

**riders**

MJ Fews Land Rover



News

# Native and rare breeds are



**Y**OU tell a gelding, ask a mare and negotiate with a stallion, or so the saying goes.

But the stallions at West Kington Stud near Chippenham seem to be a pretty contented bunch. As well they might be, since their role in life is to provide quality semen for freezing, so that mares across the globe can breed foals from some of the best stallions available, without the need to travel.

The stud is currently exporting frozen semen as far afield as Australia and other southern hemisphere countries, as well as to the USA. It is far easier than travelling a mare overseas to the stallion, and has great advantages in terms of welfare and infection control. Each sample of semen is rigorously health checked, as are all horses involved in the process, so vets play a prominent role.

Stallions visit the stud for a limited period of time, during which semen is collected every 48 hours. Surprisingly, there is little antagonism between

**Globe trotters:** A lot of native stallions visit the stud and their semen is exported all over the world. Pictured is the New Forest Luckington Sport Aide, with Kate Raynor, far left, and the Connemara Gentle Cascade, with Ella Abbott, above left. The semen is carefully examined under a microscope, left, before it's frozen in liquid nitrogen, centre left.

# in demand across the globe

Spring is a way off, but **Mary Tapping** reports from a stud that's still busy sending frozen semen to the southern hemisphere

them once they find themselves in the company of others. "Often when they arrive they have come from homes where they are the only stallion and are quite full of themselves," explained stud manager Tessa Clarke. "They may act up in front of the others until another one says: 'So, you're a stallion - so am I! Your point is...?' after which they normally settle down."

The actual semen collection process varies according to the stallion's temperament and preferences. If you thought that Ann Summers had a monopoly on fetish, you'd be wrong as each individual stallion has strong views about the collection sleeve he prefers. Should it be lined with rubber or plastic, and how warm (or even hot) should it be? Rubber tends to kill sperm, so there is quite a delicate balance between providing the stallion with acceptable conditions while, at the same time, giving his sperm the best chance of survival.

The temperature and pressure of the lining is achieved by filling with water a membrane inside the sleeve itself, which is rather like a tyre inner tube. The more water, the greater the pressure. "Put on this plastic glove and see what it feels like inside," suggested Alex,

whose job it is to create the right conditions for a successful and hygienic collection. Having covered the glove with lubricant, I inserted my forearm. Ouch! It was hot, but apparently some stallions like it that way.

A good tempered mare is used initially as a "teaser" to arouse the stallion's interest and here, once again, individual stallions will respond more positively to one type of mare than another. Then they will either mount the mare while the handler holds the collection sleeve to one side to prevent an actual mating or, alternatively, the stallion will mount a dummy designed for the purpose.

One little grey mare is a particular favourite with the boys. She came from a pub car park, where she was kept as a pet to amuse the visitors until, aged only three, she was considered too old. So she embarked on a career as a tart at the stud, and very popular she is too!

Examining samples under the microscope afterwards, I was able to see for the first time the mass of tiny, tadpole-like sperm which I had only seen in diagrams before. The semen is subjected to exhaustive tests before being transferred to "straws" for freezing. But here the similarity with normal ar-

tificial insemination ends. Bunches of straws are colour coded by batch and marked with the donor stallion's details. They are then frozen in liquid nitrogen and will remain viable for many years.

The West Kington Stallion Centre was set up in 1996 by Tim and Jane Holderness-Roddam and veterinary surgeon Martin Boyle. Since then, semen has been frozen from a selection of British stallions, including Shires, Cleveland bays, Dales, Exmoors, New Forests and Suffolks, as well as international dressage horses, showjumpers and event horses. The centre also works closely with the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, conserving frozen semen for its regeneration scheme.

Thoroughbred horses for the racing industry cannot currently be registered if they were conceived by anything other than natural mating, but the much smaller world of Arab racing has been quick to take advantage of artificial insemination by frozen semen. One of the Al Maktoum Arab stallions is currently standing at West Kington, as is one of William Fox-Pitt's young showjumpers.

Competing stallions can visit the centre during off-peak competition times to bank semen for the summer stud season so they are not restricted in their competition schedules. Stallions can also be sent before castration to have their semen frozen and stored for possible future use.

West Kington Stud is at Church Farm, West Kington, Chippenham, Wilts, SN14 7JE, and on telephone 01249 782940.



**Well bred:** Using chilled and frozen semen, foals can be conceived using stallions that live thousands of miles away from the mare