

# COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE AWARDS

The Countryside Alliance Awards have been handed out at a Parliamentary reception in London. The Awards, nicknamed "The Rural Oscars," honour the countryside through the people who work so hard to preserve its communities, traditions and enterprise.

Countryside Alliance Board Member Baroness Golding and Chief Executive Simon Hart presided over the fourth annual House of Lords reception which was attended by regional award winners and Parliamentarians keen to congratulate rural Britain's best. The Countryside Alliance Awards run over five categories, and the national winners have been drawn from those who won their regional title. Also presented were the Countryside Alliance Political Awards, honouring rural-minded politicians.

By Christopher Middleton

Another rural businessman who knows all about being adaptable is Howard Kirby. Twenty years ago, he was an outdoor pig farmer, rearing 500 sows and running an occasional shoot just outside Andover, in Hampshire. Today, the pigs are gone and the land on which they once snuffled is now the home of the thriving Lains Shooting School, voted runner-up to the Wellington Carriage Company in this year's Countryside Alliance competition, and singled out by the judges for a Highly Commended award.

Mind you, shooting's just the half of it. As well as putting on shotgun and air rifle classes for everyone from schoolchildren to senior citizens, the school also runs a fast-expanding dog training section, which was initially set up just for gun dogs, but now takes in every kind of domestic hound from naughty Jack Russells to grumpy Great Danes.

"We recognised that in order to grow, we couldn't just restrict ourselves to one type of training," says Kirby. "We now get dog owners coming from as far afield as Wales and Norfolk; people are very particular when it comes to their dogs, and if they've heard good things about you, they're prepared to travel long distances."

It works the other way, too. Each spring, Kirby and his team pack their own canine training roadshow, namely the Mullenscote Dog Display Team, into a giant, grey juggernaut, and head off round the country.

"Between March and October, we'll be out every single weekend, sometimes as far away as Scotland. As well as putting on our own displays, we've now started inviting members of the public to bring their own dogs along for a dog training clinic, at the end of which they can enter their animals for an award.

"On top of that, we're looking at setting up our own apprenticeship scheme for dog training. At present, there's no structure, no recognised qualification; literally anyone can set up in business and call themselves a dog trainer."

Given this continual sprouting of new ideas, it's not surprising that staff numbers have grown, too. When Kirby started out, the workforce was just him; now he employs nine full-time and eight part-time staff, not to mention a steady crop of work experience volunteers, both from the local schools and from nearby Sparsholt Agricultural College (where Kirby's 15-year-old son intends to go).

"For me, one of the great joys is seeing how new people take to what's on offer here," says Kirby. "Our head dog trainer Annie Buckley, for example, is an ex-forklift truck driver who first came here as a customer because she had a dog at home that was proving difficult.

"She started working as a volunteer, studied really hard, threw herself into the work, and now has four or five dogs of her own and an extremely long client list, which means she's booked out 40 hours a week."

So while other businesses are withering in the current economic climate, Lains Shooting School is quietly blossoming.

"We thought the anti-hunting Bill might hit us, but if anything, it's raised the profile of country sports and made more people want to get involved in them," says Kirby. "Strangely enough, the credit crunch hasn't been too bad for us, either. I've had quite a few approaches from people who have been given a golden goodbye from their company and now want to retrain and get into country sports.

"They tell me they've spent half their lives travelling up and down on the train to London, and they now want to do a job they love, not just one they do for money."

### **National winner**

**Highly commended:** Lains Shooting School, Hampshire

- For more information on the Countryside Alliance Awards (formerly known as the CA's Rural Retailer competition), and the shortlist for all the awards, see [www.countrysideallianceawards.co.uk](http://www.countrysideallianceawards.co.uk)
- Lains Shooting School, Quarley, nr Andover, Hampshire SP11 8PX (01264 889467, [www.lainsshootingschool.co.uk](http://www.lainsshootingschool.co.uk) )