

## **STALLION AI SERVICES**

To walk into a stallion barn at Stallion AI Services is to walk into an oasis of calm. Even on a day with fourteen stallions in residence, all is calm, quiet and relaxed – quite the opposite of what many people expect of any yard with stallions in residence.

For Tullis Matson, who set up this business on his family's farm, the environment that visiting stallions find themselves in is all-important. He says: "Owners have reservations about sending their stallions away, so we do everything that we can to reassure them that their horses will be safe and well cared for with us. The last thing we want is a stressed horse – or a stressed owner. We pay a lot of attention to security and monitor the stallions closely all the time that they are with us."

Welfare is of paramount importance. In total, the unit consists of twenty spacious and well-ventilated boxes, divided into three quarantine sections. There are well-fenced grass turnout paddocks, a large horsewalker and a lungeing pen. Individual condition is constantly monitored and stallions are weighed twice a week.

For additional peace of mind, every stable is fitted with CCTV cameras so that the staff can constantly monitor every horse on the yard – and an added bonus for owners is that they can log on via the internet and see the same live footage of their horse for themselves.

Stallion AI Services is the result of over 20 years of research and development – work that is still ongoing – but it all started because of an accident.

After working in racing, Tullis Matson had returned to Twemlows Hall in Shropshire to join the family's stud business specialising in the breeding of sport horses. One day, during a routine covering of a thoroughbred mare by an Irish Draught stallion, the mare suffered an internal rupture, which resulted

in her death. Tullis says: “It’s a rare occurrence, but it can happen and it made me ask myself if there wasn’t an easier way.

“At that time, although AI was commonplace for farm livestock, it hadn’t become established for horses in the UK partly because there was no training available for the layman. It is one of the things that the UK has lagged behind on, largely because so much breeding here is focused on the bloodstock industry and AI wasn’t and still isn’t allowed with horses in racing.

“In New Zealand, however, AI had been used on horses for years largely because the cost of transportation between the North and South islands for breeding was so high. My father had bought me a ticket to New Zealand to study horse breeding as a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday present and when out there I learnt to do AI in horses.

Tullis returned to Twemlows Hall Stud and started using AI on their own horses, gradually offering the service to other owners. As the business became established, the number of mares coming to the stud for AI doubled year on year until around two years ago and there are now around 400 mares going through annually.

Stallion AI Services is now a major AI training centre offering one day semen collection courses and two-day Defra approved insemination training courses. Tullis estimates that the centre has trained about 80% of lay people now qualified to carry out equine AI.

Although still based adjacent to Twemlows Hall Stud, which is run by Tullis’s father Richard and brother Edward, Stallion AI Services is now a completely separate business.

Tullis first started freezing semen in 1996, initially in conjunction with Genus Breeding and has now frozen semen from between 500 and 600 stallions – including many rare breeds. Tullis first became involved with RBST in 2000

and one of the first rare breeds collections that Tullis did was from Eriskay stallions which saw semen from four different bloodlines being collected.

Tullis acknowledges that the concept of freezing semen is still not fully accepted by everyone in the horse world. He says: "What many people do not realise is that the technology is always evolving. We can now freeze semen from stallions that we wouldn't have been able to do as little as two years ago. Although in the early days conception rates were poor we are now seeing rates in the 80% bracket.

"When we first started only about 60% of the semen would freeze and we are now looking at around 90% - the horses haven't changed, it's the technology that's moved on and Stallion AI Services have invested heavily in that technology.

"With all collections, whether the semen is to be used fresh, chilled or frozen, we assess its viability, filter for quality and, if necessary, improve the concentration of live sperm which increases the likelihood of conception.

"With frozen semen, we also evaluate samples from each collection post-freezing by thawing them at 37°C for 30 seconds so that we can visually assess motility and carry out a morphology assessment. This latter is done by staining the semen so that dead sperm cells show up red and live ones green. We then look at 100 live cells and note the number of normal ones. The number of live, normal sperm post-thaw in each dose can then be calculated to form a clear, objective view of what the end product will be, whenever in the future it is thawed."

For owners of rare breed stallions looking to sell frozen semen overseas, Tullis describes the RBST semen collection programme as "a golden opportunity". He says: "Depending on where you are exporting to, there are differing requirements for health testing. While the owner will have to pay for territory-specific tests, on the RBST scheme their pre-entry health tests and livery costs will be paid so the export costs will be considerably lower. The

owners already receive 15% of the semen collected, but it would be possible for them to arrange additional collections for export while the horses are here.”

*For full details of Stallion AI Services and a detailed description of the semen freezing process, visit [www.stallionai.com](http://www.stallionai.com)*