



It's a brief goodbye to Swiftly Done as Claire contemplates a major operation and some time out of the saddle.

Fourteen years ago, I interviewed Claire King at a Leeds television studio when she was making a comeback as super-bitch Kim Tate in the rural soap opera *Emmerdale*, which often allowed her to indulge her lifelong love of riding.

Now, we are meeting at racing trainer Declan Carroll's Sledmere House Stables, in East Yorkshire, where she keeps Swiftly Done, a four-year-old, dark bay gelding in which she owns a leg. The horse might never set the world on fire, but Claire is pleased to report that it has just come second at Pontefract and achieved a win at Warwick last year.

However, there will be no riding today – or for some time to come – for Claire, who has always enjoyed getting on horseback two or three times a week. She is just days away from going into hospital for a hysterectomy to treat fibroid tumors ("I've got Freddie the football on one side and Gary the grapefruit on the other") but has agreed to speak in detail for the first time about her life with horses and what the equestrian world means to her.

"My mother's always had horses and her parents were into point-to-pointing, so horses were always a big part of my life," recalls Claire, who was born in Bradford but moved to a village outside the North Yorkshire spa town of Harrogate when she was young.

Her father, John Seed, comes from a West Yorkshire family of maltsters and his grandmother, from Co Kerry, could trace her ancestry back to Scottish horse thieves who raided England in the 15th century.

"We had 16 acres and used to bring the donkeys back from Scarborough beach because they don't use them in winter and need a home for them," Claire continues. "We had Dusty and Misty, and then Gippo – which probably isn't very PC nowadays! There were also horses, sheep and chickens.

"My first pony, when I was nine, was a pure-white 'grey' called Rocket and we did gymkhanas, showing, show jumping, eventing – everything. He was a general-purpose pony, something you can fling around. I always looked up to these older girls in the gymkhanas who used to ride with no saddle and no hat, because it was easier for jumping on and off and apple-bobbing, and I would think, 'One day, I'm going to be that good.'"

Claire achieved that ambition, even though, at the age of 11, she became a boarder at Harrogate Ladies' College, just seven miles away, and could ride only during holidays and half-terms. "I became one of those gymkhana girls who wins all the prizes," she says. "The first time I went hunting, with a friend of mine from our village, was with the Zetland, which was far too fast for me. They'd jump anything – cars, you name it!

"Then, we went with the Bedale, where I was a member of the Bedale Pony Club,

and, later, the West of Yore, which was more just good fun – hip flasks and 'hooray!', and exercise your horses. I don't think we ever killed anything!"

By then, Claire was riding her second equine, an ex-racehorse called It's the Day. "I got to the age of 15 and outgrew Rocket, so he had to move on," she explains. "My parents moved him on while I was at school. It was a bone of contention, but it had to happen!"

Claire has firm views about hunting. "It's one of those things that people are pro or against, but they don't really understand what it's about," she says. "It's actually about conservation. It was keeping the hedgerows for farmers. You all paid a cap to go hunting, which was for the upkeep of copses, streams, rivers, fences, gates and walls for the farmers, so it was beneficial to them. It took pests, like foxes, out of the way. Now, there are very few foxes left in the country – they've gone to the cities.

"You will see now, since the hunting ban, vast, open areas where all the hedges have been taken out. People will say hunting is cruel against animals. It's cruel now because the wildlife that lived in the hedges, like shrews, haven't got that habitat any more."

EXCLUSIVE! Sport of KINGS Top actor's horse play

Former *Emmerdale* and *Bad Girls* star Claire King talks about her lifelong love of horses – the highs and the lows. Words and pictures by ANTHONY HAYWARD.

'MY MOTHER'S ALWAYS HAD HORSES AND HER PARENTS WERE INTO POINT-TO-POINTING, SO HORSES WERE ALWAYS A BIG PART OF MY LIFE.'

Riding photographs courtesy Claire King



After joining *Emmerdale* in 1989, Claire found little time for hunting. This new era followed her teenage punk period – complete with pink, purple and orange hair – work as a disc jockey in a Leeds club, managing a local rock group and singing in another one, relationships with Skids singer Richard Jobson and Bob Geldof, and four years in London, when she lived with Geoff Bird, better known as Cobalt Stargazer, lead guitarist in the group Zodiac Mindwarp and the Love Reaction.

This led her to appear in a promotional video for the band's hit *Prime Mover*, then another for Elvis Costello's American single *This Town*, in which she drove a motorcycle, with the singer in the sidecar, through "the gates of hell" – on fire.

Directing both was the former *Young Ones* TV star Adrian Edmondson, who suggested that she should take acting lessons, so she signed up for a course. With another Claire Seed on the actors' union Equity's books, she took her professional name from the nickname of Elvis Presley and became Claire King.



Left: Claire enjoys a ride on Milton Rooms on the gallops at Malton.

Far Left: Boomshadow was one of the many horses ridden by Claire over the years in the countryside around her North Yorkshire home.

Parts followed in a stage play and on television in *Alas Smith and Jones*, *Wish Me Luck*, *Hot Metal*, *The Bill* and the "Comic Strip Presents..." production *Eat the Rich*, and she played a motorcycle-riding Hell's Angel in the 1989 film *Batman*, starring Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson.

Although living in London, Claire was able to carry on riding with a friend who had a horse at livery in Hertfordshire. This proved useful when her agent phoned, saying: "On your CV, you've listed that you can ride. Now listen, honey, everyone always ticks every box for fear of losing out on a job, but I need to know, can you really ride a horse and, if so, how well?"

As Claire says now: "You can mess with cars, because you're in control, but you're not ever 100 per cent in control of horses, because they have a mind of their own. If they want to stop or veer right, you've got to be pretty strong, especially when you're going at 40mph."

She found herself heading back to Yorkshire and an audition to play Kim Tate, wife of businessman Frank and stepmother to Chris and Zoë, in *Emmerdale*, which was set to move some of the action away from the

Sugdens' farm and and become more raunchy. The arrival of the Tates at Home Farm, where Kim ran the stables, signalled this change in emphasis and much of the action over the next decade revolved around the family.

Claire landed the role and was first seen on a chestnut horse called Tilley, alongside Leah Bracknell as Zoë, riding across country to see who could reach Home Farm first – showing the competitive nature of the former secretary who had married her boss.

Then, Claire had to canter through a field and narrowly miss hitting Stan Richards, who, as Seth Armstrong, was riding a bicycle. In reality, the horse reared up over the actor and Claire had to use all her riding skills to pull her away. She recalls: "Stan always says, 'You saved my life that day.' That was a little bit of an embellishment, but he could have got hurt."

As time went on, it became apparent that Claire was bringing not just a touch of *Dynasty* glamour to the character, but also J R Ewing *Dallas* nastiness. Kim would divorce and remarry Frank, and then watch him die of a heart attack as he clutched his chest and pleaded for the tablets that could have saved his life.

The role made Claire a huge star. As she settled in the familiar, beautiful countryside outside Harrogate, she decided



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to apply for an amateur jockey's licence. "One of my best friends, Clare Pears – who has been living in California for the past 15 years, race riding and working with quite a few horses in San Francisco, after moving from Santa Anita – was then working for the trainer Charles Booth near York and said, 'Why don't you come and ride out?'" So I did.

"She also looked after Desert Orchid when he came back from training down South up to his owner Richard Burridge's place at Fryup, near Whitby. I was allowed to ride Dessie, so when they were doing the road work up on the Moors to get him fit – it's really steep up there, so it builds up the muscles – I used to do that before he went back into training. I was very privileged. It was just a pleasure to ride him."

Over the years, Claire has had relationships with jockeys Frankie Dettori, Fergal Lynch and Kieren Fallon. "It was just because of the work I was involved with and that was my life at the time," she says. "If you're involved in racing, those are the kind of people you tend to meet – jockeys and trainers. It's just like musicians meet musicians. If you're on the circuit, you see each other all the time."

Asked whether the attraction to jockeys was that they were "small but perfectly formed", she laughs and replies: "They're no different – just a bit smaller! It's skill and talent, isn't it? Frankie was only 19 and I was 26. OK, there was a bit of an age gap, but the older you get, the less it matters."

"We still see each other at the races and say "hi". He used to come up North quite a bit, racing at York, and he was best friends with another jockey, Jason Weaver, whose agent was one of my best friends, David Craig [now a Sky Sports News reporter]."

DURING HER DAYS AS AN AMATEUR JOCKEY, CLAIRE RIDES THE CHARLES BOOTH-TRAINED FAIR DARE AT REDCAR.



But, after gaining her amateur jockey's licence – and even beating John Francome in one race – Claire's own racing days were shortlived. She was forced to give up after the shock of being diagnosed with arthritis in 1992.

"You just think it's an old people's thing, but it's not," she says. "Babies can get it. I found out I'd got it by getting very stiff fingers, feeling as if they'd been hit by a hammer some mornings, particularly when it was cold and damp. I went to the doctor's, had tests and it came back that I had rheumatoid arthritis.

"It wasn't that bad – I could cope with it – but it has been quite progressive over the years. I've hung up my racing boots. I was an amateur jockey and now I just take part in the odd charity race, but that's worse, because you're not doing the regular riding. You've got to be so fit to do race riding. Everyone thinks you're just sat on a horse but, when you think about it, you're holding half a ton of radiator back and then you're having to push half a ton of flesh out."

Another major impact that *Emmerdale* had on Claire's life was marrying Peter Amory, who played her screen stepson, Chris. They wed in 1994 but separated less than 10 years later following his affair with co-star Samantha Giles while Claire was away in London, playing prison wing governor Karen Betts in the popular drama *Bad Girls*. The couple have only recently divorced and Claire now has a new man in her life.

"I've got a boyfriend, but I don't speak about him," she says. "We're taking our time and enjoying it. It's been eight years since the split from Pete and I've only just got divorced, in January. I've still got to shell out money for him. You see, it's not always the bloke!"

Like all sensible riders and owners, Claire enjoys reading *The Equestrian*.



This is more my world. I do acting just to pay for this. I started out in horses, but I could never make money out of horses and I was never a good enough rider to go professional.



During a trip to Lesotho in 2008, Claire meets World Horse Welfare saddlery instructor Mark Fisher and locals whom the charity is training.

Photograph by World Horse Welfare

As well as short runs as a defence barrister in *Hollyoaks* and a businesswoman in its spin-off, *Hollyoaks: In the City*, plus a one-off appearance in *The Royal*, Claire was persuaded to take part in *Strictly Come Dancing* and teamed up with the professional ballroom dancer Brendan Cole – they were the ninth couple to leave out of 14.

"I didn't want to do it," says Claire. "My agent made me do it! I'm not bothered either way about it. It didn't hurt me, but it certainly didn't help in any way and I'm not a big advocate of these reality TV shows. At least you were learning a skill, although I felt it went on for too many weeks. I thought I was going to be out in Week 2 or 3. I just laughed all the way through it – that was the best way to handle it."

In the wake of her marriage break-up, at a vulnerable time, came another of the worst moments in Claire's life – an off-screen drama centred on the racing circuit that was every bit as dramatic as her on-screen roles. A man who had persuaded her to take part in a racing syndicate with him and impressed her with some of his tips – although she also lost large sums on some bets – visited Claire at her barn conversion and, after she had drunk plenty of wine, persuaded her to take cocaine.

Unknown to her, he filmed her on his mobile phone, before they slept together – something she regretted by the morning. Months later, after accepting that she did not want a relationship, he started sending sinister messages. Then, he texted her the video and a demand for £10,000, with the threat that he would sell it to the press.

Distraught, but not willing to risk further demands, Claire cleverly decided to take the blackmail story to a Sunday newspaper herself, giving her the chance to tell the whole story and limit the damage to her reputation. She told of her depression following the breakdown of her marriage and explained how this man had made her life "a living hell" and turned her into "an emotional wreck".

The paper also set up a "sting", taping a conversation between Claire and the

blackmailer that backed up her story. Despite the humiliation, she was able to put the frightening scenario behind her and look to the future, which included writing her 2006 autobiography, *Confessions of a Bad Girl*.

"It's something I don't speak about too much now," she says, "because he's still about somewhere and I don't want to encourage him. It was just a horrible, horrible time.

"That's why I wrote the book, because it was a cathartic thing for me. It was the end of one period of my life and the beginning of the next. I'd split up with my husband and it was a horrible, depressing time, so writing the book was like going to a counsellor – going through diaries, writing everything down, digging out pictures. Then, that was it, time to move on."

Away from the dance floor, Brendan was filmed entering Claire's world. "I said he could do something that I'm good at," she recalls. "So he came up to stables near me. First, the BBC wanted some pictures of me and Brendan mucking out. I told him that the easiest way to do it was to pick the poo up in his hands, put it in the barrow and take it to the muck heap. So he did it and then they said, 'Can we have some of you doing it?' I said, 'Well, I usually wear gloves when I do this...' He was livid!

"Then, they got the horses out. The BBC were naughty and they used to set things up, but I had to laugh because his face was like thunder when it came out on the night. I rode this beautiful, 16.2hh, big, showy horse, cantered it round the arena and they put the music over the top –

SWIFTLY DONE IS BASED AT TRAINER DECLAN CARROLL'S SLEDMERE HOUSE STABLES, IN EAST YORKSHIRE.



Claire has ridden horses since the age of nine, when she was being brought up in the North Yorkshire countryside outside Harrogate.

Black Beauty. Then, they said, 'Here's Brendan.' And they found him this 14hh, cobby pony and used the theme tune to *Steptoe and Son!*"

Claire has just finished eight months on tour in a stage play, *The Naked Truth*, which required her to learn another skill – pole dancing. The moving, "sisterhood" comedy follows a group of women who, for various reasons, join a dance class and, *Full Monty* style, perform a show at the end to raise money for breast cancer.

"My character was very brassy and loud, but the victim of wife-beating, mainly in a verbal way," explains Claire, who turns 50 next year. "He was quite an abusive husband and she wanted to get away from him.

"I had four one-to-one, hour-long lessons in Harrogate before starting in the play. I was covered in bruises – you don't realise how

strong you have to be. We

didn't have to be totally proficient, because it had to fit in with the characters, so I made mine more humorous, although wanted to be quite good at it. I managed to go upside-down – you jump up and hang yourself back off the pole. Even at my age and with my arthritis! It did actually hurt, but I got through it."

Having her own children has not figured in Claire's life. "It's never really happened," she says. "Pete had a son by a previous girlfriend. Thomas is 21 and leaving university now. I brought him up, because we had him every holiday and half-term, and I have nieces and nephews, and I'm godmother to four children. Pete didn't want any more kids and I was working. So the time was never right and then it just passed me by."

Claire – who has owned many horses over the years and currently also has a share in a second horse, 11-year-old Fremem, winner of eight races last year and trained by David "Dandy" Nicholls at his Thirsk yard – adds: "My labradors are my schoolchildren and my horses are my *public* schoolchildren, because they cost about the same amount!"

Among other charity work, Claire is a patron of World Horse Welfare. In 2008, she travelled to the tiny African country of Lesotho to highlight its training of farriery and saddlery students there. "The main mode of transport is the horse and it's very mountainous, so it gets to -20°C in winter



and goes the other way in summer," says Claire. "Because there are extreme temperatures, you need horses that are sturdy. They use them for ploughing, as a conveyance form, for lifting things and moving house.

"It's a very, very poor country, with a lot of AIDS. All the tack was British Army tack from the turn of the 19th century, so there are oversize saddles on smaller horses, they get sores on their backs and they have bits that are hanging out and clanking, so their teeth break. It's not that they're cruel – it's just ignorance.

"So we started this five-year project on how to shoe horses, how to rasp their teeth, how to fit tack properly and correctly, and how to mend it, so they become saddlers as well as farriers. We train up local people, they have to pass tests and the best from each year become teachers, so we're actually making the country self-sufficient."

Back home, Claire remains a keen racegoer, attending meets where her horses are running, as well as travelling to the Galway Festival and Down Royal, in Co Down. "They tend to get the cream of the crop and there's some good-quality racing," she says. "York is one of my favourite courses. When

they held Ascot there, I thought it was better.

"I'm not a big fan of Royal Ascot, which is just full of people who go there to show off and it's celebrant-orientated, with people who don't know one end of a horse from the other. Glorious Goodwood, on the other hand, is racing people and it is glorious."

Although she treks down to London when work there beckons, Claire remains a firm Yorkshirewoman and believes it helps to keep her down-to-earth. "It does keep me more grounded and I actually think that Northern people are more open and embracing," she says. "Every time I go to London, in particular, you can't say good morning without them looking at you as if you're a nutter. You go into a shop and they don't even speak to you. You go into one here just for a pint of milk and you can't get out for half an hour."

Ask Claire which matters more to her, acting or horses, and there is no hesitation before her answer. She looks around at this Yorkshire racing yard and says: "This is more *my* world. I do acting just to pay for this. I started in horses, but I could never make money out of horses and I was never a good enough rider to go professional. I just fell into acting."

• To see a video of Claire King's visit to Losotho, log on to www.worldhorsewelfare.org, then click successively on the 'Information and Advice', 'Media Resources' and 'Video Library' links.

'I WAS ALLOWED TO RIDE DESERT ORCHID. SO, WHEN THEY WERE DOING THE ROAD WORK UP ON THE MOORS TO GET HIM FIT, I USED TO DO THAT BEFORE HE WENT BACK INTO TRAINING.'

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