

CELESTIAL HORSES – TRAVELS IN TURKESTAN

Central Asia through a camera lens, re-inventing itself after Independence from the Soviet Union. A journey around the great Silk Road cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. The present-day role of the Turkoman Horse - Akhal-Teke and other strains - and the story of one special horse; his Silk Road journey from Nisa to Merv, his subsequent starvation and rescue, and his "Thank you": an epic fund-raising marathon for medical research.

A unique glimpse of Central Asia in the brief "window" between the collapse of totalitarianism and the new strait-jacket of dictator-led states.



A former Oxford running Blue, Advanced event rider and British International Modern Pentathlete (7th in World 1979), Gill found not only her sporting life but her professional career (teaching Maths at Malvern Girls' College) cut short by Myalgic Encephalomyelitis.

Having set out to build a new career in travel writing but unable to walk far, she needed to borrow someone else's legs to explore Central Asia. The Akhal-Teke stallion Atamekan was the perfect travelling companion. Together they explored part of the Silk Road in Turkmenistan to Ancient Merv, once "Queen of the Silk Road".

Kaan was descended from the Sacred Horses of the Medes and Persians, known to the Chinese as "Celestial Horses". It was to obtain these horses, by war and then trade, that the Chinese first opened up the Silk Road 2,000 years ago.

The horses of Turkmenistan have long been sought-after. The Turkmens used them for racing and slave-raiding; while the Ottoman Turks rode them to war. Many of these warhorses were captured during European wars, and "Turks" were heavily used in the development of the English Thoroughbred.





After spending three months in Turkmenistan and seeing the situation of the horses there, Gill knew that, if she left him behind, Kaan would sooner or later starve to death. She resolved to buy him and bring him back to England.

This proved an almost impossible task, and by the time she had found a way to get him out of the country, two years had passed and he had indeed nearly starved. With careful attention he made a remarkable recovery, but it took more than a further year to complete the many stages of the journey across the Caspian Sea to Stavropol, on to Moscow and finally via Brest to the UK.



He demonstrated the fullness of his recovery two years later when he carried out the 2001 Odyssey for ME, a 500-mile ride across Britain from the south coast via the Welsh borders to Scotland, ridden by 19 different riders including six celebrities (see Brough Scott, below) and disabled people, and raising £14,000 for medical research.

Kaan learned to jump, winning showjumping classes and competing with great enthusiasm up to Open Cross-Country. He also sired fourteen offspring, which are competing successfully in eventing,



show-jumping, endurance and showing. His descendants include a great-grandson, and, although Kaan is no longer with us, Gill hopes that he has founded a dynasty of Celestial Horses in this country.

