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HORSES PAST
AND PRESENT

Walter Gilbey

Horses Past and Present

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Walter Gilbey

Horses Past and Present

This brief history of the Horse in England to the close of the nineteenth century is a compilation which, it is hoped, may prove useful as well as interesting.

So much has been done to improve our breeds of horses since the year 1800, and so many and important have been the changes in our methods of travel, in the use of heavy horses in agriculture, in hunting, racing and steeplechasing, that the latter portion of the book might be amplified indefinitely.

It is not thought necessary to do more than touch briefly upon the more important events which have occurred during Her Majesty's reign.

The interesting and instructive work by Mr. Huth, which contains the titles of all the books written in all languages relating to the Horse shows that the number published up to the year 1886 exceeds 4,060: and since that date, works on the Horse, embracing veterinary science, breeding, cavalry, coaching, racing, hunting and kindred subjects, have been issued from the publishing houses of Europe at the rate of about two per month. During the ten years 1886-95 upwards of 232 such works were issued, and there has been no perceptible decrease during the last four years.

Under these circumstances an apology for adding to the mass of literature on the Horse seems almost necessary.



*Elsenham Hall, Essex,
November, 1900.*

HORSES PAST AND PRESENT

First among animals which man has domesticated, or brought under control to do him service, stands the horse. The beauty of his form, his strength, speed and retentive memory, alike commend him to admiration; the place he holds, whether in relation to our military strength, our commercial and agricultural pursuits, or our pleasures, is unique. Whether as servant or companion of man the horse stands alone among animals.

There can be no doubt but that the horse was broken to man's service at an early period of the world's history. The art of taming him was first practised by the peoples of Asia and Africa, who earliest attained to a degree of civilisation; but whether he was first ridden or driven is a question which has often been debated with no definite result. The earliest references to the use of horses occur in the Old Testament, where numerous passages make mention of chariots and horsemen in connection with all warlike operations.

BEFORE THE CONQUEST

From very remote times England has possessed horses which her inhabitants turned to valuable account, as we find occasion to note elsewhere¹; and the farther she advanced on the path of civilisation the wider became the field for utility open to the horse. To the necessity for adapting him to various purposes, to the carrying of armour-clad soldiery, to draught, pack work, hawking, hunting, coaching, for use in mines where ponies are required, &c., we owe the several distinct breeds which we now possess in such perfection.

In early times horses were held the most valuable of all property in Britain; we see evidence of the importance attached to them in the figures on ancient coins. The Venerable Bede states that the English first used saddle horses about the year 631, when prelates and other Church dignitaries were granted the privilege of riding. This statement needs qualification, for it is certain that riding was practised by the ancient Britons and their descendants; we shall no doubt be right in reading Bede's assertion to refer to *saddles*, which were in use among the nations of Eastern Europe in the fourth century. The ancient Greek and Roman horsemen rode barebacked; but a law in the Theodosian Code, promulgated in the fifth century, by which the weight of a saddle was limited to 60 Roman lbs., proves that saddles were then in general use in the Roman Empire.

The Saxon saddle was little more than a pad; this would give no very secure seat to the rider, and therefore we cannot marvel that the art of fighting on horseback remained unknown in Britain until it was introduced by our Norman conquerors. Even after that epoch only the heavily-mailed knights fought from the saddle; for some centuries subsequently the lightly armed horsemen dismounted to go into action, leaving their horses in charge of those who remained with the baggage of the army in the rear. It would be wrong to call these troops cavalry; they employed horses only for the sake of greater mobility, and were what in modern phrase are styled mounted infantry.

Saxons and Danes brought horses of various breeds into England, primarily to carry on their warfare against the British; the most useful of these were horses of Eastern blood, which doubtless performed valuable service in improving the English breeds. The Saxon and Danish kings of necessity maintained large studs of horses for military purposes, but whether they took measures to improve them by systematic breeding history does not record.

King Alfred (871 to 899) had a Master of the Horse, named Ecquef, and the existence of such an office indicates that the Royal stables were ordered on a scale of considerable magnitude.

King Athelstan (925-940) is entitled to special mention, for it was he who passed the first of a long series of laws by which the export of horses was forbidden. Athelstan's law assigns no reason for this step; but the only possible motive for such a law must have been to check the trade which the high qualities of English-bred horses had brought into existence. At no period of our history have we possessed more horses than would supply our requirements, and Athelstan's prohibition of the export of horses beyond sea, unless they were sent as gifts, was undoubtedly due to a growing demand which threatened to produce scarcity. This king saw no objection to the importation of horses: he accepted several as gifts from Continental Sovereigns, and evidently attached much value to them, for in his will he made certain bequests of white horses and others which had been given him by Saxon friends.

¹ *Ponies Past and Present*. By Sir Walter Gilbey, Bart, published by Vinton & Co., Limited.

WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR (1066-1087)

William the Conqueror brought with him many horses from Normandy when he invaded England. Many of these were Spanish horses, if we may apply to the famous Bayeux tapestry the test of comparison. William himself, at Hastings, rode a Spanish horse, which had been presented to him by his friend, Alfonso of Spain, and the riders on horseback on the tapestry show that the Norman knights rode horses similar in all respects to that of their leader. They are small, probably not exceeding 14 hands, and of course all stallions. Berenger² describes these horses as of a class adapted to the “purposes of war and the exhibition of public assemblies.”

There is nothing to tell us when horses were first used in agriculture in England; the earliest mention of such, some considerable research has revealed, is the reference to “four draught horses” owned by the proprietor of an Essex manor in the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042-1066). Under the Norman and Plantagenet kings the plough appears to have been adapted for draught by either oxen or horses. The former undoubtedly were the more generally used, and continued in use until comparatively recent times in some parts of the country.

One of the pieces of tapestry worked in Bayonne in 1066 shows the figure of a man driving a horse harnessed to a harrow. This is the earliest pictorial evidence we possess of the employment of the horse in field labour.

The Conqueror and his followers came from a country in which agriculture was in a more advanced state than it was in England, and it cannot be doubted that the Normans did much to promote the interests of English husbandry.

² “The History and Art of Horsemanship.” By Richard Berenger, Gentleman of the Horse to George III., published 1771.

WILLIAM RUFUS (1087-1100)

It was probably during the reign of William Rufus that the first endeavour to improve the British breed of horses was made. Giraldus Cambrensis informs us that Robert de Belesme brought Spanish stallions to his property in Powysland, Central Wales, and that to these importations many years afterwards the district owed its reputation for a superior stamp of horse. The results of this enterprise were certainly of a lasting character, for “a Powys horse” occurs among the purchases made by Edward II. (1272-1307), indicating clearly that the locality still produced a good stamp of animal.

HENRY I. (1100-1135)

King Henry I. would appear to have taken an interest in the work of horse-breeding. The scanty existing records of his reign contain mention of a visit paid in 1130 to the royal manor at Gillingham, in Dorsetshire, by a squire “with a stallion to leap the king’s mares.” In this king’s reign the first Arabs were received in England from Eastern Europe, in the shape of two horses, with costly Turkish armour, as a gift. One of these horses was retained in England and the other was sent to King Alexander I. of Scotland, who presented it to the Church of St. Andrews.

HENRY II. (1154-1189)

Henry II. took a keen interest in horses, and the records of his reign show us the system then in vogue for the maintaining the royal studs. The horses, in greater or smaller numbers, with their grooms, were placed under the charge of the Sheriffs of counties, whose duty it was to provide them with pasture, stabling, and all necessities, recovering the cost from the Exchequer. The Tournament was introduced into England in this reign; but these knightly exercises received little encouragement from the king, who forbade them under ecclesiastical pressure.

William Stephanides, a monk of Canterbury, has left us a Latin tract or pamphlet descriptive of the mounted sports of Londoners in the latter half of the twelfth century, which possesses both interest and value. From this it is evident that races of a primitive character, and sham fights of a rough and ready kind had place among the recreations of the people of Henry II.'s time. Smithfield, then a level expanse of grass where periodical horse markets were held, was the scene of these amusements: —

“Every Sunday in Lent after dinner young men ride out into the fields on horses which are fit for war and excellent for their speed. The citizens' sons issue out through the gates by troops, furnished with lances and shields, and make representation of battle and exercise and skirmish. To this performance many young courtiers yet uninitiated in arms resort, and great persons to train and practice. They begin by dividing into troops; some labour to outstrip their leaders without being able to reach them; others unhorse their antagonists without being able to get beyond them. At times two or three boys are set on horseback to ride a race and push their horses to their utmost speed, sparing neither whip nor spur.”³

³ “London,” by Stephanides. Leland's *Itinerary*, vol. viii.

RICHARD I. (1189-1199)

Richard I., ignoring the opposition of the Church, which held them dangerous alike to body and soul, encouraged tournaments as valuable training for his knights; and it may here be observed that from his time through the succeeding ages until 1559, when a fatal accident to King Henry II., of France, in the lists, caused the institution to go out of fashion, tournaments were held from time to time in England. Some of our kings encouraged them for military reasons; others discouraged them under Church influence, or as records show, because they were productive of loss in horses and arms, which the resources of the country could ill afford.

We find traces of the old “Justs of Peace,” as tournaments were officially called, in the names of streets in London. Knighttrider and Giltspur Streets, for example: the former owed its name to the circumstance that through it lay the route taken by knights on their way from the Tower to the lists at Smithfield; the latter to the fact that the makers of the gilt spurs worn by knights carried on their business there. Cheapside was the scene of some historical tournaments, as were the Barbican and Roderwell. The Tiltyard near St. James’s was the exercise ground of knights and gentlemen at a later date.

JOHN (1199-1216)

King John reigned at a period when the armour worn by mounted men was becoming stronger, and when the difficulty of finding horses powerful enough to carry heavily mailed riders was increasing. This sovereign, so far as can be discovered, was the first to make an endeavour to increase the size of our English breed of Great Horses; he imported from Flanders one hundred stallions of large size. The Low Countries, in the Early and Middle Ages, were the breeding grounds of the largest and most powerful horses known; and John's importations must have wrought marked influence upon the British stock. He also purchased horses in Spain which are described as Spanish *dextrarii*, or Great Horses. *Dextrarius* was the name by which the war horse was known at this period and for centuries afterwards.

EDWARD II. (1307-1327)

Edward II. devoted both energy and money to the task of improving our horses. We have record of several horse-buying commissions despatched by him to the Champaign district in France, to Italy and other parts vaguely described as “beyond seas.” One such commission brought home from Lombardy thirty war horses and twelve others of the heavy type. There can be no doubt but that the foreign purchases of Edward II. were destined for stud purposes; the more extensive purchases of his successor, Edward III., suggest that he required horses for immediate use in the ranks.

Husbandry in England was at a low ebb during the thirteenth century, but towards the end of Edward II.’s reign it began to make progress in the midland and southwestern counties. The high esteem in which English wool was held caused large tracts of country to be retained as pasture for sheep for a long period, and while farmers possessed this certain source of revenue the science of cultivation was naturally neglected.

EDWARD III. (1327-1377)

Edward III., to meet the drain upon the horse supply caused by his wars with Scotland and France, bought large numbers of horses on the Continent; more, it would appear, than his Treasury could pay for, as he was at one time in the Count of Hainault's debt for upwards of 25,000 florins for horses. These were obviously the Great Horses for which the Low Countries were famous; all the animals so imported were marked or branded. Edward III. organised his remount department on a scale previously unknown in England. It was established in two great divisions under responsible officers, one of whom had charge of all the studs on the royal manors north of the Trent, the other exercising control of those south of that boundary; these two custodians being in their turn responsible to the Master of the Horse.

There is ample evidence to prove that Edward III. took close personal interest in horse-breeding, and it is certain that the cavalry was better mounted in his wars than it had been at any previous period. The Great Horse, or War Horse, essential to the efficiency of heavily armoured cavalry, was by far the most valuable breed and received the greatest meed of attention; but the Wardrobe Accounts of this reign contain mention of many other breeds or classes of horse indispensable for campaigning or useful for sport and ordinary saddle work – palfreys, hackneys, hengests, and somers, coursers, trotters, hobbies, nags, and genets.

The distinction between some of these classes was probably somewhat slight. The palfrey was the animal used for daily riding for pleasure or travel by persons of the upper ranks of life, and was essentially the lady's mount, though knights habitually rode palfreys or hackneys on the march, while circumstances allowed them to put off for the time their armour. The weight of this, with the discomfort of wearing it in the cold of winter and heat of summer, furnished sufficient reason for the knights to don their mail only when actually going into action, or on occasions of ceremony.

"Hengests and somers" were probably used for very similar purposes, as more than once we find them coupled thus: these were the baggage or transport animals, and were doubtless of no great value. "Courser" is a term somewhat loosely used in the old records; it is applied indifferently to the war horse, to the horse used in hunting, and for daily road work, but generally in a sense that suggests speed. "Trotters," we must assume, were horses that were not taught to amble; and the name was distinctive at a period when all horses used for saddle by the better classes were taught that gait. Edward III.'s Wardrobe Accounts mention payment for *trammels*, the appliances, it is supposed, used for this purpose, and at a much later date in another Royal Account Book, we find an item "To making an horse to amble, 2 marks (13s. 4d.)." The amble was a peculiarly easy and comfortable pace which would strongly commend itself to riders on a long journey. Hobbies were Irish horses, small but active and enduring; genets were Spanish horses nearly allied to, if not practically identical with, the barbs introduced into Spain by the Moors. The animal described as a "nag" was probably the saddle-horse used by servants and camp followers.

RICHARD II. (1377-1399)

Richard II. was fond of horses and did not neglect the interests of breeding; though he on one occasion displayed his regard in a fashion which to modern minds is at least high-handed. There was a scarcity of horses in the early years of his reign, and prices rose in conformity with the law of supply and demand. Richard, considering only the needs of his knights, issued a proclamation (1386) forbidding breeders to ask the high prices they were demanding. This proclamation was published in Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Yorkshire.

Passing mention may be made of an Act which was placed on the Statute Book in 1396. In those days all travelling was performed on horseback, and the equivalent of the coach or jobmaster of much later times was the hackneyman, who let out horses to travellers at rates of hire fixed by law. The hackneymen were in the very nature of their business liable to be imposed upon by unprincipled persons, who would demand horses from them without tendering payment, on the false plea that they were royal messengers journeying in haste on business of the State. Not infrequently, too, the hirer or borrower was none other than a horse-thief, who rode the animal into some remote country town, and sold him to whoever would buy. Richard II.'s Act of 1396, aimed at suppression of these practices, laying penalties upon anyone found guilty of them; and it further called upon the hackneymen to help themselves by placing a distinctive mark on their horses. Any animal bearing such a mark might be seized by the hackneyman if he found it in possession of another, and no compensation could be claimed by the person from whose custody it was taken.

The earliest account of a race that we can trace (apart from the sports at Smithfield) refers to the year 1377, the first of Richard's reign. In that year the King and the Earl of Arundel rode a race⁴ (particulars of conditions, distance, weights, &c., are wanting!), which it would seem was won by the Earl, since the King purchased his horse afterwards for a sum equal to £20,000 in modern money.

For nearly a hundred years after the deposition of Richard II., the available records throw little or no light upon our subject. The Wars of the Roses (1450-1471) were productive of results injurious alike to agriculture, stock breeding, and commerce. During a period when horses for military service were in constant demand, and were liable, unless the property of some powerful noble, to seizure by men of either of the contending factions, it was not worth any man's while to breed horses, still less to try to improve them. The fifteenth century, therefore, or at least a considerable portion of it, saw retrogression rather than progress in English horse-breeding.

⁴ "The History of Newmarket." By T. P. Hore. (3 vols.) H. Bailly & Co. London, 1886.

HENRY VII. (1485-1509)

Henry VII., in 1495, found the horse supply of the country so deficient, and the prices so high, that he passed an Act forbidding the export of any horse without Royal permission, on pain of forfeiture, and of any mare whose value exceeded six shillings and eightpence; no mare under three years old might be sent out of the country, and on all exported a duty of six shillings and eightpence was levied.

Under the old “Statutes of Arms” Henry VII. established a force known as Yeomen of the Crown. There were fifty of these; each yeoman had a spare horse and was attended by a mounted groom. In times of peace they acted as Royal messengers carrying letters and orders. In disturbed times they formed the backbone of the militia levies.

HENRY VIII. (1509-1547)

Henry VIII. went a good deal further in his efforts to foster and promote the breeding of good horses. In 1514 he absolutely forbade the export of horses abroad, and extended the prohibition to Scotland. He obliged all prelates and nobles of a certain degree, to be ascertained by the richness of their wives' dress, to maintain stallions of a given stature. He made the theft of horse, mare, or gelding a capital offence, and deprived persons convicted under this law (37 Henry VIII., c. 8) of the benefit of clergy. And by two Acts, the gist of which will be found on page 5 *et seq.* of *Ponies Past and Present*, he made a vigorous attempt to weed out the ponies whose small size rendered them useless.

It is to be borne in mind that the King's legislation against the animals that ran in the forests and wastes aimed definitely at the greater development and perfection of the Great Horse. Armour during Henry VIII.'s time had reached its maximum weight, and a horse might be required to carry a load of from 25 to 30 stone;⁵ hence very powerful horses were indispensable.

Henry's interest in horseflesh was not confined to the breed on which the efficiency of his cavalry depended. He was a keen sportsman, who took a lively pleasure in all forms of sport, and he appears to have been the first king who ran horses for his own amusement. It would hardly be correct to date the beginnings of the English Turf from Henry VIII.'s reign, as the "running geldings" kept in the Royal Stables at Windsor seem to have been run only against one another in a field hired by the king for the purpose.

The *Privy Purse Expenses* contain very curious scraps of information concerning the running geldings, their maintenance, and that of the boys retained to ride them. There is mention of "rewardes" to the keeper of the running geldings, to the "children of the stable," and also to the "dyatter" of the running geldings. This last functionary's existence is worth notice, as it indicates some method of training or dieting the horses. Nearly seventy years later – in 1599 – Gervaise Markham produced his book, "How to Chuse, Ryde and Dyet both Hunting and Running Horses."

In the year 1514, the Marquis of Mantua sent Henry VIII., from Italy, a present of some thoroughbred horses; these in all probability formed the foundation stock of our sixteenth-century racehorses. The *Privy Purse Expenses* quoted above refer to "the Barbaranto hors" and "the Barbary hors," which are doubtless the same animal. A hint that it was raced occurs in the mention of a payment to Polle (Paul, who as previous entries show, was the keeper of this horse), "by way of rewarde," 18s. 4d., and on the same day (March 17, 1532), "paid in rewarde to the boy that ran the horse, 18s. 4d."

That curious record, *The Regulations of the Establishment of Algernon Percy, Fifth Earl of Northumberland*, which was commenced in the year 1512, gives us a very valuable glimpse of the private stud maintained by a great noble in Henry VIII.'s time. The list of the Earl's horses "that are appointed to be in the charge of the house yearly, as to say, gentell horseys, palfreys, hobys, naggis, cloth-sek hors, male hors," is as follows: —

"First, gentell horsys, to stand in my lordis stable, six. Item, palfreys of my ladis, to wit, oone for my lady and two for her gentell-women, and oone for her chamberer. Four hobys and nags for my lordis oone ('own' in this connection) saddill, viz., oone for my lord, and oone to stay at home for my lord.

"Item, chariot hors to stand in my lordis stable yerely.

"Seven great trottynge horsys to draw in the chariot and a nag for the chariott man to ride – eight. Again, hors for Lord Lerey, his lordship's son and heir. A gret doble trottynge hors called a curtal, for his lordship to ride out on out of towns.

⁵ See *The Great Horse or War Horse* (p. 26). Third edition. By Sir Walter Gilbey, Bart. Vinton & Co., Ltd. 1899.

Another trottynge gambaldyn hors for his lordship to ride on when he comes into towns. An amblynge hors for his lordship to journeye on daily. A proper amblynge little nag for his lordship when he goeth on hunting and hawking. A gret amblynge gelding, or trottynge gelding, to carry his male.”

In regard to these various horses, it may be added that the “gentell hors” was one of superior breeding; the chariott horse and “gret trotting horsys” were powerful cart horses; the “curtal” was a docked great horse; the “trottynge gambaldyn” horse one with high and showy action, and the “cloth sek” and “male hors” carried respectively personal luggage and armour.

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