

THE HORSE IN BRITISH HISTORY

The first wild ponies arrived in Britain by walking across the swampy plain that would become the English Channel. These ancient equines, originated in North America. From America, they crossed Asia and Europe—all of which were land-linked at that time. Fossil remains tell us that they ranged in size from 11 to 12 hands. Their appearance was much the same as today's Exmoor pony, a pure survivor of this ancient stock. The early ponies became an important food source for **Stone Age hunters** who significantly reduced their numbers. By 8000 BC open grasslands and the wild ponies were limited to the mountains and hills of Britain. The formation of the English Channel, about 6000 BC, isolated the British equine population from those on the Continent eliminating any further interbreeding with European horses. Some say the early British ponies were hunted to extinction and that the horse was reintroduced to Britain by the Celts. Others believe small pockets of early ponies survived in the isolated uplands of Britain.

Horses eventually began to be used to carry or drag burdens. The arrival of the wheel, about 1700 BC, revolutionized both transport and agriculture. Oxen and horses could be harnessed to light vehicles. Man also began to improve indigenous stock by crossbreeding to obtain a larger horse suitable for riding. From about 800 BC the horse became more important for purposes other than food. The Celts, who settled in the uplands and the hills of Britain, found excellent grasslands suitable for horse breeding. They were the first in Britain to use the horse for war. Celtic chariots and cavalry successfully opposed Julius Caesar's attempted invasion in 55 BC.

When the **Romans** invaded Britain again in AD 43, their army of occupation included cavalry and mounted infantry. The Italian Romans were not particularly good horsemen, nor were they heavily reliant on cavalry. They raised auxiliary mounted regiments from areas where riding was commonplace such as Spain, Frisia (Holland), Gaul (France), Belgae (Belgium), Germany, and the steppes of Ukraine and Georgia. These auxiliary cavalry units, of all nationalities, brought their own war stallions with them. This provided a greatly expanded gene pool from which the islanders were able to breed larger and better horses.

The peace and stability brought to Britain by the Romans allowed for a dramatic increase in trade and the Roman road system provided the basis for the distribution of goods and services. Horses were essential for the many pack trains. Along with oxen, horses were also hitched to wagons. With the increase in leisure time resulting from the new prosperity, horses found new roles. Hunting on horseback and organized chariot racing became popular in Britain.

Anglo-Saxon warrior graves have yielded horse remains between 13.2 to 14 hands. Organized horse breeding can be documented during the 7th century. The "Horse Weard" or "Horse Wealth" was in charge of the king's stud and was held in high esteem. Laws regulated breeding stallions and the selection of mares. Nobles as well as the kings had their own studs. Horses led the list of bequests in an Anglo-Saxon's will. After his household, his stud of horses was the king's most valuable asset. War horses, gold-plated and jeweled tack, and armor were exchanged as gifts between royalty.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle shows that during the Viking incursions (789-1015) both sides used horses. The **Vikings** demanded, seized, and captured horses during their invasions of England. The Danes also brought some horses with them on their sea-borne landings. Horses were vital to the Vikings, giving them mobility and instilling fear into those they harried.

The introduction of the **stirrup** into Western Europe at the beginning of the 8th century was a major technological advancement in cavalry warfare. The stirrup was a simple device—a rigid wood, rope or metal loop at the end of a strap descending from the saddle into which the horseman's feet would

be placed. Before the stirrup, the cavalry soldier was forced to stay onto and direct his horse by pressing his knees into the horse's sides. This limited the horseman's ability to ride and his capability to effectively wield weapons. The stirrup increased the cavalry soldier's stability. He could now thrust the lance with more power and direction. He was able to couch it under his arm, using the force of both himself and his horse to "shock" his enemy. The invention of the **nailed horseshoe** in 890 meant battles could be fought at any time of year and over any type of terrain. Horses could now travel greater distances at greater speed over even the rockiest terrain without injury. The third major technological innovation, which improved the medieval war-horse, was the invention at the beginning of the 12th century of the saddle with a high pommel and cantle. The high wraparound cantle helped prevent a rider from being thrown backwards over the horse's rump. The high pommel protected a rider's front as well as keeping him from being thrown over the horse's head.

The **Battle of Hastings in 1066** has been described as "a victory over infantry won by cavalry supported by the long-range weapon of the archers." Although Hastings cannot be considered a typical engagement between cavalry and infantry, it was the Norman knights, together with archers, who were chiefly responsible for the victory. They were professional warriors trained to fight on horseback. They considered their mounts so important to their efficiency that they were brought over with them in small ships. The between 2,000 and 3,000 horses which crossed the Channel in 1066 are given great emphasis in the **Bayeux Tapestry**. William the Conqueror's war-horses were required to carry live loads, which exceeded 250 pounds. The horses depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry were about 1,500 pounds and slightly more than 16 hands. They were stallions. The war-horse was expected to fight in the battle himself, kicking, leaping and rearing at his opponents—he was encouraged to be ferocious. Mares were not used in warfare in medieval Europe. All the good mares were kept fully occupied in the studs. Geldings at this time were considered lacking in both dignity and courage.

In the early **Middle Ages** there was no need for a specially bred horse. However, changes in harness and the increased weight of armor soon required a stronger and heavier horse. Selective breeding eventually produced the war-horse known after the 12th century as the **destrier**. The destrier was 17 hands tall with strong bones and a short back. He was capable of carrying a heavily armored soldier into a battle or a joust. From the time of the introduction of the first heavy cavalry units (between the 8th and 11th centuries) until 1300, victory in nearly every military engagement was tied to heavy cavalry and its use of mounted shock combat. Even after the infantry victories of the early 14th century, the mounted warrior, known as a knight, still remained the dominant part of every medieval army. The war-horse was the most expensive possession of a knight or man-at-arms. A destrier, also known as the "great horse," was a highly trained, expertly bred animal. He was capable of carrying an impressive load of man and armor in the terrifying conditions of battle. However, war-horses were not suitable for riding long distances. A knight would possess at least two other horses in addition to his charger—a riding horse and a packhorse. Other highly prized horses of the time were the courser and the palfrey. The **courser** was a fast riding horse—the ancestor of the racehorse. The **palfrey** was a riding horse with a gentle amble or pacing gait.

By the 13th century, horses of all sorts were a common sight in the streets of London. Hiring a horse was necessary for those who could not afford the cost of buying and keeping one. A good riding horse could cost six months' to a year's wages for the average craftsman. The daily cost of stabling and feeding a horse was as much as a skilled craftsman could expect to earn in a day. By the 14th century, hackney-men (horse-hirers) were common in the towns on major traveling routes. The charges they levied were regulated by royal proclamation. Their horses were branded to discourage the ever-present danger of theft. Inns or hostelries on the major roads provided accommodations for travelers and their horses. Geoffrey Chaucer met the "nine and twenty in a company" at the Tabard, a "hostelrye" in the borough Canterbury. However, a journey on horseback was not a cheap one and was not undertaken frequently by most townsfolk.

In the early medieval era horses played only a small part in heavy farm duties. It was more common for an ox to be hitched to a plow than a horse. From the 13th century onwards, greater value was placed on the speed and stamina of the horse and it began to displace the ox at the head of the plough. Both the draft and packhorse were indispensable in the transport of goods, building materials and the equipment of war. During the 14th and 15th centuries the cart was the dominant form of transport for most heavy goods in and around the town. As the 15th century drew to a close many changes in equestrian life took place. With the advent of artillery the medieval war-horse became outmoded, except for use in the tournament. Pleasure riding increased and more and more people "rode to hounds" for sport.

Under the **Tudor and Stuart reigns** the horse population in England was subjected to several changes. During the 16th century a number of statutes were passed with the aim of promoting the quality and size of horses. The "great horses" now played a comparatively minor role in everyday society. The palfrey or ambling horse, providing a smooth ride at an easy gait, and the hackney or trotting horse were the horses of choice for the travelling public. During Elizabeth's reign, the nobility and the rich enthusiastically adopted the introduction of the coach. Four or six harness horses were required to pull these vehicles. The middle classes of the period traveled by stagecoach pulled by teams of six or eight horses. Under the Stuarts, England saw a tremendous growth and interest in horsemanship. James I's ascension to the throne marked Newmarket's emergence as England's capital of racing. Hunting and racing sparked the development of the Thoroughbred, and by utilizing the blood of these faster and lighter horses, the British were able to develop the finest cavalry horses in the world.

The 17th century importation of oriental bloodlines led to the development of the English Hunter and eventually the most renowned horse worldwide—the English **Thoroughbred**. All thoroughbreds can trace their ancestry back, father to father, to one of three foundation stallions—the Godolphin Arabian, the Byerley Turk or the Darley Arabian. The crucial years for the development of the thoroughbred were the late 17th century to about 1750. Queen Anne kept the Royal Foxhounds at Ascot and in 1711 ordered that a racetrack be built there. Her enthusiasm for the hunt and horse racing was an incentive for improved breeding.

The **Byerley Turk** (foaled about 1680) was the first of the foundation stallions to be imported to England. He was captured from the Turks by Captain Byerley and in spite of his name he was probably an Arabian. Although he was not bred to many mares, he founded a line; the most distinguished of which was Herod, foaled in 1758. Among the notable descendants of Herod were Highflyer, Diomed, Sir Archie, and the Flying Dutchman. All were important in the development of the Thoroughbred throughout Europe and America.

The second of the three foundation stallions to be imported was the **Darley Arabian**. He was foaled in 1700 and bought by Thomas Darley in Syria in 1704. Two of his important colts were Flying Childers and Bartlett's Childers. Over 80% of modern racehorses can trace their descent to Bartlett's Childers' great grandson, Eclipse, many of them through the great American stallion Northern Dancer. Eclipse, foaled in 1764, won 18 races and was never whipped or spurred. Through Eclipse's distinguished descendants such as American Eclipse, Hyperion, Kelso, and Sea Bird, the Darley Arabian line dominates over the other two foundation stallions.

The **Godolphin Arabian**, last of the foundation stallions to come to England, was foaled about 1724 in Yemen. Originally given to the King of France as a gift, it is said he was found pulling a water cart in Paris. Mated to the mare Roxana, he sired Lath and then Cade—the sire of the great Matchem. Matchem carried the line of the Godolphin Arabian. This grandson of the Godolphin Arabian passed on speed and an excellent disposition. Ten of Matchem's descendants were brought to South Carolina in 1755. Brutus, one of Matchem's sons dominated racing in South Carolina.

Cavalry reemerged as a force in the 18th century and reached its zenith as a mobile striking force. Black or dark brown horses were the preferred color for the British heavy cavalry, a tradition that remains today in Britain's Household Cavalry. In the War of the Spanish Succession (Marlborough's wars) 1702-1713, vast numbers of horses took the field. At Blenheim, 20,000 allied cavalry opposed 18,000 French. The allies also needed 2,500 horses for the artillery train and 5,000 more for the commissariat wagons. Historians seldom mention horse casualties, but horses usually suffered more than the human combatants. On the average, horse losses were about one-third greater than those of their riders.

Roads in and around **London** were crowded with horses in the **18th and early 19th centuries**. There were riding horses, privately owned or hired from livery stables. By 1711 there were 800 licensed hackney coaches in the city. For out-of-town journeys a finer carriage such as a Landau with four able horses could be hired. Added to those for hire, there were private carriages of all sorts—some owned by the nobility and gentry were truly magnificent. But even the most elegant carriage came to a crawl if it was stuck behind a lumbering wagon. Wagons pulled by up to eight horses and carrying as much as 10 tons took their time along the streets and roads, never giving way! In addition there were the carts and wagons of tradesmen, street vendors, and scavengers. Many tradesmen took pride in driving smart, showy horses and ponies to attract attention and therefore advertise their wares. The brewery companies in particular took pride in their horses. Because of the loads involved, heavy breeds such as Shires, Clydesdales, Suffolk Punches and Percherons were used. In the streets of any town, the variety of horses and ponies and the vehicles that they pulled was endless. Horses were used by to pull hearses, fire brigades, ambulances and mail coaches. They pulled barges along the rivers and canals. During the Golden Age of Coaching (1815-1840) 700 mail-coaches and 5,500 stagecoaches ran regularly throughout Britain, using about 150,000 horses and employing some 30,000 men.

Early **roads** were not much more than deeply rutted dusty tracks in summer, and muddy quagmires in winter. Parliament passed statutes for the upkeep of roads but they were ineffective. The first Turnpike Act in 1663 giving counties the right to set up tollgates and collect tolls for the maintenance of roads was more effective. However, the technology of road building changed little until men such as the celebrated John Loudon Macadam and Thomas Telford surveyed routes and built roads on solid well-drained foundations. These new "Macadamized" roads, surfaced with stones of uniformly small size, were smooth, solid and flat. The scene was now set for the "Golden Age" of coaching, and for the development of many types of light, elegant private carriages.

"**Horse power**" was used in many other ways. Harnessed to a treadmill, horses provided lifting power for cranes. Walking in a fixed circle, they turned a drum that became part of a winch that lifted coal, men and materials out of mine shafts. This type of apparatus was also used to drive pumps, ore-crushers, and textile mills. Pit ponies pulled loads of coal in the confined and dark spaces of a mine and powerful teams of draft horses pulled heavy farming machinery. Before the steam locomotive, horses worked the railways and tramways and the shunting yards. The last pit ponies only retired in Britain in the late 1990s and even in the 21st century, horses can be found collecting refuse and delivering beer. There is good reason why we measure power in "horse power". One horsepower being 745 Watts.

World War I introduced a new type of battlefield dominated by trench warfare, machine guns and artillery. There were few cavalry actions with the vast majority of cavalrymen reverting to the role of mounted infantry. However, British generals assembled vast numbers of cavalry horses—more than one million. The draft horse was essential for supplying the front. In addition, horses were needed to pull artillery and ammunition wagons. The number of horses involved is incalculable and equine casualties were high. The British lost 256,000 horses—mostly due to illness. Agricultural and non-agricultural demand for horses fell dramatically after the First World War. Motor transport in the towns grew rapidly and the market for horses bred for sale shrank. The breeding of draft-horses all but collapsed.

Queen Victoria had little interest in **racing** and a positive dislike of gambling. However, the Royal Stud at Hampton Court was the most influential in England during her reign. From her son Edward VII to the present, the royal family has been involved in both the hunt and the British racing scene. There are fifty-nine racecourses in Britain, staging flat racing, jumping (National Hunt), or both. Queen Elizabeth II is well known for a serious and enthusiastic love the Turf and horses in general. She has won some 650 races as an owner and has bred the winners of over a thousand. The Queen has kept at least one mare in the United States since the late 1960s. Since so many of the World's best stallions are in Kentucky, it was decided in the 1980s to increase the number of her mares here to five or six. The Queen's mares are divided between Chandler's Mill Ridge Farm and Lanes End Farm. Lane's End belongs to Mr. William S. Farish, the American Ambassador to Great Britain and a friend of the Queen.

The Mounted Regiment escorts the Queen on horseback on official state and royal occasions. It is part of the **Household Cavalry**, a collective title given to the two senior regiments of the British Army. The King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery are also Household Troops. Their duties include the firing of royal salutes in Hyde Park on royal anniversaries and state occasions and providing a gun carriage and teams of black horses for state and military funerals. It was King George VI's wish that after World War II a troop of Royal Horse Artillery, mounted and dressed in the traditional manner, should once more take part in the great ceremonies of state. In 1947, His Majesty announced that he wished the Riding Troop to be known as His Troop. Queen Elizabeth has continued The Troop in her father's memory. Today the King's Troop firing a royal salute is one of the most spectacular ceremonies to be seen in the heart of London; 71 horses take part, and the officers and soldiers wear their colorful ceremonial dress. The Troop performs a Musical Drive both in England and overseas. It is a spectacular display of horsemanship, carried out at the gallop, and culminating in the dangerous scissors movement when teams cross in the center of the arena with a minimum space between them.

The elegant grey horses that pull the magnificent royal coaches during State occasions are world famous carriage horses. They are handpicked from around Britain and Ireland. The Royal Greys—owned by the Queen—live in the comfort of the **Royal Mews** next to Buckingham Palace. As well as the Greys, which are generally reserved for the exclusive use of the Queen; there are also the Cleveland Bays, which are used on a daily basis. They perform such duties as taking other celebrities and distinguished visitors, such as ambassadors, to and from Buckingham Palace. Also housed in the Royal Mews are the beautiful State coaches.

Queen Elizabeth II's life-long love of horses dates back to her first Shetland Pony, received from her grandfather for her third birthday. Indeed all members of the current **Royal Family** have a tremendous interest in horses. Prince Philip has excelled at both polo and carriage driving. Prince Charles inherited a passionate interest in polo and is also a competent rider across country behind a pack of hounds. Princess Anne has represented Britain as an Olympian and is impressive as a jockey in both flat racing and steeplechasing.

Although no longer needed for work or in battle, the horse is still an important part of British life. Today there are 1,000,000 horses in Great Britain.