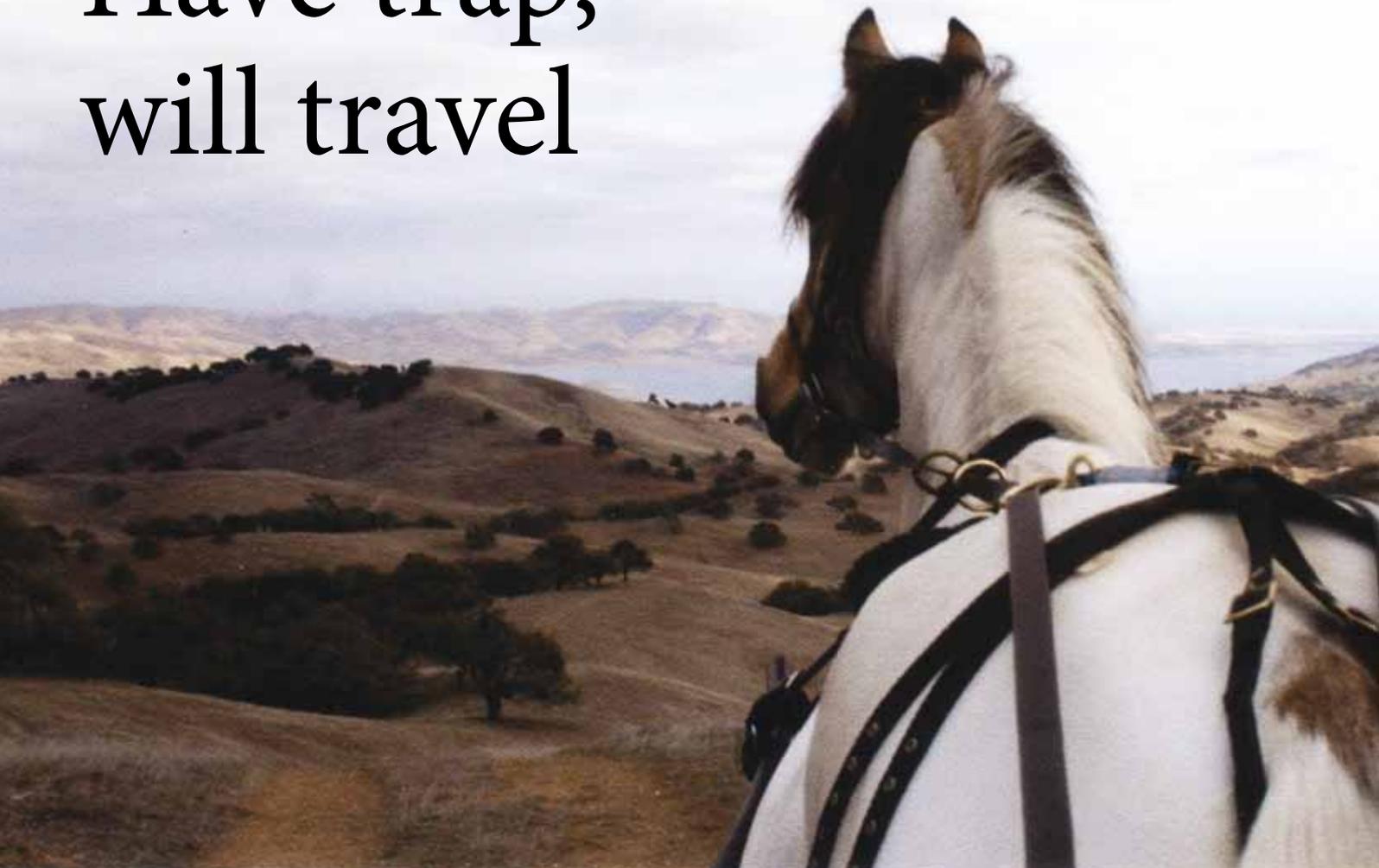


# Have trap, will travel



Wendy Nix speaks to Belinda Sillars about her journey of a lifetime across the USA

**B**elinda Sillars has never been one to conform; a bright bubbly personality brimming over with enthusiasm and a zest for life combined with an adventurous streak - all came together to create a journey that involved a pony, trap and three dogs; a journey that many of us can only dream about.

A native of Suffolk, Belinda has spent a lifetime with horses, ponies and dogs; she rode and drove from an early age – at one time she competed with East Anglia Carriage Driving Group and at nationals with her cob Timbuktu – before furthering her ridden career in eventing, dressage, show jumping and racing. With her own, much beloved Brambledown, Belinda was a regular on the amateur steeplechase circuit, the pair qualifying for the Foxhunter Chase at Cheltenham.

Belinda makes her living creating bronze sculptures; her work has been a familiar sight on both sides of the Atlantic for many years and her pieces have been inspired by her own animals, Brambledown in particular, and her almost nomadic lifestyle where she has spent time studying wild animals in their

natural environ, encapsulating the images in her photographic memory and endowing her work with a deep passion.

Together, Belinda and Brambledown spent many years in America where Belinda's work flourished. When Brambledown retired she returned to Suffolk to live with Scout, a tri-coloured cross-bred weanling, bought by Belinda to keep her old mare company. Scout was so-named after the character in the book *To Kill a Mocking Bird* as, like her name-sake, Scout was very smart and always asking questions!

It was after Brambledown passed away, and in a search for further inspiration for her work, that Belinda planned her trip in the States with Scout. The journey started in 2013 and covered around 30,000 miles, travelling from east to west (and back again) stopping as and when Belinda pleased to take off into the hills and mountains and across deserts - at one with her animals.

## Tremendous trust

Belinda says: "Over the years Scout and I have built up a tremendous trust in each other, to

the extent that when she met bears while we were out driving in Virginia, she was able to use all her senses and call on that trust to suss out the situation and not panic.

"My trap was built to suit the demands of our forthcoming travels. I needed something very sturdy but also light and manoeuvrable. The seat was an old office chair so I had support for my back and I also had a bench seat fitted for my three dogs who were coming too.

"While I was preparing Scout for her journey I made sure she was never put in a bad place, continuing to build up her trust all the time. She is the most amazing pony; she takes everything in her stride and has proved herself a team player over and over again."

To start her incredible journey Scout left Suffolk for Virginia; she travelled across the Atlantic in the company of racehorses and was treated like a VIP – another experience that was completely accepted by the pony. Once in Virginia she spent time becoming acclimatised to the heat. Days out driving Scout with the dogs either on the trap or exploring alongside were accompanied by magnificent views as

## Avoiding the ice storms

Once Scout was acclimatised in Virginia, she, Belinda and the dogs set off for Lexington, Kentucky, where Belinda and Brambledown once lived, to visit old friends and explore the neighbouring country before returning to Virginia for a short while. The next stage of Scout and Belinda's adventure meant heading south to avoid the winter ice storms. Setting off across the Great Smoky Mountains they headed to Texas and New Mexico before continuing west, virtually in a straight line along Route 40, to Flagstaff in Arizona for a short stay.

A journey over the mountains and again heading west across the lower end of the Mohave Desert took them to Hollister in California where they stayed during the turn of the year. Here, Belinda took the opportunity to drive round Dinosaur Point and along the amusingly-named Whisky Flats Road. Dinosaur Point is adjacent to a huge national park and it was on this part of her trip that Belinda, Scout and the dogs encountered packs of coyotes, bob cats and herds of elk. "The coyotes were watching the dogs and calling to each other across the valley," says Belinda. "It was so important that Scout could see all around her but, as usual, she was completely unfazed.

"We headed north towards an area near San Francisco and on one of our days out we ran out of America! We had come to the Pacific coast and had to retrace our steps."

Belinda carried as much as she could with her and bought hay and fodder on the way. Most nights she and the dogs stayed in motels or with friends while Scout bedded herself down in the trailer; occasionally the pony had the 'luxury' of a stable, sometimes a barn and, at some stops, a corral to let off any excess energy she might still have. Wherever

she was, Belinda made sure that Scout and the dogs had everything they needed. On occasions it was so cold that Scout's water would freeze in the trailer so Belinda traipsed in and out of the motel with buckets of warm water; Belinda also kept water carriers in the foot well of the truck with the heating on to stop the water from freezing. "It could be below 200C, at times Scout's breath froze on her whiskers – other times we were in the 90s,

*Opposite page: Heading for the Pacific Coast  
This page above: Belinda's truck and trailer with her trap tied on the back Right: Back home in Suffolk*

and all Scout was worried about was food. She never went off her feed or refrained from drinking," says Belinda.

## Over the Sierra Nevada Mountains

In mid-January and through her friends in Hollister, Belinda, Scout and the dogs were invited to spend time in the Mohave Desert. There is very little natural water in the desert, it is mostly piped in and Scout quickly learned to drink whenever water was offered. It was here they met Lynn Lloyd who, in turn, invited Belinda to visit her at her livery yard and training centre in Reno, Nevada – so it was off over the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Reno for more adventures up in the hills. Here Belinda swapped the trap for a saddle and rode Scout up in the mountains. "It was so steep I had to stand up in the saddle and hang on to Scout's mane; I never had to tell her to get on, she adapted to the terrain, found footholds and kept going. She's very good at conserving her energy for when she needs it. We were both totally out of our comfort zones but Scout has so much common sense, she's beyond smart! Even when she was in the trap and we went up steep tracks – and I do mean steep – she just kicked out the earth with her toe to get a grip and worked her way up. On the way back I would walk behind, holding the trap back while Scout found her own way down.

"I was grateful for how light and sturdy my trap was when we came across huge boulders. I would ask Scout to stand, get down from the trap and lift it up while asking Scout to walk on, or back, or even sideways, until we cleared the boulders and I could put the trap back down again. I had no help, other than Scout doing as she was asked – she has a strong sense of where the trap wheels were

they drove up and down the Blue Ridge Mountains and along the Shenandoah Valley.

The dogs, veteran Sprout and the only one left of the original four that initially went to America, nine-year-old international author Trouble (he has 'written' an autobiography, illustrated with Belinda's watercolours) who are both terriers and two-year old Dalmatian Humphrey, are well-used to trans-Atlantic travel – Sprout now having undertaken the return trip five times – so while Scout was settling in they made themselves at home and checked the place over to ensure everything was as they had left it, as well as joining Belinda and Scout when they drove out.

To get to each of her destinations Belinda added a large American horse trailer to her truck and tied the little trap on the back. Scout travelled loose and at night she would just lie down and sleep.





at all times – and she would stand all day if I wanted.”

Returning to the area round Dinosaur Point – which has suffered a drought for two years and horses are banned from some farms for fear of a shoe striking a stone and setting off a spark – Belinda and Scout enjoyed a bit of relaxation in the form of a fun obstacle event organised by Gerald Fisher near Horseshoe Bay, San Francisco. “Gerald is deeply involved with horse driving trials in California,” explains Belinda. “Scout had never seen an obstacle before, but so what? She took great delight in whizzing through the water and completely soaking me; as it was so dry I was already very dusty so I ended up covered in mud!”

### Terrifying weather

Being such a large country, different areas of America have their own climates; in the east everywhere was suffering from floods while in the west there were dreadful droughts. In Texas there were ice storms and Tornado Alley invariably lived up to its name with winds strong enough to flip a truck on its side. “The sky would become absolutely black and the funnel clouds were terrifying, there’s nowhere

to run to,” says Belinda. “I drove over the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Reno with the use of snow chains; the ice storms were so severe the interstate highway at high altitude would be shut – a bit of a contrast to Suffolk!” Due to the extreme conditions, supplies of expensive hay and straw had to be shipped in from Nevada and Canada and many ranchers were getting rid of their stock.

From Reno, Belinda and her band returned to Flagstaff close to the southern ridge of the Grand Canyon, the north side being some 1,000 feet higher. As in the desert, on the ranches round the Grand Canyon water is piped in underground and comes to the surface in very deep waterholes, a useful facility in hot weather.

### From heatwave to deep snow

At this point Belinda started to head back, making her way from Flagstaff driving for days and days through worsening weather before arriving in Virginia where the snow was over Scout’s knees. “We went from plus 400 to minus 200 in a short while,” laughs Belinda.

Scout flew back to England at the end of April this year with Belinda and the dogs

returning a couple of weeks later. It was quite an adventure for all of them but particularly Scout who simply took everything in her stride, eating, sleeping and trotting her way across America. Belinda says: “She misses climbing the mountains where she would stand and look at the view, then without hesitation she would spot the tallest mountain and march off to climb that - now we drive out every day around Suffolk.”

Currently Belinda is busy in her workshop, creating bronzes inspired by her journey and fulfilling commissions acquired from people she met, including wonderful bison which will be on their way to the States by the time you read this. She is also planning to open a studio at the end of this year.

However, don’t imagine this will be the end of Scout’s travels; Belinda has in mind to drive her in Ireland and across Europe, but that’s for the future.

- To view Belinda’s work, visit: [www.belindasillars.com](http://www.belindasillars.com)

*Above: Heading for the pacific coast  
Below: Leaves display their glorious colours in the Fall*

