



The dog whisperer

If you need to see a man about a dog, Ben Randall is the man to see. **Philippa May** talks to the award-winning trainer, canine psychologist and (with wife Nikki) owner of a hugely successful boarding kennels about his special bond with man's best friend

Moving into a new house with 28 paying guests already in residence isn't everyone's idea of a stress-free move. But when Ben and Nikki Randall, with sons Jack and Joe, took possession of the keys of Ledbury Lodge Kennels two years ago they took over the business as a going concern and almost 30 canine lodgers were there to greet them.

Twenty minutes after they'd driven through the gates, and after the briefest of introductions to the dogs, they were on their own.

It was the first day of the new life they'd been dreaming of for a long while, a dream that had seen them scour the country from top to bottom as they viewed kennels as far afield as Scotland and Cornwall, before they found Ledbury Lodge Kennels.

Both had left secure careers in Bristol, Nikki as a primary school teacher and Ben as grounds manager at Bristol Grammar School, but two years on, neither of them has the slightest regret about the life-changing move. "I gave up a secure career and a house," says Ben. "But we decided to bite the bullet and make the move."

Making such a momentous change to their lives in the middle of a recession was a brave thing to do, but their unique approach has paid off and they have gone from strength to strength, with a constantly expanding client list. Talking to the couple, there's a sense that neither of them can quite believe just how well it's all going. "I never thought it would

work this well, but this is a county where if you're good at what you do and people like you, you will succeed. But it's incredible how fast it has grown.

"We spent years dreaming about doing it and planning it in our heads," adds Ben. "It's something we've wanted to do for years and we finally found somewhere we thought we could develop. The basic shell was here, but we've spent more than £100,000 on renovations, including a large investment in a full security system featuring laser beam sets and full CCTV."

Ben, who also runs Beggarbush Gundogs – a gundog training and breeding facility – at Ledbury Lodge Kennels, won this year's Cocker Spaniel Championship with Fitch Heolybwilch Fatty, and has rapidly established an enviable reputation throughout Ledbury as the dog whisperer, a man with a unique ability to handle dogs – and their owners.

A dog owner since he was 15, Ben has become increasingly fascinated by dog psychology and it is this, he believes, that has led to the success of Ledbury Lodge Kennels and his own success in the championships in January.

"I am totally self-taught over the past 20 years," he says, adding that though Nikki knows a huge amount of what he knows, that certain something that enables him to control a dog with barely a move is a gift he was born with and not something that can be explained or taught. "I don't believe what I have learned can be learned from a book. Every →



Cocker Spaniel
Championship winner
Ben Randall with
his trophies

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PICTURES: DAVID GRIFFITHS





LEFT Nikki with one of the couple's own spaniels
BELOW Ben and Nikiki at Ledbury Lodge Kennels



← dog knows I am pack leader. I've probably trained a couple of hundred dogs and it's helped me understand my own dogs so much better."

It's his increasing concentration on dog psychology that he credits with helping him to his big win earlier this year, and his magical rapport with dogs attracts ever-increasing numbers of owners to seek his help.

There is, believe Ben and Nikki, no other kennels in the UK offering what they do. "We've put all our own ideas into practice, the things we wanted to do."

One of the major ways in which Ledbury Lodge Kennels stands out is that it is run entirely by Ben and Nikki – there is no part-time kennel help, unless you count Ben's parents who arrive to help out when it's extremely busy.

"We wanted to do something completely different, a different sort of boarding kennel, a place where I'd be happy to leave my dogs. So we run it with the emphasis on dog psychology. I do things in a specific way and

my parents understand the way I want and need things done," he explains.

Despite their success, numbers at the kennels are strictly limited and even regular clients will be turned away if they haven't booked well in advance. "I have 15 dogs of my own. We could build 20 more kennels and have them full, but I won't do that."

Although he keeps and trains gun dogs, Ben emphasises that the guns come a distant second to the dogs – "the dogs are first", and there is no shooting for shooting's sake. "We eat everything we shoot, or give it to friends and neighbours. Since we have been here, though, the shift has been away from gun dogs and shooting to dog psychology."

Ben is currently giving at least three lessons a day, involving a full consultation followed by a practical lesson.

"We teach clients to understand their dogs rather than just doing basic obedience lessons," he explains. "There are no bad dogs, just bad handlers," he adds emphatically.

"Every dog is different and every single day there is a little something new to discover." ●

'Ben and Nikki Randall run the best boarding kennels we have come across in 25 years of working spaniel ownership. It immediately impresses by its quality and professionalism. Every aspect of the dogs' care is thought through in detail and in line with canine psychology – their care and interests are at the heart of everything'

WORKING DOG OWNER
SIR RICHARD SHIRREFF