

We have to inform you, with heavy hearts, that our much loved pony Speckles is no longer with us.

We have been served over our 45 year history by many wonderful horses and ponies, all of whom have enabled us to provide live changing therapy, fun, and opportunity to the riders we set out to help. Speckles was with us for almost half of this long history, purchased as a five year old in 2000, and deserves the title of “irreplaceable” above any other.

Speckles’ achievements over two decades of RDA service are staggering. We have long lost count of the number of placings, and, indeed, winning titles, he has earned at regional and national level. Almost exactly a year ago, at his last ever regional show, he brought in four scores of 70% or above with four different riders, and went on to win two overall championship titles at Nationals, one with a first time competitor. He represented our group away from home on various occasions, exhibiting at the Game Fair and Blenheim Horse Trials, turning his hooves to para dressage training days, and even visiting a rider too unwell to come to the stables in her own garden. He was nominated on multiple occasions for the RDA Horse of the Year award, and anyone taking care of him at shows would feel as if they were part of a celebrity entourage: “Is that Speckles?” “Can I take a photograph of Speckles?” He rarely needed an introduction when entering a warm up arena, and prize giving MCs would read out his name like an old friend: “from the Abingdon Group... of course, Speckles”.

Much of the earlier portion of Speckles’ RDA career was devoted to carriage driving, at which he excelled. I suspect that he continued to miss pulling Father Christmas’ sleigh each Christmas long after our group wound down its driving component. A true ride-and-drive, he was also an incredibly consistent, versatile, understanding pony under saddle. Much like the rosettes he won, it would be impossible to keep track of the number of our riders whose first ever RDA pony was Speckles, or who rode off the lead rein or trotted for the first time on Speckles, who learned to canter on Speckles, or who competed at their first ever show on Speckles. Even for some of our other horses, Speckles was their first equine friend, their travel buddy, their example (for younger recruits) of how the professionals do it.

14.1hh, stocky, sensible, and (usually) gentlemanly, Speckles was anybody’s ride, and the recipient of countless claims of true love and everlasting friendship from those who rode, handled, or cared for him. He commanded a respect even from other horses which could only come from his vast experience of his job. Many people involved with our group have been with us for much less time than Speckles, and even those who had known our yard without him on it were still struck on occasion by the sense that he knew what he was doing more than anybody else. When we describe what we want in an ideal RDA pony, we are describing Speckles: safe, but not slow. Sturdy, but not too wide. A schoolmaster who is kind and patient, but still makes sure his riders actually learn to ride, and have fun doing it. Unfazed by almost anything, especially with an RDA rider on board. Lead rein or no lead rein – whatever you needed. I think the only thing we might have changed was his light colouring. Many knuckles over the years were worn down by scrubbing purple shampoo into his feathers and tail, but what else would do for a pony watched by so many adoring fans?

Like all the best and most memorable equines, Speckles wasn’t completely meek and mild: he never stopped being able to switch on what seemed to be an internal turbo booster to get from his field to his breakfast in as little time as possible (whether you were ready for it or not), and was notorious for his character building party trick of pretending he was completely unable to halt on the centre line when practicing a dressage test. Each spring, the soundtrack of the stables was a chorus of little (and sometimes not so little voices) pleading him to “woah, Speckles”, although, given that he’d always pull it out of the bag when it really counted, it’s hard to complain when that was his only

major flaw. Even in his later years, he kept a spring in his step, and would always know when his leader wasn't quite paying enough attention.

But, always understanding his job, Speckles seemed to have an innate understanding of the needs of whoever was on his back. "This rider likes a bit of speed... OK, I can do that, woohoo! This rider is nervous, and they need my help to let their potential shine through... I can do that. This rider can't see, and this rider can't hear, but I can handle that. This rider has ambitions, but they need to work hard. This rider likes to have a laugh. This rider just needs me to be their friend, and I can do that too." He was a wise old man with a twinkle in his eye.

It's hard for a post like this not to be sad, because it is unlikely that we, or indeed anybody else, will ever encounter a pony quite like Speckles again. To say his horse shoes will be difficult to fill is an understatement, But, ultimately, we should all feel incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to know, work with, and love one of the best RDA equines we will ever have the privilege to meet, and should be excited to look forward to where his legacy will take our group next.

Please, don't be sad. Share your favourite memories of this special pony with us. Did he help you achieve a milestone? Did he make you smile? Did he help you when you were struggling with something? What was your favourite thing about him? Speckles, like all of our much-missed equine friends, will be with our group as long as we continue to celebrate his memory. After twenty wonderful years with Team Abingdon, he's earned nothing less than a celebration.