

# KING GEORGE ROAD TRIP



*In the first of a five-part series leading up to Saturday's midsummer highlight at Ascot, **Steve Dennis** visits the oldest-surviving winner of the King George VI & Queen Elizabeth Stakes*

**A**S BOB DYLAN once said, you would not think, to look at him, but he was famous long ago. He's just an ordinary brown horse in a field, white face and one white foot, picking away at the grass like ordinary horses do.

Admittedly, he looks immaculate; there is a bloom in his coat that speaks of vigour, health and plenty of work with a brush. And there is about him a certain indefinable something that draws the attention, captures the eye, sets a little bell ringing in the back of the mind when he raises his head at a sudden noise, pricks his ears, walks towards his small knot of admirers at the field gate.

He passes us, turns around and passes again, as though measuring us. Perhaps he sees the camera, perhaps he hears us mumbling, warmly and appreciatively, perhaps he's just been bottling it up.

Down goes his head with a squeal of delight, he paws the earth, digging in, slipping a little on the wet ground. He sashays side to side, wriggling with exertion, blowing fiercely down his nose, now flicking out a leg, now tossing his head, all grace and power and energy and mischief. Then he wheels away and up, up on his hind legs, forelegs fighting the breeze, head thrown back as if to say 'look at me now, do you remember me now, this is what I was and what I still am'.

With all four feet back on the floor, a shiver ripples through his skin like a wave rolling over the ocean. Then he's up on his hind legs again, turning back the years, 21 years. Mtoto is playing to the gallery, and to see him so doing sparks the same rush of appreciation and awe as he inspired in the days when he used to come fast and late and irresistible, a vivid blur of brown and white and bright yellow silks.

At 26, Mtoto is the oldest living King George winner. His racing career was a glorious one – twice champion older horse – that blossomed only after the late Alec Stewart had skilfully nurtured him through his first two seasons, taking care of the colt with vulnerable feet and husbanding his talent so that it might be fully realised.

The race everyone remembers is the 1987 Eclipse, in which the bludgeon of Reference Point crossed steel with the rapier of Mtoto in a contest that Racing Post readers voted 44th in the 100 Greatest Races. Reference Point set a gruelling pace, and Mtoto had to use not only his dazzling turn of foot but also demonstrate his tenacity in wearing down the Derby winner, two sets of yellow and black silks flapping like battle standards on a hot summer afternoon.



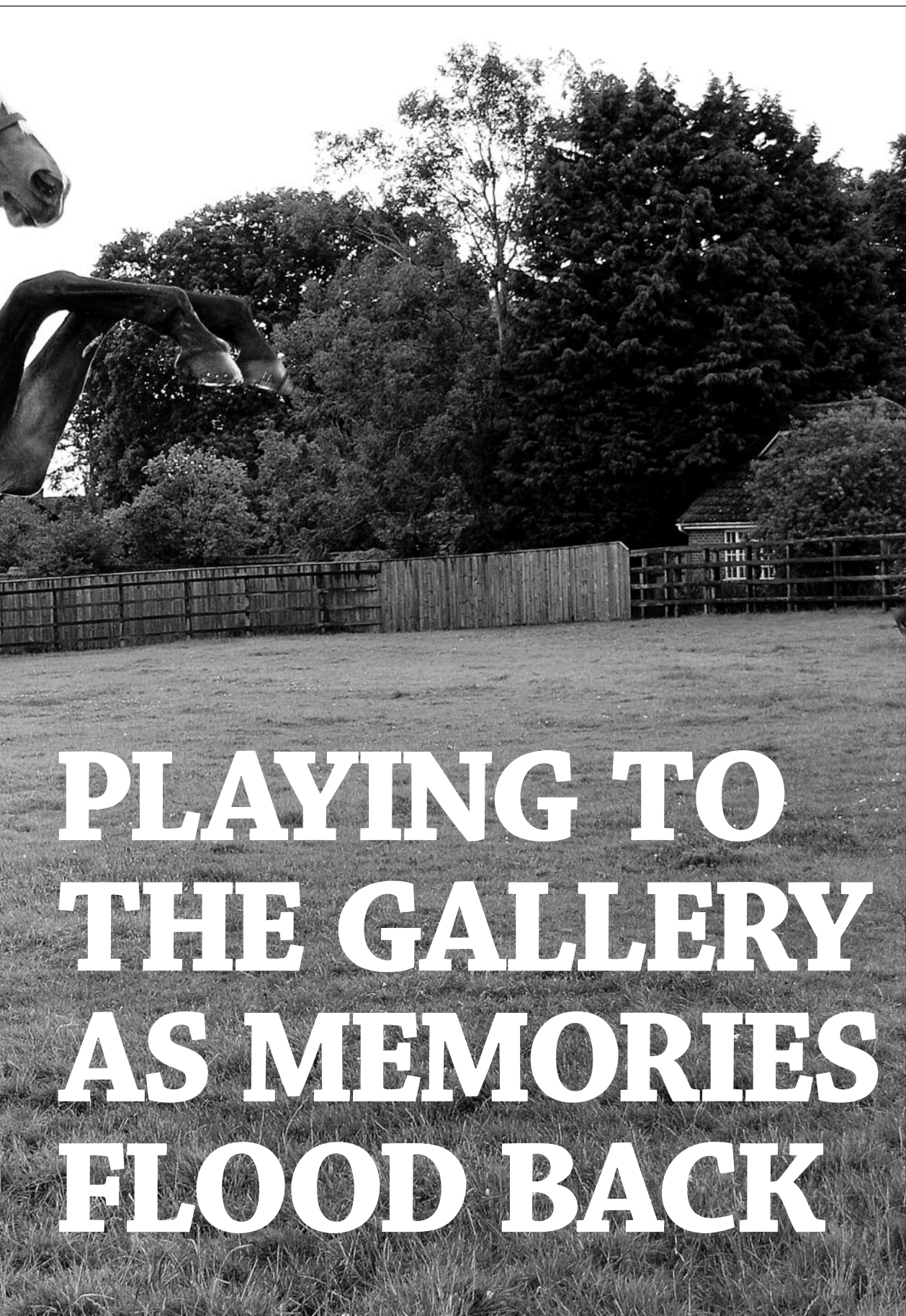
**Mtoto in playful mood at Aston Upthorpe Stud, where he lives in honourable retirement**

Mtoto had another Eclipse in the locker, another knock-down-drag-out affair with the outsider Shady Heights, by the time he lined up for the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Diamond Stakes against nine rivals. He was only second favourite behind the galloper Unfuwain, whose attritional style was expected to be enhanced by the ease in the ground. The Guineas winner Doyoun and Derby runner-up Glacial Storm were fancied too, but victory was never seriously in doubt after Mtoto had loomed up on Unfuwain's shoulder a furlong and a half out. Michael Roberts shook him up and he

shook off Unfuwain, galloping away to win by two lengths. Third was Tony Bin; that's another story.

Mtoto might have gone out on the highest of highs by winning the Arc, but he was caught in a pocket at the precise moment he should have been surging for the line, and although it took only a few strides for Roberts to extricate him he came up a neck short of Tony Bin when the camera clicked. Even today, teeth are sucked and regretful glances exchanged at what might have been on the Bois de Boulogne.

During his career at Aston Upthorpe Stud, in Oxfordshire, the son of Busted sired a Derby winner in Shaamit and a Gold Cup winner in Celeric, as well as producing the outstanding jumps sire Presenting, Prix de Diane runner-up Mousse



# PLAYING TO THE GALLERY AS MEMORIES FLOOD BACK

Glancee, Irish Oaks runner-up Mot Juste, Oaks third Crown Of Light, last season's Cheveley Park winner Serious Attitude and the inveterate headcase Maylane. He was never a truly commercial proposition, however, never the fashion in a fickle bloodstock world, and he covered his last mares three years ago.

"He was probably still fertile enough, but he wasn't attracting many good mares, wasn't getting many full stop," says affable stud manager Denes Marrffy. "He was one of the last syndicated stallions, so his book never rose above 66 mares anyway. There was more interest in the couple of years after Shaamit won the Derby, but he was perceived as a staying influence. He was very good for small breeders, though."

Those days are done now, and

**'His routine hasn't changed in 20 years, other than now he doesn't visit the covering shed'**

Mtoto lives in honourable retirement at Aston Upthorpe, across the way from the bad-tempered Zilzal, who disgraced himself in front of the man from the Racing Post by pulling off his own headcollar and shaking it rather as a terrier would a rat. He capers irascibly around his paddock, putting up a hare, which darts nimbly out of reach of his hooves. His combustible temperament manifested itself on the racetrack too; retirement and old age have evidently not mellowed him.

Not so Mtoto, though. "There isn't a nasty streak in him," says Bob Woods, who has been his groom and companion for 20 years. "He has his habits, though, one of which is that he runs round and round inside his box, lap after lap, but he only does it clockwise." To see him do it is a remarkable thing. He has a big



## MTOTO

26 b h Busted-Amazer (Mincio)  
Trainer Alec Stewart  
Owner Ahmed Al Maktoum  
Breeder John L Moore



Race record 3/215224/11148/111112

Wins				
June 86	Haydock	maiden	M Roberts	5-4f
May 87	Sandown	Brigadier Gerard Stakes	M Roberts	16-1
June 87	Ascot	Prince of Wales's Stakes	M Roberts	7-2jf
July 87	Sandown	Eclipse Stakes	M Roberts	6-1
May 88	Goodwood	Listed race	M Roberts	4-7f
Jun 88	Ascot	Prince of Wales's Stakes	M Roberts	8-15f
July 88	Sandown	Eclipse Stakes	M Roberts	6-4f
July 88	Ascot	King George VI & Queen Elizabeth Stakes	M Roberts	4-1
Sep 88	Goodwood	Select Stakes	M Roberts	1-4f

also runner-up 1988 Arc, fourth 1987 Arc

detached box, a box fit for such a horse, with a plaque on the wall in owner Ahmed Al Maktoum's black and yellow colours denoting his name and pedigree, the floor thickly carpeted with straw and a door opening out on to his paddock. But it evidently fulfils some inner desire, some atavistic urge, to run helter-skelter round it, always on the turn, always the same way, running a trench in the straw. We must forgive our elder statesmen their quirks.

HE HAD a few problems with his back a few years ago, not improved by that circular habit, but otherwise Mtoto has escaped the depredations of age and ill health. "He's always been a healthy horse, we've never had any problems with him. He's always had good skin, never had trouble with his feet," says Woods.

"He does what he likes," adds Marrffy. "As a result, he looks like a horse ten years younger. The manager before me said that he'd never make old bones, but just look at him now. He's done well. For exercise, he used to walk around the village, but then it got a bit too busy with traffic and we had to stop that."

"His routine hasn't changed in 20

years, other than now he doesn't visit the covering shed. This is a retirement home now, with him and Zilzal and the old teaser Layal, who is 30. Teaser he might have been, but he did sire Wollboll, who was a bit of a star in Jersey a few years ago. Now they're just old boys all together."

The Aston Upthorpe office is quiet, almost reverentially so, walls lined with paintings and photographs of Mtoto and his offspring. Among an amalgam of Darley memorabilia, many commemorating minor glories in obscure places, sits the trophy for the 1988 King George. There is a dent in the lid, you would hope dating from high jinks at the post-race party.

It's what remains of that afternoon at Ascot – the gilded trophy in a silent room and the old horse in the paddock outside, now once again cropping away at the grass. Not quite all that remains, though. Today there was something else, the resurrection of a memory undulled by the years, still as bright as sunlight gleaming off a set of yellow silks.

He might be an old man now, but Mtoto's still young at heart, still owns the spirit that moved us all those years ago. He showed us; lucky us to be there to see it. I swear he winked at me as I walked away.