

The Diamond Centre for Disabled Riders

The Early Years of The Diamond Centre

The Diamond Centre for Disabled Riders was one of the forerunners of riding for disabled, but the roots of Diamond go back to 1959 when the founder, Keith Webb, a London Mounted Police Officer first saw a child who was normally dependent on a wheelchair, benefiting from riding a pony in Hampshire.

The image stuck in Keith's mind but the real turning point was not until much later in 1968 when Keith, supported by Dr. Joan Bicknell was asked to undertake a pilot scheme at Queen Mary's Hospital for Children in Carshalton, to explore the benefits of riding for the patients. Six riders were chosen, three with learning difficulties and three with physical problems, to ride at The Diamond Farm Riding School in Oxted, some considerable distance from the hospital. They were shortly joined by riders from the Croydon Spastics Society and Edith Edwards House (Banstead).

Transport was an issue and later that year the rides were moved to the Queen Mary's Hospital grounds with ponies being brought in for twice weekly sessions. In November 1969 The Diamond Riding Group was formed and Diamond became one of the founder members of the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA).

Through Keith and his wife June's determination a suggestion was made to have a purpose built centre and so in 1970, the Diamond Group was offered six acres of Crown land at Queen Mary's Hospital, Carshalton, Surrey on which to create a purpose-built centre. Lessons continued at the hospital until 1971 when a fundraising drive raised the £75,000 needed to secure the land and develop the first few buildings on the site that is now The Diamond Centre. Construction began in January 1973 with the first lessons in the arena starting in September 1973. It took two years to plan and a further two years to complete but the centre was opened by Princess Anne on 13th May 1974.

The rest as they say is 'history' and over the past 50 years the therapeutic value of riding for those with physical disabilities and learning difficulties has been fully appreciated. However, it is worth remembering that the Diamond Centre was the first purpose-built centre for disabled riders in the UK and is still one of the largest in the world.

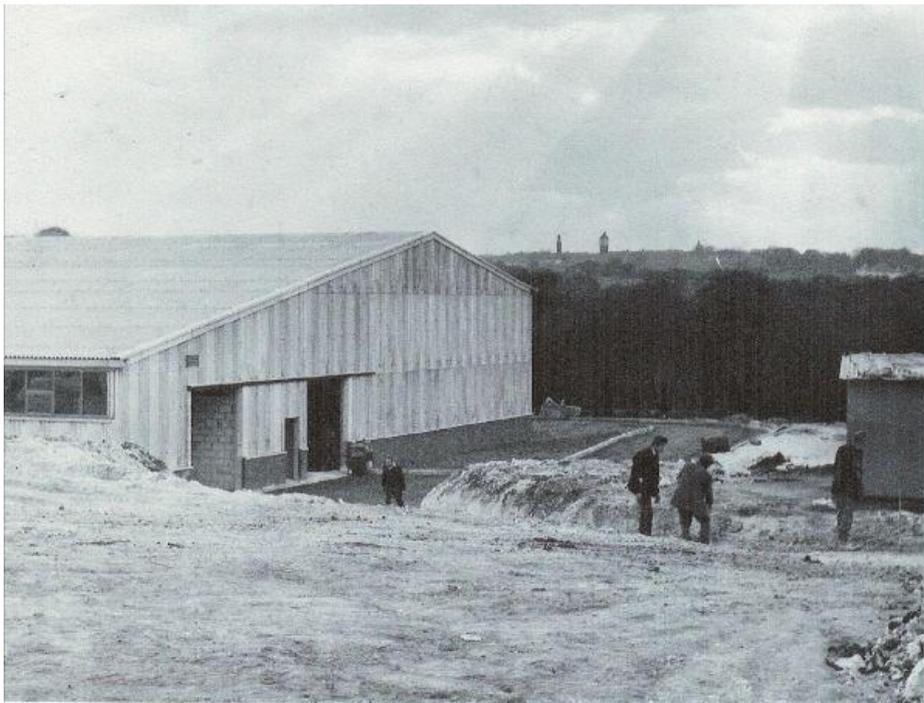
Over the years literally thousands of disabled children and adults have benefitted from riding at Diamond with some coming for over 30 years. Diamond, and especially the horses, are very much at the heart of many people's lives. Many of our 200+ volunteers have been coming for years and give their time on a weekly basis to help our riders enjoy the therapeutic benefits of regular contact with horses.

The centre has been in operation for over 50 years and continues to uphold Keith Webb's legacy and looking forward to providing many more years of riding for disabled.

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1971 – RDA National Conference – Diamond Model shown to Princess Anne by the founder, Keith Webb



1973 – Near Completion

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1974 – Opening Outside View



**1974 – Princess Anne with Malcolm Bridson,
the first Centre Manager**

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Archive Films on YouTube

As part of our 50th Anniversary celebrations you might be interested in our archive films showing the opening of Diamond and the early years. To view the film clips please use the links below or search for "Diamond Centre" on YouTube.

Clip 1 – "Riding Towards Freedom"

<http://youtu.be/ub4i61HNI-k> (1:42.80)

Made in 1973, before the opening in 1974.

Clip 2 – ITV News covering the opening of the Centre on May 13th 1974

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aicnG_cTaDU (2:42.12)

Shot on the opening day with Princess Anne – aged, just 24. It was a sad day for the Princess as her favourite horse had been put down that morning. The ride features riders from Edith Edwards House in Banstead (which no longer exists).

Clip 3 – BBC TV Programme "Nationwide": Brian Foulks Reporting

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjBywQQq4SU> (6:29.00)

Quite a long piece covering the early work of Diamond – made in 1975 soon after the opening in 1974. There is mention of Vivian from Queen Mary's Hospital, who is autistic, Alison (aged 9) with spina bifida, Simon has hardly any arms, caused by something similar to thalidomide, Brian (aged 8), who is deaf, and we believe is riding "Chunky", and Roy, who is blind. The instructor on the microphone might be Ruth Clark and the clip includes interviews with Dr (now Professor) Joan Bicknell and very wise and profound words from Keith Webb, the founder of Diamond.

Clip 4 – Central Office of Information: "What's Best in Britain Today"

YouTube <http://youtu.be/m9I2Vwcw1x4> (4:32.00)

Again the early days of Diamond (probably 1975) are shown in a short film called "*But I can ride a pony*". Helen Henn, the Diamond Physio can be spotted in the clip as can Keith and June Webb (June is the lady holding the dog in the Servery). The young girl with Down's is Kim.