

The Horse Trade of the Midlands in the Seventeenth Century

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I
THE seventeenth century was an important period in the growth of the domestic market. Much research is still needed to fill in the details but the general trends are clear. Stress has been laid upon the ever-increasing importance of London as a centre for the consumption of food, and as a buyer of other commodities. On a far smaller scale, admittedly, was the growth of regional centres also requiring an increasing amount of food, commodities, and services. Owing to such factors as increasing demand, expanding population, the sophistication of taste, and improvement in transport facilities, a degree of specialization grew up in the production of foodstuffs and commodities, which in itself stimulated trade between the various regions. The open market found itself unable to cope with this vast increase in trading activity, and after a period of painful adjustment alternative methods were eventually evolved to cater for the new demands. If the seventeenth century did not see the end of this period of transition, it none the less marked a critical phase in which many of the new influences could be seen at work. The livestock trade was not exempt from the effect of these pressures, and it is the aim of this article to illustrate their effect on the economy by reference to the horse trade in the Midlands.

In this article I have made particular use of toll books, recording the sale of horses at markets and fairs. Stemming from legislation enacted during the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth, designed to check the sale of stolen horses, they often give details about prices, type of animals sold, catchment areas, scale of operations, and even the social classes involved.¹ Vouchees had to be given by each seller, and the

horses were often described in great detail, giving such information as type, colour, gait, value, and distinguishing marks.

The books, none the less, have a number of shortcomings which the researcher must bear in mind. The chance survival in one place rather than another, and the absence of long runs, and overlapping with those from other fairs are serious handicaps. Moreover, one cannot be certain of the accuracy of the books. Tolls were leased from time to time, and perhaps only infrequently kept. Some toll books are mere lines of scribble, seemingly written down on any piece of paper. Others, although neatly set out in books, give the impression of being fair copies written at leisure after the fair had ended by people who may not necessarily have written the first draft. In a number of cases it is apparent that the scribe did not know the names of the places to which he refers. This is a particular difficulty for anyone trying to analyse the toll books of fairs such as that at Shrewsbury, for one not only has to place the host of Joneses and Davieses in the correct parish but also has to try to decipher the attempts of semi-literate Englishmen at spelling Welsh place-names. At no time would the list have reflected the full scale of operations of any particular fair. Burgesses were usually exempt from the payment of toll, and in addition a number of reciprocal agreements, albeit occasionally hotly contested, existed between various places. Also unrecorded were those who slipped through the net without paying toll, a growing problem in the seventeenth century, and symptomatic of the gradual decline of the open market. Bearing in mind all the problems, the toll books none the less remain an invaluable aid to our understanding of the horse trade during a critical period. Even their shortcomings bear mute witness to the great changes

¹ 2 & 3 Philip and Mary, c. 7; 31 Eliz., c. 12.

that were taking place in the organization of the trade.

II

A significant economic development, discernible from the late sixteenth century, can be seen in the greater sophistication of taste and the growing demand for many different qualities of the same article at a range of prices. In the horse trade purchasers of horses were showing new discrimination in their transactions, and new demands were being made on breeders to produce horses for special purposes.² A contemporary account of this development was given by Thomas Blundeville, who was one of the first publicists for the improvement of English breeds.

... so many perchance would have a breede of great trotting horses meete for the warre, and to serue in the field. Some other againe would have a breede of ambling Horses of a meane stature for the journie and to travell by the waie. Some againe would haue perhaps a race of swift Runners to runne for wagers, or to gallop the Bucke, or to serue for such exercises of pleasure. But the plaine councitrieman would perchance have a breede onelie for draught or burthern.³

Horses, the "internal combustion engine" of pre-mechanized England, were of vital importance to the economy, and were, indeed, used for a greater variety of purposes as the seventeenth century progressed. On the farm horses were more and more employed as draught animals, not only to draw the plough but also to pull the larger wagons introduced by the Dutch in the mid-sixteenth century. Coaches, also introduced by the Dutch at the same time, became fashionable with the well-to-do, as did the sport of horse racing, popularized by James I at the beginning of the century. Horses were also used to provide motive power in the pits and other industrial concerns, pulling loads or

working gins and other devices. On the roads packhorse trains and wagons increased in number in order to carry the growing volume of trade around the country.⁴

By the end of the sixteenth century it appears that certain fairs had acquired a reputation for a particular type of horse, and therefore attracted more than a purely local trade to them. Shrewsbury was one such centre. Although many of the horses were bought and sold by Shropshire men, a substantial long-distance traffic also existed, the importance of which seemed to lie in the small sturdy horses brought in for sale from the Welsh border.⁵ In particular, the herds of semi-wild horses known as merlins that roamed the vast common pastures of Montgomeryshire were rounded up from the hills at the age of three and brought to market. Many of these small horses, sure-footed in climbing the mountains, were employed in their native districts, conveying the produce of the country to the market at Welshpool or Shrewsbury.⁶ Montgomeryshire had been noted for its horses as far back as the Middle Ages. Later, in the 1720's, Daniel Defoe wrote that

This county is noted for an excellent breed of Welsh horses, which, though not very large, are exceeding valuable, and very much esteemed all over England.⁷

In the mid-sixteenth century an attempt was made by the government to increase the height of such mountain and border breeds by a statute ordering the destruction of stoned horses of under 15 hands and mares of 13 hands. This attempt to destroy such breeds was short-sighted, and directly opposed to the interests of mining and carrying, for which purposes small horses were admirably suited. A large slice of the horse trade comprised the sale of ponies to

⁴ J. A. Chartres, 'Road Carrying in England in the Seventeenth Century: Myth and Reality', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. xxx, 1977, pp. 73-94.

⁵ Shrops. R.O.: Shrews. Borough Records, 2645-68, Horse Toll Books, 1548-1674.

⁶ 'Montgomeryshire Horses, Cobs, and Ponies', *Montg. Collns.*, xxii, 1888, p. 19.

⁷ D. Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 1971 edn, p. 383.

² Joan Thirsk, 'Horse Breeding in the Seventeenth Century' (unpubl. lecture), p. 22.

³ T. Blundeville, *The Foure Chiefest Offices Belonging to Horsemanship*, 1580, fols. 6-7.

colliers, metal workers, carriers, and other tradesmen, and the Shrewsbury toll books are full of references to such people. Many of the horses that were sold out of Shropshire went to the neighbouring counties of Worcestershire and Staffordshire, and of these the vast majority were purchased by buyers from the growing industrial area there.

There was a growing demand for such horses as industrial and mining concerns developed during the course of the seventeenth century. At Bedworth in north-eastern Warwickshire the population, almost entirely dependent upon the mining industry, was reduced to great poverty in the early seventeenth century because of flooding in the mines. In about 1619 a successful attempt was made to recover the pits, and it was said at the time that sixty horses were employed in drawing water out of them. The large output of the mines also necessitated a considerable number of horses to transport the coal around the wide area served, and such needs probably account for the large number of horse dealers living in Bedworth, of whom more will be said later.⁸ Celia Fiennes on her travels around the country in the 1690's also noted the use of horses in mines. Writing of Flintshire she stated that

there are great coal pitts of the Channell Coale thate cloven great pieces they have great wheelles that are turned with horses that draw up the water and so draine the mines which would else be overflowed so as they could not dig the coale. . . .⁹

Whilst fairs such as that at Shrewsbury specialized in the sale of small, sturdy work horses, that at Penkridge in the neighbouring county of Staffordshire catered for the market in high-quality horses. Defoe happened to be in the town when the fair was being held, and was surprised to find so much activity in such an out-of-the-way place:

We expected nothing extraordinary; but was I say surprised to see the prodigious number

⁸ W. Page (ed.), *V.C.H.*, II, 1908; p. 221; *infra*, p. 97.

⁹ C. Morris (ed.), *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, 1947, pp. 181-2.

of horses brought hither, and those not ordinary and common draught-horses, and such kinds as we generally see at county-fairs remote from London. But here were really incredible numbers of the finest and most beautiful horses that can any where be seen; being brought hither from Yorkshire, the bishopric of Durham, and all the horse-breeding countries.¹⁰

The fair was already well known in the second half of the sixteenth century and attracting dealers from as far away as Bedfordshire and Yorkshire.¹¹ By 1640 the principal buyers at Penkridge were the London dealers, and according to the recorded information they completely dominated the fair held on 23 September. The place of origin of buyers of fifty-five horses is known, and of these thirty-one were bought by Londoners. It is also likely that two other dealers, who bought nine horses between them, also came from the capital. Half of the London dealers, at least, came from Smithfield, the great livestock market, where a number of Penkridge horses were undoubtedly resold. Harvey Conway of Smithfield, for instance, is recorded as having bought 5 geldings, 3 nags, 1 stoned horse, and 1 mare at a total cost of £135 15s. The thirty-one horses, mainly geldings, that the London dealers bought totalled £353 2s. 4d., or an average of £11 7s. 10d. Suppliers came mainly from Staffordshire and the neighbouring counties of Shropshire, Derbyshire, and Cheshire, although one or two people came from Denbighshire, Oxfordshire, Warwickshire, and Yorkshire.

Apart from the horses coming to the fair from Yorkshire and the bishopric of Durham, Defoe elsewhere notes that Somerset supplied the northern counties with colts bred in great numbers on the moors there. The breed was very large, and after being bought by horse dealers in Staffordshire and Leicestershire, the horses were later resold for use as cart and coach horses in London.¹² Before being sold to Lon-

¹⁰ Defoe, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

¹¹ B.M.: Egerton MS. 3008, fols. 2v-22v.

¹² Defoe, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

don dealers many of such horses were broken in to the collar in the Midlands by being worked in the plough for one or two years.¹³ Some of these horses may have been sold at Penkridge. London dealers, as has been shown, certainly patronized the fair there, but this may have been due to the exceptional quality of the horses for, generally speaking, they concentrated their efforts on the east Midlands. Defoe writing of Leicestershire commented that

The horses produced here, or rather fed here, are the largest in England, being generally the great black coach horses and dray horses, of which so great a number are continually brought up to London, that one would think so little a spot as this of Leicestershire could not be able to supply them.¹⁴

Unfortunately, information has not survived for many of the fairs of the county, but it is known that the horse and cattle fair at Market Harborough attracted buyers and sellers from as far afield as Hertfordshire, Lincolnshire, London, and Yorkshire.¹⁵ Some of the horses were supplied by members of the local gentry. The estate accounts of the Tresham family of Rush-ton in Northamptonshire record that on 12 October 1574 £7 17s. 6d. was received from the sale of two horses sold at the fair.¹⁶ In the 1720's the records of the fair at Hallaton, seven miles to the north-east of Market Harborough, indicate a preponderance of buyers from Leicestershire and the neighbouring counties, but others came also from East Anglia and the Home Counties.¹⁷

Toll books for the St Peter's Day fair (29 June) at Market Bosworth in the western part of the county survive for the period 1603–32.¹⁸ Apart from supplying the local rural population with horses for general agricultural purposes as elsewhere, the fair may also have provided

work and pack animals for use in and around the neighbouring coalfields of Leicestershire, north-east Warwickshire, and south Derbyshire. Families such as the Dabbsses of north-east Warwickshire, the Bonners of Hinkley, and the Wathoes of Appleby Magna could well have been helping to supply this market. It is interesting to note that William Rocke, a member of a north Worcestershire/south Staffordshire family who supplied such horses to their own developing industrial area, was at the fair in 1603, selling two horses.¹⁹

The fair also provided larger horses, for which Leicestershire was famous, and in the variety of horses sold there could lie the explanation for the considerable variation in the prices of the animals. Dealers came from the Home Counties and the metropolitan area to buy the larger, more expensive horses, although during the period covered by the toll books they were not as dominant as they were to become at other east-midland fairs. John Lucas of St Sepulchre's, London, was the most important purchaser, buying 7 mares, 6 nags, and 3 geldings on four visits to the fair. Even if only relatively few horses were sold directly to the capital, many of the horses bought by east-midland dealers eventually found their way there through resale at other fairs in the region which catered for the metropolitan trade. In fact, a large number of dealers from south-east Leicestershire and north and west Northamptonshire, who specialized in rearing horses for the London market, travelled regularly to the fair. Defoe's comments on the specialization of such dealers²⁰ is admirably illustrated by the purchases that Northamptonshire men made at Market Bosworth, since they concentrated on buying saddle, coach, and cart horses as well as young stock to train up in the collar. The toll books record their purchase of 329 horses, consisting of 25 stoned horses, 7 horses, 90 stoned colts, 56 colts, 6 gelded colts, 73 geldings, 58 nags, 9 mares, 3 fillies, and 2 foals.

Northamptonshire had long been a noted area for horses. Records of the purveyors of horses for Henry VIII show that they were

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 409. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

¹⁵ A. M. Everitt, 'The Marketing of Agricultural Produce', *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, ed. by Joan Thirsk, Cambridge, 1967, p. 539.

¹⁶ B.M.: Add. MS. 39836, fol. 102v.

¹⁷ Leics. R.O.: DE 339/350–3, Hallaton horse fair, 1720–8.

¹⁸ Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.: MS.V.b.165.

¹⁹ *Infra*, p. 97.

²⁰ *Supra*, p. 92; *Infra*, p. 93.

operating in the counties of Northampton, Buckingham, Oxford, and Hertford, and buying up horses in hundreds.²¹ According to Defoe the town of Northampton was

counted the centre of all the horse markets and horse fairs in England, there being no less than four fairs in a year. Here they buy horses of all sorts; as well for the saddle as for the coach and cart, but chiefly for the two latter.²²

Such horses were the specialization of Leicestershire and Northamptonshire. The toll books of Bucton Green, near Northampton, show the influence of the metropolitan trade with dealers from London and the south-east buying up horses and geldings for use as either coach or cart horses.²³ Richard Clough, who appears in the toll book of the fair held at Penkridge on 23 September 1640 as having bought six geldings at a cost of £77 8s. 4d., was present at Bucton Green on 25 June 1627, where he is recorded as having purchased two nags for £11 5s. 6d. Clough seems to have specialized in fairly high-quality horses, for at the St James's Day fair held at Derby on 25 July 1639 he spent £25 10s. 8d. on two nags and one mare. The fair at Rothwell, near Kettering, catered to an even greater extent for a more sophisticated market. Toll books exist for the last sixteen years of the seventeenth century, and it is obvious that horses and geldings were the attraction of the fair.²⁴ The price that some people paid was considerable. At a time when £8 was a fairly high figure to pay for a horse, the mean valuation for those horses and geldings individually priced was £12 4s. and £8 17s. 3d. respectively, but prices in excess of £20 were not uncommon. The visual effect of a nicely matched pair of horses was a selling point, and in a number of cases horses and geldings were sold in twos. London dealers bought many of the horses, often on a consider-

able scale. Mr Knight was at the May fair in three successive years, 1685-7, when he is recorded as having bought a total of thirty-one horses. Other purchasers came from the ranks of the gentry, and the fair, like that at Penkridge, drew custom from a wide area, attracted by the high-quality horses sold there. The farm accounts of the Hatcher family, a prosperous gentry family from Careby in Lincolnshire, indicate that whilst they went to Melton Mowbray and Fotheringhay for geldings, they bought their coach horses at Rothwell.²⁵

III

The patterns of movement in the horse trade were quite complex and midland fairs, lying in a central position in the country, had an important role to play in the flow and direction of this traffic. In particular, toll books of the fairs held at Nottingham²⁶ and Derby²⁷ seem to suggest that they occupied a pivotal position in the trade. Nottingham fair attracted sellers from some of the noted horse-breeding areas of the country such as Yorkshire and the Lincolnshire fens. Defoe, describing Bedall in the North Riding and the Barnard Castle area of Durham, not only commented on the excellent quality of the horses bred in these two districts but also noted the exceptional number of horse breeders and dealers there.²⁸ Evidently many of these animals were brought south for resale at such north-midland fairs as Nottingham or, as has been seen, to centres further south like Penkridge, which were outlets for good-quality stock.²⁹

East-midland buyers regularly attended the fairs at Nottingham and Derby and many of the horses that they bought there were resold at local fairs to dealers from the capital. Leicestershire men were more numerous at Nottingham fair than those from Northampton,

²¹ P.R.O.; E101/107/27-8.

²² Defoe, *op. cit.*, p. 406.

²³ Northants. R.O.: ZA 2455, Bucton Green horse fair, 25 June 1627.

²⁴ Northants. R.O.: 595, Rothwell horse fair 1684-99.

²⁵ Joan Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming*, 1957, p. 176.

²⁶ Nott. Borough Lib.: CA 1504, Horse toll books. 1636-48.

²⁷ Derby Central Lib.: Derby horse fair books, 1638-61, 1677, 1697-1700.

²⁸ Defoe, *op. cit.*, pp. 512-13, 515.

²⁹ *Supra*, p. 92.

and indeed their presence at such fairs as Nottingham and Derby helps to explain the large number of horses noted in the county by Daniel Defoe. The occasional buyer came to Nottingham from London and the Home Counties, one mare, significantly, being sold in 1664 to Robert Fox, a coachman of London. There was also a westerly movement of horses. Derbyshire dealers bought much young stock at Nottingham, a proportion of which found its way at a later date to the Derby fair. The occasional dealer came from further west. George Deane from Blymhill in Staffordshire travelled regularly to the St Matthew's Day fair held on 21 September, and on five recorded visits between 1636 and 1647 bought 9 mares, 7 fillies, 1 foal, and 1 nag.

At Derby a similar pattern of trade can be more clearly seen owing to the survival of a good run of toll books for the middle of the century. Leicestershire and Northamptonshire dealers came to the fair in force, buying up horses in considerable numbers. In 1646 701 horses were recorded as having been sold at the six fairs, nearly one-quarter (23.7 per cent) of which were bought by purchasers from these two counties. More horses in gross went to Leicestershire, an adjacent county, but on occasions Northamptonshire dealers dominated the fair. At the Easter fair, held on 19 April 1650, over two-fifths (41.8 per cent) of all recorded purchases (ninety-eight horses) were made by men from Northamptonshire. Between 1639 and 1656 William Campion from Clipston was virtually ever-present at the Easter fair (except for the war years 1642-5), and over the whole period bought at least 5 nags, 10 colts, 12 stoned colts, 1 gelded colt, and 7 geldings. Between the same years William Eaton of Cottesbrooke bought a minimum of 2 mares, 1 filly, 2 horses, 1 stoned horse, 19 nags, 18 colts, 8 stoned colts, 2 gelded colts, and 18 geldings.³⁰

Dealers from the west Midlands were also more numerous here than at Nottingham fair. Shropshire buyers are recorded as having bought 155 horses between 1638 and 1661, virtually all of which (92.3 per cent) were either

mares or fillies. On five recorded visits to the fair between 1651 and 1661 William Skitt, a chapman from Willaston in the parish of Prees, bought 21 mares, 4 fillies, selling 1 mare, 1 nag, 1 gelding, and 1 colt during the same period. In this respect the demands of dealers from the county differed from those of their counterparts who lived in the east Midlands. This admirably illustrates the different requirements of pastoral and arable regions, a situation which was mentioned by John Worlidge in 1675:

which difference we may observe between the great breeding places for horses in the parstues and woodlands, full of gallant lusty mares, and the naked corn countries of horses and geldings.³¹

The horses imported into Shropshire were larger and more powerful than the native breed, and were mainly bought as draught and wagon horses. Even at the beginning of the nineteenth century draught horses were being brought into the county from Derbyshire and Leicestershire.³² In a *History and Gazetteer of Derbyshire*, printed in 1831, it was stated that the county had long been famous for its horses, ranking next to the Leicestershire for its stout, bony, clean-legged breed of work-horses, which were principally black in colour.³³ Virtually all of the Shropshire dealers operating at Derby lived near the eastern border of the county, that is to say on the side neighbouring Derbyshire. It is interesting to note that dealers from the same area also travelled to Market Bosworth fair where they purchased a similar type of horse. Between 1603 and 1632 Shropshire dealers paid toll on 52 horses at the latter fair, the number being made up of 23 mares, 25 fillies, 3 nags, and 1 colt.

Warwickshire fairs such as those at Stratford³⁴ and Warwick,³⁵ located like Derby be-

³¹ J. Worlidge, *Systema Agriculturae*, 1675, p. 160.

³² J. Plymley, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Shropshire*, 1803, p. 262.

³³ T. Noble (ed.), *History and Gazetteer of the County of Derby*, Derby, 1831, I, p. 188.

³⁴ Shakespeare Library, Stratford-on-Avon: Misc. Docts. v, vii, xiv.

³⁵ Warwicks. R.O.: W13/1, Warwick Borough horse fairs, 1651-6, 1684-93.

³⁰ Also at Market Bosworth on 29 June 1627.

tween pastoral and arable regions, also catered for the needs of both. Good-quality horses were sold at Warwick, the average prices of the various types of horse sold there in 1651 being appreciably higher than those sold at Derby five years earlier. The fair supplied not only plough and cart horses but also light saddle horses. The felden areas of Warwickshire and Northamptonshire obtained geldings and horses, doubtlessly for similar purposes as those bought at Derby. The wood-pasture areas of Warwickshire and Worcestershire, such as the Forests of Arden and Feckenham, bought in not only young stock for rearing but also brood mares for breeding and for use as draught animals. Arden also supplied numerous horses that were sold at the fair, many having been over-wintered there and brought back for sale to buyers from the east Midlands. Inevitably, most of the business involved men from Warwickshire and the adjacent parts of Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire, but persons from the counties of Bedfordshire, Cheshire, Lincolnshire, Middlesex, Norfolk, Suffolk, and Yorkshire are also recorded in the toll books of 1651.

Stratford fair was similar to that of Warwick. If any difference can be discerned it is in the greater number of young stock that was sold there. A number of these young horses seem to have been brought to the fair by persons from the east Midlands, where there would have been less winter feed available than in wood-pasture areas of Worcestershire and Warwickshire. Both fairs supplied the neighbouring arable areas, although buyers from the east Midlands tended to go to Warwick, whilst people from the felden part of Worcestershire were more in evidence at Stratford.

IV

The development of a long-distance trade and the growth of fairs specializing in the sale of a certain type of horse were largely due to the rise of a specialist class of horse dealer. An examination of toll books of midlands fairs reveals that certain people were travelling around the area and attending a number of fairs

on a regular basis. It is clear that many of these people knew each other well, meeting one another on their annual round. This can best be illustrated by the numerous examples in the toll books of dealers standing vouchee for one another, even though they often lived miles apart. When John Maggs of Marston Bigott, Somerset, bought a brown mare from Robert Harrington of Whitechapel, London, at Warwick fair on 24 August 1688 he stated that he accepted the horse "with this voucher onley whom he knows". The vouchee, in fact, was William Harries of Old Bedlam, London, and while it is easy to see how he could have become acquainted with Robert Harrington, it is likely that he had come to know John Maggs through meeting him at various fairs around the country.

Such men were often acting in the capacity of middlemen, buying horses of a certain type at one fair and selling them at another. Many of the transactions at fairs, especially those involving long-distance traffic, took the form of exchanges between dealers. Bringing horses of one type to a fair, they would make an exchange for a horse of a different kind instead of receiving a straight cash payment. Of course, if a Derbyshire dealer, for instance, brought a large draught mare to Shrewsbury and exchanged it for a Border horse, the difference was made up in money.

Many horse dealers seem to have come into the trade through occupations which involved them with horses. Trade *with* horses naturally led to trade *in* horses.³⁶ A case in point is the Dabbs family of Atherstone, Bulkington, Hartshill, and Nuneaton in north-east Warwickshire, who travelled extensively around the midland fairs, buying and selling horses on a considerable scale. Between 1618 and 1656 various members of the family are recorded at Derby, Market Bosworth, Nottingham, Shrewsbury, Stratford, and Warwick fairs, in fact in almost every toll book of midland fairs in the early seventeenth century. In this period they bought at least 114 horses and sold 106. Arthur Dabbs of Atherstone was classed at

³⁶ Chartres, *loc. cit.*, p. 82.

different times as a yeoman, chapman, and butcher. John, another butcher, came from the neighbouring parish of Bulkington, as did Arthur Dabbs, senior. Samuel Dabbs of Nuneaton was variously described as a silk-weaver, yeoman, and chapman. A relation also lived on the Strand in London: Samuel Dabbs was a mealman, and is recorded in company with other members of the family at Stratford on 24 September 1646 and at Derby on 7 May 1647.

Butchers elsewhere were involved in other activities which necessitated the buying and selling of horses. In the first half of the seventeenth century a group of butchers from Newport, Shropshire, were acting as wool merchants,³⁷ collecting parcels of the fine March wool from local farmers, and taking them to the wool staplers who had established themselves in the area.³⁸ The Robson and Boycott families, in particular, combined their trade with that of wool merchants and horse dealers, and regularly visited Shrewsbury to buy horses and cattle.

William Frizwell of Bedworth, Warwickshire, was listed in the Kidderminster toll books³⁹ as both butcher and chapman. Four other members of the family were regularly recorded in the toll books of Dudley,⁴⁰ Kidderminster, and Warwick at the turn of the seventeenth century, John Frizwell being specifically called a "horse squarser" in the Kidderminster book for the fair held on 24 August 1705. Apart from the Frizwell family, other notable dealers from Bedworth who appear regularly in toll books of midland fairs are Humphrey Hanbury, Luke Bradbury, Thomas Liddell, and William Satchell. The Bedworth area by this date had become a noted mining centre, and supplied large quantities of coal to Coventry and further afield. The coal was transported overland, and it is reasonable to assume that the large number of references to Bedworth men in the books

was due to their involvement in the coal industry, supplying horses not only as pack animals but also to work gins and other equipment.

These examples show that horse dealing was not only often combined with the pursuit of another occupation but also frequently a family tradition. Various members of the Rocke family of north Worcestershire and south Staffordshire were frequently to be seen at Shrewsbury at the end of the sixteenth century and beginning of the seventeenth. Between 1585 and 1626 thirteen members of the family living in the three industrial parishes of Old Swinford in Worcestershire, and Kingswinford and Rowley Regis in Staffordshire are recorded in the toll books there, and it is evident that more than one generation is represented. They are mainly classified as chapmen, and their concern seems to have been to supply the mining and metal-working industries of their home area with work-horses. Between the two dates they are listed as buying 321 horses and selling a further 32.

One member of the family, John Rocke, a chapman of Rowley Regis, made his will on 3 September 1609, and this document shows his involvement with the horse trade.⁴¹ To his eldest son, Roger, he left

all my furniture belonging to my horses with two of the best horses or mares that he can choose amongst any horessces [*sic*] within one week after my death with sufficient hay to winter them and also all the debts I have owing unto me in whose hands soever they be.

Roger, however, did not long outlive his father. At an unknown date later in 1609 or early in 1610 he made his own will, leaving to his younger brother, Thomas, "the worst of my two horessces which my father gave me."⁴²

The toll books also reveal the existence of groups of horse dealers living in one, often closely defined, area. Such factors as easy access to the regional fairs and good communications

³⁷ Staffs. R.O.: Sutherland Colln., D593/J/16.

³⁸ P. J. Bowden, *The Wool Trade in Tudor and Stuart England*, 1971, p. 81.

³⁹ Kidderminster Borough Lib.: horse toll book, 1693-1711.

⁴⁰ Dudley Borough Lib.: horse toll book, 1702-8.

⁴¹ Worcs. R.O.: Wills 1609/87.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1609/152.

were obviously important. One group of dealers lived in a block of parishes adjoining Watling Street on the north-eastern border of Warwickshire. The Dabbs family, already referred to, formed part of this group. John Alcock, a chapman from Wolvey, was another dealer who travelled to a number of midland fairs. On 29 June 1632 he sold a mare at Market Bosworth, and twelve years later he is recorded at Stratford on 14 and 24 September where he sold 14 mares, 2 fillies, 1 foal, 4 colts, and 1 gelding, obtaining a colt in return for one of the mares. John obtained many of his horses at Derby and Shrewsbury, for he is regularly listed in the toll books as having bought animals there.

Dealers from this area were by far the most numerous group from Warwickshire at the Derby and Market Bosworth fairs. Between 1639 and 1649 dealers from a contiguous group of parishes stretching from Merevale to Monk's Kirby were involved in three-quarters of both the sales and purchases of Warwickshire men at Derby (73.7 per cent and 75.4 per cent respectively). They were not so dominant at Shrewsbury fair, but apart from John Alcock and the Dabbs family men such as Thomas Watson of Hurley were regular attenders here, as at Derby and Market Bosworth. Not surprisingly, they were also much in evidence at the Warwickshire fairs of Stratford and Warwick.

Gentry families sometimes made use of horse dealers. The accounts of the Leveson family's estate at Lilleshall in Shropshire record that in February 1677 Thomas Rowley of Preston-upon-Wealdmoors twice accompanied the estate agent, Thomas Wickstead, to Benthall to view Mr Benthall's grey horse: after all, they were paying £57 for the animal.⁴³ In general, however, such families used their own servants to buy and sell horses for them. The Levesons used Robin Parkes in this capacity. In 1674 he was out for a week when he travelled to Lenton fair, near Nottingham, with two horses, one of which was sold for £15 10s.⁴⁴ The estate

accounts record that on 6 September 1676 he paid in £18, the surplus from the sale of a bay gelding at Penkridge fair after £16 had been expended on a grey horse.⁴⁵ He was also present at fairs there in 1675 and 1678, although it is not known what transactions were made on these occasions.⁴⁶ In 1676 he also journeyed into Radnorshire on his master's business, and bought a bay stallion there for £26 1s. 6d.⁴⁷ Toll books, moreover, contain numerous references to servants who were acting on behalf of their masters. In the Penkridge toll book for 23 September 1640, Thomas Mason, a servant of John Stiles of the Bell, Smithfield, is recorded as having bought three bay geldings and one bay nag for £41 5s. It is interesting to note that the previous year, on 25 July, Thomas had been at the St James's Day fair at Derby where he had bought a bay gelding and a bay nag for £19.

The reference relating to Thomas Rowley⁴⁸ is also a reminder that a considerable proportion of all transactions did not take place at markets or fairs. Edward James was a grazier and horse breeder living in the parish of Penkridge, Staffordshire. Between 1692 and 1710 his farm accounts record that whereas he bought, sold or exchanged nineteen horses at various fairs, his private deals involved fifty-one horses.⁴⁹ Edward James bred and dealt in good-quality horses, but more humble animals were sold privately as well. When Richard Wells of Wem, Shropshire, made his will on 10 December 1602, the debts he recorded include £7 4s. 8d. for three mares that he had sold to three of his fellow parishioners.⁵⁰ Geoffrey Higginson was granted particularly easy terms, being allowed to pay the £2 6s. he owed in instalments of 1s. per week.

Horse dealers belonged to a growing community of wayfarers, an increasingly important section of society from the late sixteenth century onwards. By the opening of the seven-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, D593/F/2/8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, D593/F/2/8; D593/F/2/11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, D593/F/2/8. ⁴⁶ *Supra*, p. 98.

⁴⁷ Staffs. R.O.: HM 27/3, farm accounts of Edward James, 1692-1710.

⁴⁸ Lichfield Joint R.O.: 18 May 1603, Wem.

⁴³ Staffs. R.O.: Sutherland Colln., D593/F/2/38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, D593/F/2/6.

teenth century such people had established a distinct identity, holding particular ideas and attitudes that to a large extent were different from those of settled society of town and village.⁵¹ Horse dealers, in particular, had acquired a popular reputation for untrustworthiness, and in this respect the comparison between them and modern second-hand-car dealers is quite apt. In 1659 the Secretary of State, Sir Edward Nicholas, wrote to the Marquis of Newcastle concerning some horse dealers:

for itt is two professions, a good horse-man, and a horse-courser. I pretende to the firste, but knowe nothinge of the seconde, for Ile cosen no bodye. I only take care nott to be cosende, which they finde I can doe reasonably well att thatt.⁵²

Horse stealing was widespread in spite of its being a capital offence. Thieves often went to great lengths to disguise any distinguishing marks on stolen horses, painting on or obliterating blazes and stockings as the need arose. Some Derbyshire dealers, suspected as horse thieves, were tried at the Staffordshire Quarter Sessions in 1608–9. The record relates that

they could give no reckoning, how, or where, or of whom they bought them, being indeed riff-raff horses not fit for horse coursers to traffic withall in any fair or market . . . [they had previously brought horses but] they have not sold them in any fair or market openly, but in the pastures and fields where they go, and have had divers chapmen secretly to receive them at their hands, who almost are ill as the horse stealers themselves. . .⁵³

Stolen horses, however, were taken to fairs to be sold. In 1615 David Jones, a shoemaker from "Pulseloid" in Denbighshire (described as "a short well trust fellowe somewhat pale faced wth a little blacke beard, a notorious theefe, and a great horsestealer"), was imprisoned in

Stafford after having tried to sell a gelding at Penkridge fair. The horse belonged to a Dr Williams of Ruthin, Denbighshire, and at the time of the theft had been tied to a door in the street along with other horses.⁵⁴

V

No discussion of economic activity in the seventeenth century can fail to mention the impact of the Civil War on the flow of trade. The movement of livestock around the country was particularly hampered, and this fact is brought out very clearly in the toll books. At Derby 360 horses are recorded as having been sold in 1639, and 290 in 1642, the year that war broke out. In 1643 and 1644 the numbers declined to 36 and 43 respectively. In 1643 one or two people from distant towns are listed, although, of course, their presence at Derby may have been due to other causes. In 1644, however, the furthest that anyone ventured was only from north-east Worcestershire. Many of the regular dealers seem to have avoided the fair altogether, especially the large-scale dealers from Warwickshire, Leicestershire, and Northamptonshire. Trading began to pick up in 1645 with 169 horses sold, and in 1646 a record number of 701 horses were listed in the books.

Other fairs must have experienced a similar period of decline, followed by a subsequent improvement as the re-establishment of peace tempted people back on to the road. At Shrewsbury two additional fairs were granted in 1638, and the toll books for that year record the sale of more horses than for any year since 1616. After this, however, nothing is known until 1646 when the run of toll books begins again. Shrewsbury was a royalist centre until its capture by Parliamentarians on 22 February 1645, but as much of the surrounding countryside was under increasing Parliamentary control and skirmishes were often taking place, disruption of trade was inevitable. On 16 May 1643 Lord Capel, the Royalist commander in Shropshire, Cheshire, and Wales, wrote from Whitchurch

⁵⁴ Staffs. R.O.: D1287/10/2, common place book of Matthew Craddock, 1614.

⁵¹ Everitt, *loc. cit.*, pp. 558–9, 562.

⁵² Sir G. F. Warner (ed.), *The Nicholas Papers* . . . , Camden Society, 3rd ser., xxxi, 1920, pp. 110–11.

⁵³ Joan Thirsk and J. P. Cooper (eds.), *17th Century Economic Documents*, Oxford, 1972, p. 331.

in north Shropshire to Sir Francis Ottley, governor of Shrewsbury, that

A large influx of people to the May fair from the surrounding country bringing horses, sheep, linen and woollen fabrics afforded a favourite opportunity for treachery or plunder. . .⁵⁵

Three days later Lord Capel wrote again to Sir Francis congratulating him on the care that he had taken on fair day and exhorting him to continue the good work.⁵⁶ None the less, the danger was ever present. Letters coming from Chester dated 7 August 1644 and recorded by *Mercurius Civicus* give an account of the activities of Colonel Mytton, the local parliamentary commander, in the area around Shrewsbury:

Colonel Mytton for the Parliamentarians lately faced Shrewsbury with his horse and with another party kept Montford Bridge and wheeled about the town with another party through Crow Meole and Brace Meole towards the Welsh Gate within three miles of Shrewsbury to Atcham Bridge where Colonel Hunte governor of Shrewsbury, lies and drove away many of his horses, calves, and sheep and did much to hinder Shrewsbury fair which was that day.⁵⁷

The war certainly disrupted the trade of markets and fairs. The merchant community was hardly likely to feel secure with reports of excesses, real or imaginary, the common talk of the market place. In 1643 Colonel Hastings, who was operating in Leicestershire, felt obliged to make a declaration forbidding looting by his troops, and threatening death to anyone who took horses, money, or goods to the value of 2d. in Leicestershire and Derbyshire. He assured the merchants that if they brought their goods into Leicester to sell, their horses would not be seized "as was lately done at

Derby to the grosse prejudice and terror of his Majesties subjects."⁵⁸

Conversely, whilst it is clear that the reduction in the number of horses recorded in the toll books of the war years represents a real decline in the trading activities of markets and fairs, the war must have stimulated the demand for horses. They were, obviously, needed in great numbers, and not just for the cavalry but also to carry supplies and munitions or to move ordnance. In this respect the war aided the expansion and diversification of the horse trade, for even if many of the horses were acquired as spoils of war the armies could only have obtained a regular supply by dealing more honestly with horse breeders and dealers. Indeed, the absence of such men from the toll books during these years could indicate that they were dealing directly with the armies.

VI

Taking the seventeenth century as a whole, the overall picture for the horse trade was one of growth and diversification. Horses were being used in greater numbers over a wider range of activities, and the insistent and varied demand made horse breeding a profitable occupation in many rural communities. As the market became more diverse, and the types of horses sold more varied, the prices charged widened, as did the range of customers to be catered for. Horse dealers, travelling extensively around the country, were largely instrumental in supplying the growing differentiation in demand by buying, selling, and exchanging horses with one another at the different fairs. Many of these men had come into the trade through an occupation that involved them with horses, often as carriers, and this enabled them to see the potentialities of an expanding and more discriminating market. These dealers were, in fact, acting in the capacity of middlemen, the growth of whom was similarly affecting the marketing of many other commodities, and was the inevitable result of the growth of specialization and organization of the market on a regional and national basis.

⁵⁸ Derby C.R.O.: D803M/Z9, fols. 47-8.

⁵⁵ W. Phillips (ed.), "The Ottley Papers relating to the Civil War", pt 1, *Trans. Shrops. Arch. Soc.*, VII, 1895, p. 320.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Phillips (ed.), *loc. cit.* VIII, 1896, p. 245.