now owns a leg of Pluto and, with Bridget and Ed King, Kathryn's ride Brookpark Momentum. Varenna also owns half of Decapop 277. We're lucky to have such a great band of owners."

Kathryn was born in the UK at Cranford Hall in Northamptonshire, the family seat her father, Sir John Robinson, 11th Baronet of London, inherited in 1975. Her mother, Gayle, is Canadian — hence Kathryn can sport the maple leaf flag in competition.

"Even though I've still got a lot of relatives in Canada, we don't go that often. There's no time," says Kathryn, who has just walked into the kitchen.

Kathryn took up eventing after a spell as a working pupil to Canadian-born Jamaican



Gio schools Le Lion d'Angers-bound Penhills Celtic Rolex

Wedded bliss



GIOVANNI and Kathryn met in 2008 at Olivia Simonazzi's yard in Italy, where Gio was working and Kathryn had gone for two months of training. They had known each other for just two months when Giovanni decided to follow Kathryn back to the UK.

The pair got together on Valentine's Day 2009, became engaged on Kathryn's birthday (4 August) in 2013 and they tied the knot on 1 July 2017 at Kathryn's family home Cranford Hall, which her mother Gayle runs as a wedding venue.

"Despite the fact he's Italian, any attempts Gio has made at romance have usually been disastrous," Kathryn reveals. "I didn't like the engagement ring he bought, so I took it back to the jewellers and chose a more expensive one instead."

event rider Sam Albert. She says that, until then, eventing hadn't been on her radar. She has since experienced an occasional crisis of confidence, but she has always maintained a link with racing, regularly riding out for trainers, including Bourton Hill-based Ben Pauling.

"I watch and learn from the trainers. It's helped my riding," she says.

Sophie, carrying a bridle, approaches the box of white-faced Penhills Celtic Rolex (Donald). She tacks him up for Gio to school.

"He's a nice horse, but he's always after food and, if you don't have anything, he will show his displeasure," says Sophie, one of just two staff employed by the couple.

A tricky ride, Donald was sent to Gio to sell on, but the six-year-old has exceeded expectations and will now head for Le Lion d'Angers.

In the school, Gio works Donald slowly, making him stretch, first on the right and then on the left rein. After a while, the pair moves on to lateral work.

"I don't put him under too much pressure at this stage," he shouts from across the school.

As Gio returns to the yard with Donald, Kathryn leads out the striking six-year-old grey Castello 236 (Bambi), who she has just tacked up. He, too, is about to be schooled for 40 minutes.

"Bambi's a real character. He loves to whip round for a bit of fun," says Kathryn.

Purchased two years ago via the couple's German agent and friend Philipp Kolossa, Gio confesses that he calls the eye-catching grey "Cheque". He's my blank cheque. He roars with laughter.



'We love it here': Gio and Kathryn are based at Empshill Farm, owned by the Tew family

"We nearly split up over selling Billy The Red," interjects Kathryn, who has been building up a reputation as a producer of talented young horses. She sold Billy to Tina Cook in 2013, four years before he won European Championship team gold in Strzegom. Calling Card headed for Irish rider Aoife Clark's yard two years ago.

"As Gio says, money doesn't go lame," Kathryn smiles. "Actually, Gio and I get on well, despite spending 24 hours a day together. We rarely waste energy arguing."

After plenty of riding and hard work — including skipping out stables, sweeping the yard and chain harrowing the school — it will soon be time for Gio and Kathryn to return to their rented house in Northleach to catch up on paperwork.

"Tonight we're also going to the gym. We tried working out at the beginning of the day, but our personal trainer Calum [Taylor] works us so hard that we felt too shattered to ride," laughs Kathryn. H&H



'We try to treat them as individuals': Gio gives Sunny a treat after hacking out

Picture by Peter Nixon