

INTERVIEW KIM BAILEY

# Older, wiser and confident the good times will roll again



**Nicholas Godfrey** speaks to the one-time leading jumps trainer who is aiming for big-race success after several years in the doldrums

**S**PEAK to Kim Bailey and it soon becomes clear he doesn't care for the word 'resurgent'. Having reached his lowest ebb a few years ago when his training career was virtually submerged beneath a flooded all-weather gallop in Northamptonshire, Bailey has been labelled 'resurgent' for a couple of seasons as he steadily rebuilds after a period during which he hit rock bottom.

"Resurgent is rather an unfortunate word but I feel things are on the way up," suggests the in-form trainer. "I hadn't disappeared completely." No? Well, almost. At his professional nadir in 2007-08, Bailey saddled a total of three winners, having produced just 21 in the three previous seasons combined. "Okay, I disappeared off the winners' scale but we moved to Gloucestershire five or six years ago and since we've been there it has suddenly got better again. But I'd rather say rejuvenated than resurgent."

Still, while there is significant improvement, a fiercely competitive nature means Bailey is painfully aware that his status is far removed from his 1990s heyday. That, though, was the past, a foreign country where they did things differently and Bailey – eminently clubbable, blessed with top-drawer PR skills – was a leading member of the 'Lambourn mafia' and a fixture on the major stages. Lest it be forgotten, until Neptune Collonges won at Aintree last season for Paul Nicholls, Bailey was the only active trainer to have saddled winners in the Grand National, Cheltenham Gold Cup and Champion Hurdle, via that wonderful trio Mr Frisk, Master Oats and Alderbrook.

Now, after two changes of yard, he is a middle-ranking trainer grateful simply for a horse good enough just to be thinking about running in those types of races.

"Oliver Sherwood and I are going through the same thing," says Bailey, who is now 58. "We've been mates for a long time – I had a winner at Newbury the other day and mentioned the name Master Oats, he had a winner two days later and mentioned Large Action. We're lucky to have been through those times and it's great when you find yourself having horses good enough to talk about those horses again."

Bailey is level-headed in his ambitions these days. "I shall never get back to the scale I did before because I honestly don't want to train that many horses again, and in any event I don't think I've got the time to do it," he says. "It's too late in life and it's all changed; there are new kids on the block. I was one of those once and the old boys looked at me in horror but time moves on.

"But we're aiming for the same end product: don't get me wrong, I'd like nothing more than to be standing in the Gold Cup winner's enclosure again."

The last time he did that was in 1995 when Master Oats completed an unforgettable Cheltenham double for Bailey and stable jockey Norman Williamson after Alderbrook's victory in the Champion Hurdle two days previously. In that context, his subsequent fall from high estate was both sudden and not far off unthinkable. A prolonged bout of the

virus finally prompted a move from the Lambourn goldfish bowl to a brave new world at Preston Capes in Northamptonshire, 20 minutes from where his father used to train.

However, that new dawn faded almost as soon as it had come up. "We had a very good season the first year after I moved but in the end it was a disaster," he explains. "I had an all-weather gallop that got washed away so I couldn't train. The gallop disappeared and got turned into a ploughed field. I had nowhere to train."

**B**AILEY'S horsepower fell from about 90 to less than half that figure. He was forced to use other people's training facilities as a stopgap, only for the foot-and-mouth crisis to render that unworkable. "Frankly, at the end it was like opening a can of worms, putting a hole in the back of a bucket," he says.

"Owners disappeared; horses went too. It was terribly hard to get back from, and I had to admit that what I had sunk an awful lot of money into – what I believed was going to be an all-conquering place to train racehorses from – actually wasn't going to work. Probably that was my lowest point."

Forced to admit defeat, a victim of circumstance as much as anything else, Bailey upped sticks again with his

wife Clare and then-infant son Archie, recalibrating their life at his stunning new Cotswolds base Thorndale Farm, a rented stable in Andoversford, within shouting distance of Cheltenham. That put him perilously close to great mate Nigel Twiston-Davies, with whom he used to live when they were both bright young things (perish the thought) starting out under the tutelage of Fred Rimell at Kinnersley in the glory days of Comedy Of Errors, Rag Trade and Royal Frolic.

"We sold where we were in Northamptonshire and it took a year to sort out and get the operation going again," says Bailey, who speaks highly of his new staff headed by Mat Nicholls. "It all quietly gelled together and started to make a bit of sense. We got rid of all the dross horses we had at the time and went and bought some on spec. It is hard to keep smiling when things are going wrong but terribly important that you do, to give the impression that you are doing things the same as when you were doing well."

The winners duly started to flow again, with a seasonal tally of 38 in 2010-11 his best for 12 years, and there's a potential star in the yard in the shape of novice chaser Harry Topper, who caught the attention with his recent success in a Grade 2 at Newbury. "He is the most exciting horse I've had for a while," says the trainer, who is determined to adopt



**Kim Bailey:** "I've always tried to be a great communicator"

a patient approach with the five-year-old, who carries the colours of long-term patron Tony Solomons in partnership with David Keyte.

"I've been to Cheltenham and I'm not tempted to go rushing back there and luckily my owners are backing me

## Three Bailey stars of the past – and one for the future

### Mr Frisk

#### 1990 Grand National winner

I bought him at the sales, brought him home and he was completely tonto – and he wasn't very fast or very good. Jimmy FitzGerald was staying with me and watched him work with two or three other horses and he finished about 100 yards behind them. I told Jimmy he was running at Exeter soon and he said don't embarrass yourself by running him. He won by 20 lengths! History relates he turned out to be what he was but he was never a good horse at home – never a good horse at all unless there was fast ground.

### Master Oats

#### 1995 Cheltenham Gold Cup winner

I remember when he won at Southwell and Marcus [Armytage] said: "That was your greatest training performance, winning with that horse, he's no good." He was brain dead but he just tried and

tried and tried. He used to stand there at the end of a race with his head on the ground, absolutely knackered because he'd given everything. A lot of work went on behind the scenes with him, such as Yogi Breisner teaching him to jump. We even schooled him over poles the morning of the Gold Cup and he still made a horrendous mistake in the race. He was an extraordinary horse.

### Alderbrook

#### 1995 Champion Hurdle winner

I can't believe I'll get another one like that – he was a freak one for me. The first time we schooled him I've never seen a horse go over hurdles so fast. It was a competition between me and Brian Delaney, who was watching, about who could get to the bookies the quickest. Obviously he was electric but he was also an unbelievably tough horse. Of all the horses I trained he is a special memory for me because he

was unique – he was a colt and at evening stables he would almost savage the person going in to feed him but my seven- and eight-year-old children could go in there and he'd leave them alone. I was disappointed not to win a second Champion Hurdle with him.

### Harry Topper (right)

He's only a five-year-old, is 17 hands and very, very weak, but he's the most exciting horse I've had for a while. I mentioned Master Oats after he won at Newbury and it's obvious the two horses are

very similar. Master Oats didn't have a huge amount of ability but he had guts like you've never come across and this horse is exactly the same. He's very much a challenge for us as he's quite difficult – he's a box-walker, a crib-biter – and I hope he'll be a far better horse next year when he's filled his frame.





with this one," says Bailey. "That's most probably the difference in me now compared to ten years ago. I've got 'Saturday' horses coming through now but there are a lot of nice young horses, and while I always had a fair amount of patience I've probably got more now.

"How tempting would it be to run Harry Topper at Cheltenham? People say there's only one Cheltenham but it's wrong to think there are only four days in the whole calendar. It's the best place to have winners but you can't ruin a horse's career just to go there. Now I look upon them as long-term prospects – not today's horse, tomorrow's horse, but hopefully next year's horse."

What hasn't changed are Bailey's people skills, manifesting themselves in his embrace of social media. "Look, I'm in the entertainment business," he explains. "People are spending an awful lot of money to have horses in training and I've always tried to be a great communicator, even back in the Lambourn days.

"If you invest a lot of money in stocks and shares you want your stockbroker to ring you up – if you're spending 20 grand a year on something you don't want to be ignored. I might not want to sit in the pub with them all night long by any means but I like to give them a bit of a laugh. Hopefully the website gives an impression of what we're about. We'll try to have winners and make it fun for you as well."

"I write the blog at 6am every morning – it doesn't take too long, it's light-hearted and we get a number of hits."

Bailey's blog, humorous and informative, is always well worth a visit, featuring regular mentions of Twiston-Davies, 'the Fat Farmer from Naunton' (TFFFN). Bailey is a regular tweeter too. "The first time I went on to tweeting two years ago, within 48 hours I had a Russian girl proposing marriage to me which my wife saw, so my Twitter account was cancelled," he recalls. "I got a new one about 18 months ago." A new account that is, not a new Russian wife.

For all his jovial outlook, there are aspects of the past that remain determinedly off-limits, and just occasionally it is tempting to see in Bailey the wedding guest who awakes as 'a sadder and a wiser man' the 'morrow morn' in Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Then again, he could also pass for a living embodiment of the cliche that 'what

**'People say there's only one Cheltenham but you can't ruin a horse's career just to go there. I look upon my horses as long-term prospects'**

doesn't kill you makes you stronger'.

"I'm a much more relaxed person than I used to be and I like to think I'm a better person," he says. "Because I don't live on site now, you can have a life, which wasn't the case in Lambourn. My whole attitude has changed – my son Archie is seven and it means I can see him."

Bailey has two grown-up children from his first marriage. "I didn't really see them enough because I was working, working, working," he says. "There are so many things I regret. I never used to go on holiday skiing with them because I was too busy."

"That word 'busy' is a terrible thing to have and I won't let it happen again. If there's a panic then of course I'm at the yard, but there's more outside racing. I have a family and I want to be with that family. I'm an old dad – when I go to school they ask if I'm the grandfather! I think the father-and-son race is off."

Cricket remains a passion, and a few days' salmon fishing is close to heaven in the Bailey world. But before anyone starts thinking the competitive juices don't flow quite as strong, recollections of an attempt at a 'proper' holiday in Thailand should be enough to convince otherwise.

"It was a complete disaster," he says. "I spent my whole time phoning up the yard to find out why something hadn't won. I hate not being able to see my horses run. I want to have those good winners again, and they will happen."

Having been once round the racing fair, Bailey feels he is ready for another ride on the carousel. Rest assured, he will appreciate it more the second time around.

## STEVE DENNIS



**B**EGINNINGS are the best part, endings never as much fun. That applies across a wide spectrum – love affairs, holidays, life – and, as we saw yesterday, to the careers of racing heroes.

As far as the individual case goes, I wouldn't go anywhere near it with a 20-foot bargepole with the UN peacekeeping force on the end of it, suffice to say a horse belongs to his owner and that owner is within his rights to do anything he wishes with his possession.

But the situation yet again turns the spotlight on the best thing to do with racehorses once they stop being racehorses. There is life after racing, it is generally of a greater duration than the brief span centring on the racecourse, and the decision regarding what to do with a horse when his career is over is arguably the most important decision of all.

The future is almost always more important than the past, even a thoroughly illustrious past. Retirement doesn't have to mean inertia – although it can – and these days retirement is more often the term used for a change of career. It was not always so, of course.

The great Ryan Price kept his old soldiers such as Hill House and Persian Lancer in a field at home, and by all accounts they were very happy. Racing writer Sean Magee tells a tale of discovering Cheltenham Gold Cup winner Fort Leney in a muddy field with a companion, rugged warmly against the weather and contentedly seeing out his dotage. From the sublime to the frequently ridiculous – our old racehorse Breton Banquet spent three-quarters of his life standing benignly in a field, rejecting every attempt to provide him with a more active existence and sticking to what he did best: eating.

Nowadays, of course, the choice for ex-racers is far wider, thanks in the main to the Retraining of Racehorses initiative – 'trained to run, retrained for fun' – backed by the BHA, which provides a 'jobseeker's charter' for the laid-off racehorse and enables him to turn his hand to every equine discipline imaginable.

The thoroughbred is not by definition a racehorse – look at the famous example of Snaafi Dancer, bred to be one, trained to be one, yet no more a racehorse than one of Thelwell's ponies. Thoroughbreds can have a career in eventing, showjumping, dressage, horseball, polo, showing, the Household Cavalry, the police force – the whole gamut from A to Z aside from the niche occupation of racing from A to B. The mercifully short-lived pastime of banded racing ably demonstrated that some racehorses should never have been racehorses in the first place.

The only question is deciding what's best for an ex-racehorse, at which point human intervention can cause more problems than it solves. To be precise, no human can know what's best for a particular horse. All that can

## Retirement should be only the end of the beginning

feasibly be done is to try several things and see which seems to suit best.

They can't talk, can they, so we frequently feel the need to talk for them. It's called anthropomorphism, which is an ugly word for what can be an endearing habit but can also be a stumbling block laid squarely in the path of the future.

Someone might think dear old ex-racehorse Lucky Jim should spend the rest of his life turned out in a field, because he's been such a good boy and deserves a long rest. On one hand, this might be exactly what Lucky Jim has been yearning for. On the other, the enforced inactivity might bore him into viciousness or an early grave. Stone walls do not a prison make, but maybe four green hedges and a locked gate do.

**P**ERHAPS Lucky Jim is perfectly suited to being an evener, and after a period of adaptation could enjoy several years of activity and usefulness before – at a certain age – being pensioned off to a peaceful paddock.

Because the outdated idea of retirement is 'relaxation', people can talk of cruelty, as if allowing an ageing horse to be healthy and active is somehow cruel. That is anthropomorphism gone mad. Cruelty is denying a horse food, water, warmth, security. That scenario is unfortunately far more likely if Lucky Jim is tossed into a field, out of sight and soon out of mind, than if he is reinvented for another discipline.

At bottom, a racehorse is just an animal, after all the fog of glory with which we surround him is stripped away. Hierarchies belong on the racecourse; when racecourse days are done the 55-rated plodder stands equal with the champion as the next phase of their lives beckon.

It's up to us, the humans, to make that next phase as enjoyable and as rewarding for the horse as the previous phase has been. In so doing, our needs must perforce be subordinate to his.

Endings don't have to be sad; if we see them as opportunities for new beginnings they become full of exciting possibilities.

**'The plodder stands equal with the champion in the next phase of life'**