

LOUISE POLLARD



## 'MY ALICE COULD LIVE ON FRESH AIR'

MARRIAGE counselling may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the brothers Easterby.

But Peter enjoyed a long and magnificent marriage to the late Marjorie, of whom he once said: "She struck lucky when she met me – landed on her feet."

"Yes," said the saintly Mrs E, "my bare feet."

But if you have relationship troubles forget Relate. You need to speak to that great modernist thinker Mick, married to the legendary Alice since the Boer War, and a veritable fount of wisdom.

He says: "You have to have a thrifty wife and my Alice could live on fresh air. She doesn't worry about what we could do with – she has always been more interested in what we can do without."

"She'll make the leftovers from Sunday lunch last a week. So when she's not looking I give them to the dogs. She'll ask 'What happened to that piece of pie?' and I will say 'I ate it'."

"So then she'll have to cook again. I've got the fattest dogs in England, me."

As I leave I notice Mick is wearing a new cap. Peter gives it the once over and says: "Someone must have given it him."

It turns out it was left one morning by an owner. Let's hope he is not holding his breath for a call to tell him his "flat 'at" is waiting for him at Sheriff Hutton.

bloody good across country. And Mick was a very fair jockey by all accounts. He says: "I was a young teenager when my Uncle Walter, brilliant horseman, asked me to ride one of his at Wetherby. I had to lose a bit of weight and needed to shift 10lb in the last two days."

"I wrapped myself in blankets in front of the fire and sweated off a lot and drinking a bottle of liquid paraffin did the rest."

"What a man that Uncle Walter was. Never swore and he'd give you anything in the world – except money."

"The race was a three-mile amateur handicap hurdle and I was so excited putting on the colours in the weighing room my hands were shaking."

"Then Uncle Walter appears in the doorway and says 'You're not riding it. The top amateur is suddenly spare so you can lead it up.'"

"After the race he said you'd better ride it 'ome. You'll be home by the time we are. So that's what I did – ten miles bareback all the way to Tadcaster."

And the brothers knew how to celebrate. Peter – who retired from training in 1996 – has

## 'WE'VE ALWAYS WORKED TOGETHER. MY BROTHER WOULD LEND ME MONEY, I WOULD LEND HIM MONEY'

said that they spent £1,000 on champagne in the bar at Cheltenham after Sea Pigeon won the Champion Hurdle and recalls: "We had a big party at York for Night Nurse and we were going to split the bill as Mick had invited all his big clients."

"But he slipped his head collar and somehow forgot to pay me! But we've never fallen out over anything although plenty of folk have tested us."

"And Sea Pigeon gave us that unforgettable

day when he won the Ebor. When the result of the photo was announced all you heard was the word Sea because the roar that went up drowned out Pigeon."

Trying to outfox the brothers would be a waste of time. You would have to get up before you went to bed to get the better of this pair, although occasionally someone would get one over them.

Peter says: "WA Stephenson was a proper man and the greatest dealer ever born. Got Mick drunk once and sold him a blind horse!"

**M**ICK shoots back: "Blind in one eye to be fair. For months afterwards WA would walk past and ask 'got any glasses for that 'oss yet?' But you never backed out in those days. You learned your lesson and took it on the chin."

Both men have had run-ins with authority and neither subscribe to "that bloody nonsense about not treading on people's toes".

Mick has been up in front of the tax man three

times – "enjoyed it because you can if you've done nothing wrong" – and also appeared in front of a big tribunal in Birmingham when investigated for insider dealing.

Mick says: "I was quite innocent of course. But the barrister didn't half set about me."

"At one stage one of the officials nodded off and I said 'Can you wake him please as I don't want to come back here again'."

"I told the barrister he should have a racehorse but he wasn't having it. Called me a con man – could be right I suppose. But I never raised my voice or let him goad me."

"At the end of the third tax inquiry the officer in charge told me it had been a pleasure to deal with me and said he wished 'they were all like you'." If Mick's eyes are a touch moist it is not from pain at the encounter but amusement. He can adopt an air of put-upon innocence that no angel in heaven could match.

When the pair started farming, heavy horses were coming to the end of their time as those first grey Ferguson tractors were just coming in.

The old carthorses gave way to swifter ones on the racecourse skilfully backed. "They didn't all win you know," says Peter. But enough did to sow the acorns that have become oaks.

Hard work is second nature to the pair of them. They say rust never sleeps, well nor do the Easterbys. A couple of hours spent with these seemingly ageless old wisecracks is education and amusement.

But more than that it's a privilege. They don't self make them like these two anymore.

When they were young their father William had a licence to kill pigs. Peter says: "He was only allowed to kill one at a time but father would kill five. All cash and never any trouble – the policeman liked his bit of bacon too."

The irrepressible Easterby brothers have been bringing home the bacon ever since.