Vet student Joy Fenner spent a week working with farrier Kevin Willard under a new initiative highlighting the importance of cooperation between vets and farriers.

ONE vet student from each of the UK’s seven veterinary schools recently took the opportunity to spend a week with one of the country’s leading farriers under a new initiative from the Worshipful Company of Farriers (WCF) (VR, May 1, 2010, vol 166, p 541).

The Equine Veterinary Studies Award highlights the importance of close cooperation between farriers and veterinary surgeons. The final-year students were placed with highly qualified farriers, who were also WCF liverymen; the students were able to count the placement as part of their extramural studies (EMS). The WCF funded the students’ accommodation, subsistence and travelling expenses.

The first recipients of the award were Joanna Goliszek (Bristol), Rachel Croft (Cambridge), Katherine Rooney (Edinburgh), Christy MacKenzie (Glasgow), Emily Sabin (Liverpool), Christine Threlfall (Royal Veterinary College) and Joy Fenner (Nottingham).

Joy spent a week with Kevin Willard in Kent. She says that the experience helped to reinforce what she had learned practically and theoretically while at university.

Describing her week, she says: ‘The first task for the farriers each morning was to make the shoes needed for the day. I was introduced to the team, given a health and safety briefing and told what to expect during my week. I was then given my first task – to make a hoof pick!

‘The first call of the day was to two elderly Highland ponies, one for a trim and one for a change of front shoes. On the way, Kevin explained the benefits of making horseshoes, and the importance of the traditional skills involved.

‘I now have a much greater understanding of the role of the farrier in clinical disease of the equine foot, and the various treatments they can recommend and carry out’

Joy made her own hoof pick during her week. Half an hour into the job she was discovering that it was much harder than professional farriers made it look.

‘Our second visit was to a pony with chronic low-grade laminitis that has been improving with Kevin’s chosen treatment: egg bar shoes with gel filler. This was a perfect example of the benefit of forging custom-made shoes, as it would have been impossible to buy shoes small enough to fit this pony. He discussed the pony’s progress with the owner and the improvement he
The majority of the horses we saw during the week were elderly, as geriatric horses were this farrier’s speciality. Patience, he said, was essential when working with older horses and ponies. It was important to give them a rest – a chance to rebalance – between working on each foot, and he explained how shoeing them appropriately helped a variety of geriatric conditions. “I had a fantastic week; not only was it a great opportunity to see how a master farrier approaches various clinical problems, but, as we drove from client to client, there was the chance to discuss a host of subjects. Kevin described what it means to be a liveryman of the Company, and we discussed the working relationship between farriers and vets, the similarities between our professional codes of conduct and CPD, as well as the nuisance of roadworks and the weather!”

The WCF has confirmed that it will support the award for the next five years, and an invitation to take part in 2011 has been sent to all of the vet schools. Students who wish to apply should contact the school’s academic support officer or their EMS adviser.

Ten-minute chat

Anne Killick spends most of her year in practice at Meadowbank Veterinary Surgery, Selston, Nottinghamshire, but whenever she can she escapes to the mountainous Hunza Nagar region of Pakistan, close to the Chinese border, where she helps local farmers.

What initially took you to Pakistan?
In 2007, I joined a mountain biking trip that started in Kazakhstan, and culminated in cycling down the Karakorum highway from Kashgar (China) to Gilgit (Pakistan). I fell in love with the country. My feelings recorded at the time were: the Karakorums are real mountains; the scenery is so grand that words just are not big enough or impressive enough to describe it; the people are lovely and our guide is a star. I have always maintained that there are too many exciting places to visit and insufficient time to visit even half of them. Consequently, much as I loved an area, I had not retraced any of my steps. That was until I arrived in Pakistan, and now I do not want to go anywhere else.

How did you get involved with the local farmers?
The following year I spent 10 days trekking on my own with the same guide. I learned much about the local culture and farming. Tourism used to be the main source of revenue in Gilgit-Baltistan, but since 9/11 this has all but dried up. Subsistence farming is the mainstay and people have to be self-sufficient. The few rural vets are in government employment and charge for the medicines they use rather than their time, but usually people with a sick animal ask the local dispenser. They are trained and can supply basic medicines, but have great difficulty getting hold of them. This is the level at which I am trying to help.

What is planned for your next trip?
I am returning to Pakistan in January. As well as sightseeing, I hope to make some veterinary contacts in Lahore and will spend a few days at the Brooke Hospital in Peshawar. In the summer I will be back again in Gilgit-Baltistan (Inshallah).

Aren’t your trips a bit of a busman’s holiday?
Not at all. Every year I have a wonderful time, and am learning so much about life there. I feel incredibly privileged to enjoy the amazing hospitality offered by these warmhearted but desperately poor (by our standards) people. It is the least that I can do to try to help them in some way.

You may be used to treating sheep and goats, but what about yaks?
Although I come from a dairy farming background, I work mainly with small animals. In Pakistan I try to support the existing, but limited and overstretched, animal healthcare framework. I have spent some time with the government vet serving the area, and have consulted the dispensaries from several different valleys to learn how I can help. Sheep and goats are the predominant animals, but those who can afford it keep cows and yaks. Donkeys, mules and ponies are used for transport or carrying loads. Every animal, inch of land and tree possessed contributes to a family’s livelihood.

What supplies do farmers need?
Foot-and-mouth disease is endemic, and is a very real problem. Symptomatic relief is given where possible – the blisters are cleaned and necrotic tissue debrided. Occasionally antibiotic cover is used to control secondary infection, but anti-inflammatory or pain relief is never available. Parasite control is limited and respiratory disease is rife. These are the biggest issues, and the problems I am always asked about.

What was your proudest moment?
Pakistan is still a huge learning curve for me. I am proud of the fact that I have continued to visit the country despite most people and our Foreign Office advising against all but essential travel there. I realise that much of the time my insurance is therefore null and void, but the benefits of my visits, as a tourist, and for taking much-needed donations of veterinary supplies, far outweigh the risks involved.

Is there anything you don’t enjoy on your trips?
Seeing the way chickens are transported – cages crammed full with birds and piled on top of each other on the back of vans, with no protection from the elements. People frequently do not travel in better conditions, though you could argue that they have the choice of whether to travel.

What advice would you give to someone considering a similar trip?
Don’t be put off by other people giving negative advice. Expect the unexpected, since nothing ever goes according to plan, but you will meet some wonderful people and have an unforgettable time.

What is the best piece of advice you were ever given?
Perseverance reaps rewards eventually. This was something I had drummed into me as a child – if at first you don’t succeed, then try again. Nothing happens in a hurry in Pakistan and one has to remember this, but patience, persistence and humility are certainly rewarded in the end.

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Ten-minute chat

Anne Killick

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