

# Beginner's Guide to Driving Trials

## Welcome to the world of Driving Trials!

If you're thinking about entering your first competition, this guide will help you feel prepared, confident, and excited. Whether you're joining a local club event or attending a training day, you'll find everything you need to know right here.

## 1. Getting Started

This guide is for drivers who already have some basic driving experience and are ready to try competing. It offers practical advice on:

- What to expect at events
- How to prepare yourself, your horse, and your equipment
- How each phase of competition works
- Safety, timekeeping, and scoring

Many clubs run beginner-friendly training days at the start of the season. These are a great way to learn the ropes and build confidence before entering a full competition.

## 2. Understanding the Rules

Driving Trials follow a detailed rule structure. Before your first event, take time to read the official rule book on the British Carriagedriving website. Most club events follow these rules, with some helpful relaxations for newcomers.

If you're unsure about anything, experienced drivers and organisers are usually very happy to help.

## 3. Types of Events

Driving Trials consist of three phases:

- Dressage
- Marathon
- Cones

Event formats vary:

- One-day events: all phases on the same day
- Two-day events: usually dressage and cones on day one, marathon on day two
- Three-day events: one phase per day
- Indoor events: all phases in one day, indoors or in an enclosed arena

## 4. Training & Coaching

Professional coaching is one of the best investments you can make. Even a few lessons can help you feel more confident and prepared. Qualified driving coaches are available across the UK, and many offer training with your own turnout or with horses and vehicles provided.

## 5. Choosing Your First Event

Check the British Carriagedriving events diary or your local club's website. Once you've chosen an event:

- Download the schedule
- Read the class descriptions
- Note the closing date
- Contact the organiser if you have questions

Send your entry form and fee in good time—closing date is often two weeks before the event.

## 6. Classes

Classes are based on the driver's experience, not the horse's. Most newcomers start in:

- Single pony
- Single horse

Some events also offer classes for small ponies (11hh and under) with adjusted distances or speeds.

## 7. Horses & Ponies

Most horses and ponies with basic driving experience can compete at club level. The key considerations are:

- Safety
- Reliability
- Fitness for the marathon (often 10 km or more)

If you're unsure whether your horse is ready, ask an experienced competitor or coach.

## 8. Vehicles

Most well-maintained vehicles are acceptable at club level. Both two-wheel and four-wheel vehicles are used – check the rule book for the correct vehicle for the class.

Key points

- Ensure your vehicle is safe and in good condition
- Some events do not allow pneumatic tyres—check in advance
- Four-wheel vehicles offer stability and manoeuvrability
- Two-wheel vehicles must be properly balanced with driver and groom on board
- Minimum track width for marathon: 125 cm
- Recommended width for dressage & cones: varies by class; 138 for Novice; 125 for VSE & SE

If your vehicle is narrower than standard, inform the organisers when entering.

## 9. Harness

Leather, synthetic, and webbing harnesses are all acceptable as long as they fit well and are in good condition.

Tips

- Check all adjustments carefully
- Padding may help prevent rubbing in the marathon
- Synthetic harness is durable and easy to clean
- Open bridles are not recommended
- Bitless bridles are not permitted
- Breeching must always be used

## 10. Grooms

Every turnout must carry a groom in all phases (with some exceptions for Very Small Equine classes).

Groom requirements

- Must be capable and physically able to assist in an emergency
- Minimum age: 14 (or 18 if the driver is under 18)
- Must remain seated in dressage and cones (for the majority of classes) and silent in dressage
- Actively assists with balance, navigation, and timekeeping in the marathon

## 11. Spares

Every turnout should carry:

- Sharp knife
- Lead rope
- Spare trace
- Rein splice
- Leather hole-punch
- String or twine

Keep these items easily accessible. A mobile phone may be carried for emergencies but must not be used during competition.

## 12. Safety Gear

Hard hats are mandatory for both driver and groom at all times when mounted on the carriage at an event – including when not competing.

Body protectors are required for the marathon. Carriage-specific back protectors are often more comfortable than standard riding protectors.

Seat belts if used must not be fixed to the carriage. One end attaches to the carriage; the groom holds the other end and must be able to release it instantly.

## 13. General Safety Tips

- Check your vehicle and harness before setting off
- Drive only at a speed where you feel fully in control
- Avoid sharp turns—plan smooth routes
- Never drive a four-wheel vehicle without a groom on the back step
- Keep to walking pace in stabling areas
- Give others plenty of space
- Follow all steward instructions

## 14. Time Keeping

At the start of the event:

- Collect your competitor number
- Check your start times



- Locate the dressage arena, cones course, and marathon start

Arrive at each phase 10 minutes before your scheduled time.

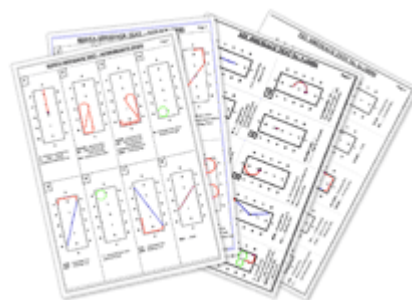
Your groom should carry a reliable watch. For the marathon, bring at least one stopwatch—preferably two.

Start times may change, so listen for announcements and check with the event office.

## 15. The Three Phases

### Dressage

- Usually the first phase
- Driven from memory
- Arena size: 40m x 80m
- Turnout should be clean and smart
- Groom must remain seated (depending on class) and silent
- Salute the judge at the end



A video of your test can be very helpful for learning.

### Cone Driving

- Tests accuracy and control
- Cones are set with narrow clearance
- Penalties for balls down or exceeding time allowed
- Walk the course before competing
- A steady trot is best for beginners
- Groom must remain seated (depending on class)



### The Marathon

The marathon is divided into sections, often including:

#### Section A

- Steady pace
- Must finish within a time window

#### Transfer & Rest

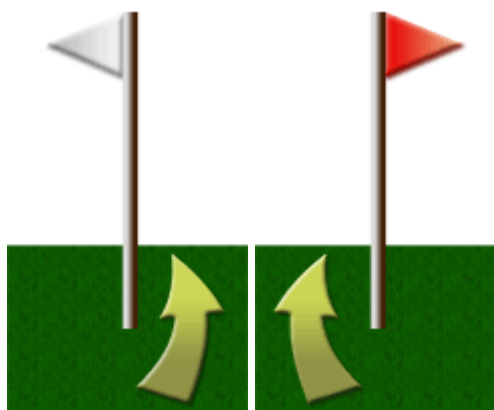
- Short break
- Horses may be checked and watered

## Section B

- Contains obstacles
- Driven at any pace except final 300 m
- Groom manages timekeeping and navigation

## 16. Obstacles

Obstacles (or hazards) include natural and man-made features. Each contains gates labelled A, B, C, etc. to a maximum of F, which must be driven in the correct order and direction keeping white on the left and red on the right.



### Key points

- Time spent in the obstacle adds penalties
- Knock-downs and errors of course add penalties
- Once a gate is driven correctly, it becomes “dead” and can be used again
- Drivers and grooms should walk obstacles beforehand

## 17. Scoring

Driving Trials use a penalty system. Lowest score wins.

### Dressage

- Marks out of 10
- Converted to penalties
- Additional penalties for errors

### Cones

- 3 penalties per ball
- Time penalties for exceeding time allowed

### Marathon

- Penalties for time faults
- Penalties for time spent in obstacles
- Additional penalties for knock-downs or errors

Scores from all three phases are added together for your final result.

After the competition, drivers unharness and attend the prize-giving—usually about 30 minutes later.

### Ready to Start Competing?

Driving Trials are friendly, welcoming, and full of camaraderie. With preparation, patience, and a sense of adventure, your first event will be a fantastic experience.