

Horses and Equine Improvement in the Economy of Modern Wales

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Abstract

This article attempts to review the importance of the horse to the economy of modern Wales and in considering the various regional types, provides some indication of the efforts made towards equine improvement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries both by the various agricultural organizations and officially-sponsored bodies. The introduction of English breeds at the expense of the genetic improvement of local stock, the economic uncertainty of horsebreeding, the unwillingness of smaller farmers to pay realistic stud fees and an obsession with the improvement of male at the expense of female lines, restricted the extent of improvements of both saddle and draught animals. By the time organizations like the RASE, the Hunters' Improvement Society and the Royal Commission on Horsebreeding had begun to make some impact, the urban horse in Wales and elsewhere was sinking into decline. The horse, nevertheless, remained the principal power unit on Welsh farms until the end of the Second World War.

As Celia Fiennes bumped and jolted her way across England and Wales in the last decade of the seventeenth century, an odyssey she recommended to all and sundry as a cure for the vapours and for laziness, she testified to the absolute importance of horses in providing the motive power fuelling the production and distribution side of the developing economy. Horses were everywhere and, if Gregory King was right, in the order of 1.2 million equines of various descriptions laboured throughout the land.¹ Miss Fiennes, with her unquenchable thirst for facts, found horses operating pumps in the coal-mines of Flint, carting corn in Devonshire, shifting lime and dung in the Lake District, and hauling cloth in Exeter, among a multitude of other tasks.² In many parts of England, and along the eastern fringes of Wales, considerable advances were being made in road infrastructure, enabling the development of a network of public carrying services and stimulating improvements in agricultural transport so

that a bewildering variety of regional carts and waggons came into being.³ John Taylor's *The Carriers' Cosmography* of 1637 had identified well-established long distance haulage routes linking the provinces with London and as the country carrying trade developed, so remote villages became more closely associated with contiguous country towns and thereby with the capital.⁴

Yet in the more remote reaches of the realm, age-old transport methods persisted. If Elizabeth I's progresses around the country required the services of no less than four hundred cart teams (a fact which must have appalled her hosts), the vast majority of agricultural and manufactured articles from the uplands of England and most of Wales continued to be transported by packhorses as had been the case in medieval times.⁵ In a region where topography and road conditions were unsuited to large wheeled vehicles, the teams of packhorses traversing

¹ J Thirsk, ed, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, V(II), 1640-1750*, Cambridge, 1985, p 446.

² C Morris, ed, Celia Fiennes, *The Journeys*, 1947, *passim*.

³ J A Chartres, 'Road Carrying in England in the Seventeenth Century; Myth and Reality', *Econ Hist Rev* 2nd ser, XXX, 1977, p 87; S Porter, 'Farm Transport in Huntingdonshire, 1610-1749', *Jour Trans Hist* 3rd ser, III, 1982, p 35.

⁴ A Everitt, 'Country Carriers in the Nineteenth Century', *Jour Trans Hist* 2nd ser, III, 1975-6, p 179.

⁵ See G Edelen, ed, William Harrison, *The Description of England*, New York, 1968, pp 305-7.

the ubiquitous packhorse ways and packhorse bridges were valuable commodities which owners were careful to maintain in good order without undue stress or overwork. The organization and operation of the packhorse train varied little from the reign of Edward I until well into the nineteenth century when packhorse haulage was still widely used in Wales. Led by one sagacious animal equipped with a set of bells to give warning of its approach along the narrow lanes, the packhorse train comprised between six and thirty animals and since each carried from two to four hundred weights depending on its size, substantial volumes could be reliably and efficiently transported.⁶ The general dealer, the builder, the timber merchant, the lead mine operator and even the undertaker made extensive use of the packhorse or the horse litter in both the uplands and lowlands of Wales. When the farmer occupying the remote holding of Nantstalwyn near Abergwesyn, Brecknockshire was poisoned by his servants in 1770 his corpse was conveyed to Abergwesyn churchyard by horse litter, supposedly drawn by his own bay gelding which had previously carried him to church each Sunday.⁷ If packhorse trains and other forms of non-wheeled transport were used primarily for the haulage of merchandise, their owners were quite prepared to carry passengers, and many a stalwart sprig of the Welsh gentry was deposited at Shrewsbury School after what must have been an extremely uncomfortable journey on the back of a packhorse.⁸

In essence, pre-nineteenth-century travellers in Wales managing to avoid the packhorse, or a ponderous and backbreaking

journey by ox-cart, either bought their own saddle horse or hired one. The records of the borough of Haverfordwest frequently identify payments by sixteenth-century officials for the hire of horses for borough business, while as late as 1801 the proprietors of the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal had recourse to hiring horses for carrying the accounts to meetings up and down South Wales.⁹ At much the same time the owners of the Hook Colliery in Pembrokeshire were attempting to curtail expenditure on horse hire for general coalfield work by exploring the possibility of taking on land to rear their own animals. This measure, they estimated, would save the enterprise £100 each year.¹⁰ Thoughts of economy were probably uppermost in the minds of the shareholders of the Montgomeryshire Canal who operated no less than forty-four complexes of waterside stables, haybarns and smithies to serve the horses dragging barges up the canal.¹¹ Similar examples, illustrating the vital role of the horse in virtually every aspect of economic life, could be quoted *ad infinitum*, possibly culminating in a brief, but honourable, mention of the 15-hand pit pony 'Star' which recently retired after a career of almost two decades working in the noisome environs of the Llanelli sewage works.¹²

Horses, of every size and shape, colour and conformation, nature and temperament, were bred, reared, broken and managed on the Welsh farm, and if horse breeding for draught and saddle purposes was a less important contributor to farm income than the production of ruminant livestock, it nevertheless constituted an important supplementary enterprise. In so doing it provided incidental benefits in the form of employment for saddlers, farriers, iron suppliers and coopers, not to mention

⁶ G Lloyd, 'Flintshire Bridges', *Flint Hist Soc Pubs* 17, 1957, p. 82. In *The Woodlanders* Thomas Hardy gives a vivid description of the timber merchant Melbury's team decked out in their full regalia: 'The horses wore their bells that day. There were sixteen to the team, carried on a frame above each animal's shoulders, and tuned to scale, so as to form two octaves, running from the highest note on the right or off-side of the leader to the lowest on the left or near-side of the shaft-horse'. (Penguin Books edn. p. 142).

⁷ *Arch Camb*, Ser IV, (3), 1858, p. 111.

⁸ *Ibid*, Ser VII (4), 1924, pp. 210-11.

⁹ NLW, Maybery 1190; B G Charles, ed, *Calendar of the Records of the Borough of Haverfordwest 1539-1660*, Cardiff, 1967, *passim*.

¹⁰ NLW, Owen and Colby 2276.

¹¹ S Hughes, *The Archaeology of the Montgomeryshire Canal*, RCAM, 1987, p. 82.

¹² H Davies, *Looking around Llanelli*, Llanelli, 1985, p. 123.

a legion of purveyors of curious equine medicines and a great many dealers in horses. Whether Welsh or English or a mixture of the two, the horse dealers formed part of an important social substratum whose members traded in horses of every description. Even before Defoe had commended the excellence of Welsh horses and noted their popularity in England, trans-border trading had been common and hundreds, if not thousands of the small, sturdy animals from the border counties were annually traded by dealers in the fairs of Shrewsbury, Chester and elsewhere.¹³ Being a somewhat clannish fraternity with their own secret ways born of generations of orally-transmitted equine lore, the horse dealers (or 'jockeys') enjoyed a less than pristine reputation. The garrulous and witty William Harrison (who was probably one of the very few Elizabethan writers effectively to describe how common people viewed common events and occurrences) had no doubt whatsoever about horse dealers, maintaining that '... an honest-meaning man shall have very good luck among them if he be not deceived by some false trick or another ...'.¹⁴ And little changed over the next three hundred years so that the inimitable R S Surtees could still malign the generality of horse dealers by describing them as '... dirty shirted, slobbering, baggy-breeched, slangey-gaitered fellows, with the word "gin" indelibly printed on their faces'.¹⁵ However much the dealer may have been distrusted, and in the vast majority of cases quite unjustifiably so, his role was of major significance in the development of trade both locally and nationally.

Insofar as the gentry required horses for riding on day-to-day business and for drawing their carriages, they were active

contributors to the farm economy and the ancillary equine trades. Before 1560 there was hardly a coach to be seen in Britain, yet by the end of Elizabeth's reign, during which British coachmakers had begun to copy Hungarian and Bohemian models, most country houses of significance maintained a coach of one description or another.¹⁶ A coach became the supreme symbol of status and *amour-propre*, and regardless of the condition of the roads and the discomfort involved in wheeled travel before the invention of the leaf spring, a gentleman moving from his Welsh fastness to his London home would generally do so in his coach. The Herberts of Chirbury, for generations interested in horsebreeding, regularly bred, bought and sold coach horses in the seventeenth century, and when Lord Herbert discovered £47 which he had thought he had lost in the house at Lymore, he immediately went out to buy 'six black coach mares'.¹⁷ Travelling frequently to London and Oxford, the Myddletons of Chirk, anxious to be well turned-out, equipped themselves with part-bred Arab horses to draw the family coach, which was built in London in 1719.¹⁸ As time went by everyone who was anyone had his coach built to his own specifications, panelled with varnished mahogany, upholstered in the finest leather, and emblazoned with arms, crests and coronets according to the owner's status. The Earls of Powys, who invariably travelled in the grand manner, incurred expenditure amounting to several hundreds of pounds annually for renovation of their various carriages, phaetons and gigs, and in 1785 the Earl bought a new coach from the London builders Wright Lukin and Company, receiving, in part exchange, £161 10s for an old coach, a *vis-à-vis* and a phaeton.¹⁹ On a rather more

¹³ P R Edwards, 'The Horse Trade of the Midlands in the Seventeenth Century', *Ag Hist Rev*, 27, (ii) 1979, pp 90-1; D Defoe, *A Tour through the whole Island of Great Britain*, 1971 edn, p 383.

¹⁴ Edelen, *op cit*, p 17.

¹⁵ R S Surtees, *Mr Sponge's Sporting Tour*, Everyman edn, p 10.

¹⁶ 'Yet there had been knights, and lords, and gentlemen', said Mistress Quickly 'with their coaches - I warrant you, coach after coach'. *Merry Wives of Windsor* II, ii 60).

¹⁷ W J Smith, ed, *Herbert Correspondence*, Cardiff, 1963, p 364.

¹⁸ NLW, Chirk E 1249.

¹⁹ NLW, Powys Castle 20595-6.

modest scale, the stable inventory for Nanteos in Cardiganshire reveals that in 1865 family travelling facilities included one open carriage, two Broughams, three dog carts, a pony carriage, a clarence, a chariot, and a basket cart; not to mention four Bath chairs for Colonel Powell.²⁰ The five carriage horses also mentioned in the Nanteos inventory may well have been Irish Draught animals which, by the early nineteenth century, were being regularly shipped from Wexford to Hobbs Point in Pembrokeshire for use as carriage horses.²¹ Indeed, Irish horses crossed with local animals to produce saddle horses had probably been used by the gentry for generations in view of the well-established equine trade between the south of Ireland and Milford Haven from the sixteenth century.²²

I

Since the so-called laws of Hywel Dda had set the value of a destrier (war-horse) at £1, a palfrey at 60d, a sumpter at 40d and a wild horse at 40d, horses had been valued items in the Principality.²³ Nevertheless in Hywel's time, and for centuries beyond, oxen formed the main source of tractive power on the farm and it was not until the seventeenth century that the horse, with its greater speed and flexibility, came to be used with increasing frequency as a farm draught animal. It was the expanding demand for horses both for farm and commercial purposes that prompted George Owen of Henllys to suggest that whatever the deficiencies of horses in Pembrokeshire ('more by negligence of gentlemen than from anie other urgent cause') men might well keep a stud of breeding mares which, '... yeldeth more proffitt than anie other Cattle of that number, and of like chardge'.²⁴

But the increased use of horses by no means brought about the eclipse of the ox. Horses came to be preferred for long-distance haulage, harrowing and other light draught farm tasks, yet the ox, docile and cheap to maintain, remained firmly yoked to the plough. As late as the 1790s oxen were still used for ploughing in Carmarthenshire, Glamorgan and Pembrokeshire, either solely or in combination with a horse team. In the latter county both species worked together in carrying coal to the coast, while in Radnorshire, whatever the recognized advantages of oxen, farms were obliged to keep horses to undertake the long-distance chore of hauling culm and limestone to the holding.²⁵

According to the Report of the Royal Commission on Land in Wales and Monmouthshire of 1896, 'The love of horseflesh is a characteristic of the race'.²⁶ Yet we have virtually no account of the regional varieties of horses in Wales before the mid- to late eighteenth century. Between Giraldus Cambrensis' remarks that the Welsh rode into battle on 'swift mettlesome horses' and the Reports of the Board of Agriculture's surveyors in the 1790s, there is little critical comment of real value.

North Wales and Montgomeryshire

Richard Myddleton of Chirk was a man of ample proportions. In 1725 his agent, David Williams, was sent off to scour Anglesey and Caernarvonshire for a suitable mount for his master, only to return with the news that the horses 'in this upper country are too low and few good and handsome'.²⁷

²⁰ NLW, Nanteos (unnumbered).

²¹ NLW, Dolaucothi L 4246.

²² E A Lewis, ed, *Welsh Port Books, 1550-1603*, 1927, pp 178-9.

²³ D Jenkins, *The Law of Hywel Dda*, Gomer, 1986, p 172.

²⁴ H Owen, ed, *The Description of Pembrokeshire by George Owen of Henllys*, Lord of Kemes, 1892, p 148.

²⁵ C Hassall, *General View of the Agriculture of Carmarthenshire*, 1794, p 18; G Fox, *General View of the Agriculture of Glamorgan*, 1796, p 7; C Hassall, *General View of the Agriculture of Pembrokeshire*, 1794, p 19; J Clark, *General View of the Agriculture of Radnorshire*, 1794, p 21. The relative roles of horses and oxen in earlier periods have been considered in a number of distinguished publications by John Langdon, notably his highly stimulating, *Horses, oxen and technological innovation: the use of draught animals in English farming from 1066 to 1500*, Cambridge, 1986.

²⁶ RCLWM, 1896, p 742.

²⁷ NLW, Chirk E 626.

Conformational inadequacy and smallness of stature had long been a feature of the horse population of North Wales. Commissioners of Array operating on behalf of the Council in the Marches of Wales in the late sixteenth century had consistently reported 'default and lack of horses and geldings'. On Anglesey, lamented the local sheriff as the Spanish Armada sailed towards Britain, '... founde we no geldings at all meete for the s'vice of her ma'tie', and again in 1660 William Mostyn, Archdeacon of Bangor, held that the northern region of the Principality 'does not produce many horses of the stature required'.²⁸ To eighteenth- and nineteenth-century observers, fitness for draught and saddle purposes were the principal criteria in judging horseflesh, and however much they might value the hardiness of the North Wales pony, they universally condemned its lack of size and scope, so that even on the thin soils of Anglesey three to five horses in line astern were required for shallow ploughing.²⁹ If lack of judicious selection within the native breeds had been largely responsible for the general decline in size, preventing Flintshire packhorses engaged in hauling coal to Chester from carrying more than one hundredweight apiece, unsatisfactory management practices had aggravated the situation.³⁰ Promiscuous breeding among the hill ponies of Merioneth had led inexorably to 'deformity and further diminution in size', while the tradition of putting horses to hard labour at two years old was prejudicial to their subsequent growth. On Anglesey, inadequate fences and walls meant that horses had to be hobbled from a very early age and hence, '... their natural gait and shape must

necessarily be changed . . . into awkwardness and deformity'.³¹

Contemporary pundits, ignoring the importance of selection within local types to exploit local environmental conditions, steadfastly believed that the panacea for these evils was to introduce large, improved English stock. In Flintshire, explained Kay, the gentry and 'better sort of farmers' had brought in English horses of between 15 and 16 hands. In neighbouring Caernarvonshire, however, where men had introduced Thoroughbred blood in the hope of breeding hunters out of local animals, they had succeeded only in producing animals suited neither to draught nor saddle use.³² Attempts to convert the Welsh mountain pony into a 15-hand animal, originally conceived in the sixteenth century and long since abandoned, were fundamentally misguided. The nutritional regime prevailing on the upland farm was simply unsuited to sustaining large horses which, incidentally, would have been of little value in working such farms. With careful husbandry and management, native animals could have been produced to a size commensurate with their genetic capacity, and doubtless this occurred on some farms. Indeed, had crossing with English stock taken place to anything like the extent suggested by the Board of Agriculture's reporters, the tough hill pony, capable of sustaining a hard day's work on a modest diet, would have been doomed.

Montgomeryshire stands alone in the context of the history of horsebreeding in Wales. The native ponies, for centuries known as 'merlins', ran virtually wild on the hills until they were rounded up at three years old, broken, and sold in the periodic local fairs whence many found their way to the coal-mines of south Wales, while others, '... unrivalled in the agility with which they climb the slippery ascents of the

²⁸ R Flenley, ed, *The Register of the Council in the Marches of Wales, 1569-1591*, 1916, pp 55-72; E Gwynne Jones, 'An Anglesey Muster Book, 1574', *Ang Ant Soc and Field Club Trans*, 1946, pp 35-6; B E Howells, ed, *A Calendar of Letters relating to North Wales*, Cardiff, 1967, pp 145-6.

²⁹ G Kay, *General View of the Agriculture of Anglesey*, 1794, p 27.

³⁰ *Idem*, *General View of the Agriculture of Flint*, 1794, p 21.

³¹ W Davies, *General View of the Agriculture of North Wales*, 1810, p 373.

³² G Kay, *General View of the Agriculture of Caernarvonshire*, 1794, p 19.

mountains', hauled wool and cloth in the border towns. Although most wild and semi-wild herds were confined to the upland country bordering the Berwyns by the 1850s, they continued to provide a steady supply of pit ponies for the burgeoning coalfields.³³

The lowlands of Montgomeryshire played host to an entirely different class of horses. A number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers drew attention to the local type, generally between 15 and 16 hands and black or bay in colour, which, if too light of bone for ploughing, was much prized for waggon and carriage work as far afield as Liverpool and Manchester.³⁴ Despite generations of outbreeding, the heavy Montgomeryshire animals had probably originated from the royal stud at Caersws, established in the mid-sixteenth century with the object of breeding large, tractable horses for military purposes under the terms of Henry VIII's various legislative measures.³⁵ Around 1540 it had been proposed that the park of Caersws, together with the farms of Penprise, be reserved and fenced for the King's use, a task which could be accomplished at little cost since there was 'a great plenty of oke'.³⁶ The officers drawing up the proposal outlined arrangements for the maintenance of 100 mares and 10 stallions of suitable size in the newly fenced park, and set out detailed instructions for the dispersal of their progeny. Like all emparkments the Caersws project did not proceed uncontested, with men of the mettle of the chronicler Oliver Mathews complaining of the '... given awaie of the parkes of Caerouse from the burgesses to keep the King's breeding mares'.³⁷

Remonstrate as they might, locals and others could not prevent the venture from going ahead, and when Elizabeth I granted the manor of Arwystli to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester in 1571, the Caersws stud was in operation. Significantly, Dudley's predecessor was William, Earl of Pembroke, Master of the Horse, who had probably held Arwystli on condition that he maintain the royal breeding stock.³⁸ The enthusiasm with which Dudley's henchmen discharged their duty is open to question since William Harrison was prompted to note in 1577 that however successful the King's 'noble studderie' had been in the past, 'the officers, waxing weary, procured a mixed brood of bastard races, whereby his good purpose came to little effect'.³⁹ Nevertheless, when the Montgomeryshire District Entire Horse Association set about improving local draught horses in the later nineteenth century, they were working with animals directly and collaterally descended from the royal foundation stock, which had steadily improved on the lush pastures and heavy soils of lowland Montgomeryshire.

South Wales

From the horsebreeding standpoint, South Wales shared many of the drawbacks of the northern counties. Farms were predominantly small, so that in most cases their occupiers could not afford to devote much attention to the exacting and time-consuming business of horsebreeding, preferring instead to direct most of their efforts towards the production of cattle and sheep. Setting aside the usual problem of ignorance and indifference to the importance of selective breeding, the fact that ruminant stock took priority meant that nutritional provision for horses was, at the very least, basic, and often limited to the poorest hay, barley straw, chaff, and gorse. Even so, most

³³ Anon., 'Montgomeryshire Horses, Cobs and Ponies', *Mont. Coll.*, XXII, 1888, p. 19.

³⁴ Davies, (North Wales), *op cit*, p. 355; T Rowlandson, 'The Agriculture of North Wales', *JRASE*, Ser. i, 7, 1846, p. 582.

³⁵ 27 Hen. VIII, c. 6, 1536; 32 Hen. VIII, c. 13, 1540. Details of this legislation are set out in R J Moore-Colyer, 'Horse Supply and the British Cavalry; a review, 1066-1900' (forthcoming, *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*).

³⁶ *State Papers (Domestic)*, Hen. VIII, vol VII, 1574.

³⁷ Anon, *Mont Coll.*, XVI, 1863, p. 163.

³⁸ *Calendar of Letters Patent*, 1571.

³⁹ Edelen, *op cit*, p. 48.

farmers kept some horses for farm work, more especially in localities where there was a ready demand for pack animals to carry coal from the newly-sunk pits to the shipping banks. In Llandeilo-Talybont (Glamorgan), for example, probate material for 1603 reveals that three-quarters of farmers bequeathing less than £20 kept between three and seven horses, typically owning 'two labouring horses, three mares and a colt'.⁴⁰

By the middle of the eighteenth century, many larger farmers in south Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Glamorgan became interested in producing crosses out of local horses by heavy draught stallions from Herefordshire which travelled the area in the breeding season.⁴¹ Concurrently Suffolk Punch stallions were working in Pembrokeshire to breed highly-favoured draught animals from mares of the old Pembrokeshire breed, predominantly a heavy-boned type of around 14 hands. Unfortunately, despite landlords' efforts to encourage their tenants by obtaining quality stallions for their use at subsidized stud fees, most preferred to make their own arrangements, which generally amounted to having a mare covered by any available sire provided his service fee were sufficiently low. The situation had changed very little by the end of the following century and the Report of the Royal Commission on Land in Wales and Monmouthshire could not avoid the conclusion that the general run of farmers completely disregarded the provenance, suitability or soundness of stallions.⁴²

Whereas standards of equine husbandry in Wales had steadily improved during the nineteenth century, *genetic* improvement of the heavier draught animal had lagged behind that of the saddle horse. For years those farmers who concerned themselves at all seriously with horsebreeding had gone

to some lengths to raise animals suited to the expanding market for hunter/carriage types. As early as 1770 numerous Thoroughbred stallions were finding their way to Glamorgan and Pembrokeshire where they covered local mares to produce hunters for the English shires. Even full-blooded Arabs had been imported, prompting Charles Hassall to observe with his customary sourness that their progeny out of local mares were '... a miserable race of under-sized feeble animals, that were not fit for any purpose whatsoever'.⁴³ However great may have been the financial benefit to individuals of producing hunters by Thoroughbred stallions out of strong, big-boned and active mares, the general effect on the Welsh draught horse was deleterious, more particularly when part-bred colts were themselves raised as stallions for breeding.⁴⁴ Thus, wrote the distinguished agriculturalist Clare Sewell Read in 1849, 'The old Welsh punch is much degenerated by injudicious crosses with high-bred animals, which makes them too light and delicate'.⁴⁵

This was a fundamental flaw in breeding policy. Where farmers were interested merely in producing Thoroughbred crosses they pursued what amounted to an almost blind faith in sire lines, and as they failed to improve female lines by selective breeding for conformation, size and action, the quality of native draught stock was bound to suffer, to the considerable advantage of Clydesdale breeders from Scotland and the north of England whose stock found a ready market in South Wales.⁴⁶ Accordingly, '... it is impossible to expect to breed valuable

⁴⁰ F Emery, 'West Glamorgan Farming, ca. 1580-1620', *NLW Journal*, 10, 1957, p 23.

⁴¹ Hassall (Carmarthenshire), *op cit*, p 18.

⁴² RCLWM, *Report*, pp 745-6.

⁴³ Hassall (Pembrokeshire), *op cit*, p 49.

⁴⁴ W B Wall, 'On the Agriculture of Pembrokeshire', *JRASE*, Ser II, XXIII, 1887, pp 78-9.

⁴⁵ C S Read, 'On the Farming of South Wales', *JRASE*, Ser I, X, 1849, p 142.

⁴⁶ RCLWM, *Report*, p 742. The relative success of Scots breeders of Clydesdales probably lay in the stimulus provided by the lucrative urban markets in the industrial zone of south-west Scotland. The Cleveland, also imported into Wales, was improved in response to the demand for both medium weight agricultural horses and hunters in the north-east of England.

horses from the undersized ill-shaped mares that are generally considered good to breed from, when they are unfit for any other purposes'.⁴⁷ Only by giving careful attention to improving the female side of the breeding equation and upgrading the environmental conditions under which young stock were kept might the equine profits of farmers be increased, an achievement which could be realized, maintained the Land Commission, 'at small cost'.⁴⁸

If the Land Commissioners reproached South Wales farmers for their inattention to the niceties of horsebreeding, they found little to complain of in Cardiganshire, home of the celebrated Welsh Cob. The foothills of the Mynydd Bach in mid-Cardiganshire had become the established base for the breed which had originally derived from a weight-carrying packhorse and subsequently developed into a versatile multi-purpose animal.

The reports in local newspapers of the numerous horse shows held in Cardiganshire and the adjoining counties in the later decades of the nineteenth century indicate, both in their length and detail, the widespread interest of the community in equine matters. The Newcastle Emlyn Entire Horse Show of April 1891 held, like other shows, at the beginning of the breeding season, attracted 'at least a thousand persons' and, 'at the conclusion of the show horses trotted up on the upper Cardigan road, attracting an immense number of spectators'. Even allowing for journalistic hyperbole, these shows were clearly events of considerable local importance both to those contemplating hiring the services of a stallion and to others who merely wished to pit their critical faculties against those of the judges. On this, and other occasions in the 1880s and 1890s, the small Thoroughbred class and the heavy horse classes were dominated by gentry-owned stallions,

whereas the cob classes were almost entirely the preserve of substantial tenant breeders. If the obsession with using the cheapest available sire had coarsened the cob type in earlier years, the reporter in *The Cardigan and Teifside Advertiser* was pleased to note that in 1891 at least, '... blood combined with strength and finer forms was the order of the day'.⁴⁹ There were, however, those who believed that repeated injections of Hackney and, more particularly, Thoroughbred blood, had resulted in excessive fineness of bone with the result that observers at the Newcastle Emlyn Show of 1900 were moved to compare the qualities of cobs in the 1870s with contemporaries and to conclude that '... it is regrettable that this valuable and most useful class of horses should degenerate'.⁵⁰

This problem was of major concern to the army remount officers attending horse shows in Cardiganshire and other cob-breeding areas of the Principality in the decade preceding the Great War. In his address to the guests at the dinner held at the close of the 1910 Teifside Horse Show, Major Ferrers of the Remount Department caused some unease when he criticized the breeders of cobs for allowing an excess of Hackney genes in their bloodlines. After all, he observed, a man riding a Hackney 'would get hold of the best cure possible for a torpid liver'. Other speakers responded by suggesting that not only was the Army's offer of a £7 premium to owners of cob sires suited to remount breeding derisory, but that the price paid by the War Office was far too low to encourage farmers to breed the heavier type of horse required. Besides, commented someone darkly, such was the inexorable trend towards the motor car that there was little future in horsebreeding, '... and only a few that were afraid of them would adhere to horse locomotion'.⁵¹ The following year the Remount Department

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 744-5.

⁴⁸ *Idem.*, p 743.

⁴⁹ *Cardigan and Teifside Advertiser*, 1 May, 1891.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 4 May, 1900.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6 May, 1910.

was represented by one Colonel Bridges who pronounced that horses in the cob classes were 'somewhat short of the type required', and suggested that it might be helpful if the Army were to send into Cardiganshire 'examples' of ideal officers' chargers, artillery horses, mounted infantry animals and the like for the benefit of breeders.⁵² As he descanted on the same theme in 1912, Bridges provided no indication as to whether the 'examples' had been despatched. Comparing the Welsh Cobs with the thick-set animals regularly imported from Ireland, he noted that for military purposes the former were still too light of bone to carry a heavily-equipped rider and to withstand what he described as 'a good deal of rattling about'. In so doing he conceded the point that the fixed price paid by the Army for remounts was hardly an incentive to farmers to go to the time, effort and expense of producing the ideal military saddle horse.⁵³

Breeders of Welsh Cobs and ponies had long been aware that they were operating in an environment devoid of any centrally-organized effort either to maintain type and quality or to set guidelines for future development.⁵⁴ If the creaming off of the best examples of the breed for Crimea service had led to some deterioration, infusions of high-stepping Hackney blood in the 1870s had supplemented the Thoroughbred (or even Arab) genes introduced at an earlier stage of breed development, to produce a breed distinguished for both saddle and driving work. The problem of 'overfiness', however, still remained and effectively excluded many animals, ideal in other respects, from the potentially lucrative army market. The Welsh Pony and Cob Society, established in 1901 after a preliminary meeting in London of interested breeders, turned its attention to this and other problems. In pursuing its objective of

the overall improvement of the breed and the establishment of a Stud Book, the Society built upon the sterling efforts of the Cardiganshire Horse Show Association to ensure that the Welsh Cob would develop into the animal with those qualities of courage, strength and resolution for which it is justly celebrated today.⁵⁵

II

Since classical times the breeding of horses had been the subject of much vigorous debate regarding the relative contributions of heredity and environment to the performance and quality of a foal. The notion that purity of blood transcended any other consideration in the achievement of the equine ideal was forcefully argued in the sixteenth century by the influential and prolific Gervase Markham, whose views were widely accepted.⁵⁶ Markham's near contemporary, Nicholas Morgan, in supporting the former's thesis, contributed further to the debate by venturing to suggest that there had been a general deterioration in equine quality since God had placed the perfect prototype in the Garden of Eden.⁵⁷ Despite William Osmer's total rejection of any consideration of 'blood' and pedigree in favour of the idea that the performance of horses was in essence a function of 'the mechanisms of their parts', few eighteenth-century contemporaries were prepared to accept that form was necessarily related to function.⁵⁸ The mystical notion of 'blood' continued to hold centre stage, and two years after Osmer's 'Dissertation' appeared, Richard Wall countered his arguments with the view that little of any value could be expected from the union of any but the

⁵² *Ibid.*, 5 May, 1911.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7 May, 1912.

⁵⁴ *Cambrian News*, 7 March, 1890.

⁵⁵ R Phillips, 'Fashions in Horseflesh', *Folk Life*, 5, 1967, pp 62-3.

⁵⁶ G Markham, *The Perfect Horseman*, 1599, p 4.

⁵⁷ N Morgan, *The Perfection of Horsemanship*, 1609.

⁵⁸ W Osmer, *A Dissertation on Horses*, 1756, pp 8-48.

finest animals and that purity of bloodlines was the sole basis of quality in horseflesh.⁵⁹

As it became clear to breeders that certain characteristics appeared to descend down the generations there arose the notion that whatever the direct evidence to the contrary, the lineage of a horse determined its quality. In pursuit of this argument, the fact that full brothers were frequently widely dissimilar in their performance was conveniently ignored, and in their obsession with pedigree, eighteenth-century horse breeders were inclined to close their minds to common sense and observation. John Lawrence put it rather more strongly, finding that the general run of horses in England and Wales were bred by men, '... the weight of whose knowledge of what they were about did not much oppress their brains'.⁶⁰ In a society dominated by the belief that social position was determined not merely by the possession of land and wealth, but also by an unbroken transmission of hereditary qualities from some obscure ancestor, it is hardly surprising that men should anthropomorphize the situation and advocate that horses be selected on the basis of pedigree for precisely the same reasons. Aristocratic and gentlemanly breeders of horses and cattle believed that their animals' bloodlines should be as pure as their own, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the *Stud Book*, *Coates' Herd Book*, and *Debrett* show many similarities of principle. In a sense, the genealogically-distinguished breeders of animals of fine bloodlines were ultimately celebrating themselves.⁶¹

With the notable exception of breeders of Thoroughbred racing animals, the generality of nineteenth-century British horsebreeders continued to pay scant regard to the selection of females, and since traditional lore held that the stallion had a stronger influence on the organization of the progeny than the mare, the latter was regarded as little more than a vessel to sustain the growth of the equine foetus. Understanding of the respective roles of the sexes in heredity was extremely limited. Even among the more distinguished agricultural writers prepared to concede some role to the female, there were those who held that the stallion contributed locomotive powers to the offspring, and the mare its digestive system, while the central nervous and brain systems derived from both parents in equal proportions.⁶² It came, then, as no surprise to most observers that the majority of brood mares were drawn from the ranks of the ancient, over-worked, and broken-winded, and used for breeding when 'old age or injury rendered them worth little for it'.⁶³ One mid-Victorian equine expert went so far as to aver that indifference to the selection of mares was responsible for the 'deformed and the misshapen dwarfs which are now ruining the once-prized native breed of English horses'.⁶⁴ The deep concern of the pundits at what they considered to be the ignorance of farmers/breeders was based upon the perception of a decline in the quality of British hunter/hackney horses and thus, more importantly, of animals suited to the requirements of the cavalry.

Securing sufficient cavalry remounts had been a continuing problem since the Napoleonic Wars and unlike several continental powers, British governments had taken little official action to maintain momentum in the production of part-bred cavalry horses, with the result that horse supply for the Crimean campaign had been

⁵⁹ R Wall, *Dissertation on the breeding of Horses upon Philosophical and Experimental Principles*, 1758 *passim*. This subject is discussed at considerable length in N Russell, *Like Engend'ring Like; Heredity and Animal Breeding in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, 1986.

⁶⁰ J Lawrence, *The History and Delineation of the Horse*, Albion, 1809, pp 232-3.

⁶¹ See H Ritvo, *The Animal Estate; The English and other creatures in the Victorian Age*, Harvard, 1987, p 45.

⁶² H Stephens, *The Book of the Farm*, II, 1851, pp 729-36.

⁶³ W Youatt, *The Horse*, 1831, p 30.

⁶⁴ E Mayhew, *Illustrated Horse Management*, Allen, 1864, p 427.

left entirely to the combined spirits of free enterprise and patriotism, with predictably disastrous consequences.⁶⁵ Action, it was felt, had to be taken to remove at least some of the uncertainty from the remount market, and more assiduous attention to the production of quality animals would go a long way towards achieving this objective. But advocates of a more rational approach to breeding conveniently (or so it seems) neglected any consideration of the economics of the English and Welsh farms on which these horses were to be produced. Horsebreeding, after all, was a chancy business and even if a farmer succeeded in producing a potentially valuable hunter, he would have to maintain that animal on his farm for three or four years before it was marketable, during which time it would absorb a good deal of food, time and effort. Little wonder then, that in most of the livestock regions of Britain, cattle and sheep had first call on the skills and attention of the farmers with horsebreeding remaining something of a backwater of low priority.⁶⁶ Depressed agricultural conditions in the 1820s and 1830s prompted many farmers to part with their best brood females, besides which a buoyant market for saddle mares, consequent on the growing fashion for gentlemen to ride mares as well as geldings, meant that the pool of young breeding stock began to shrink. This situation continued to give rise to concern throughout the century and was to be exacerbated in the depression of the 1880s and 1890s, when the need for economy forced many farmers to abandon the hunting field and to sell off their best mares to foreign buyers or even London cabmen. Henceforth the comfortable image of the sturdy British farmer riding to market on his hack or cob was a

thing of the past as farmers came increasingly to travel for business on the railways.⁶⁷

Cavalry remount officers or well-heeled hunting men were looking essentially for horses of sound constitution capable of carrying weight with endurance and speed. Such animals were normally produced from part-bred or pure cob type mares covered by a Thoroughbred stallion, care being taken to ensure that the dam carried sufficient bone to ensure that the offspring was not 'overfine'. Basically a simple procedure, hunter breeding was fraught with problems. To begin with, the farmer, were he in the weald of Kent or the uplands of Cardiganshire, required the services of a suitable Thoroughbred sire, usually obtained by arrangement with the owner of one of the numerous stallions travelling the counties in the breeding season.⁶⁸ Because most of the better Thoroughbred males remained at stud to cover mares for the turf, their travelling brethren were rarely of the same quality, often lacking in bone and substance, and by no means guaranteed free of hereditary defects. This apart, few farmers bothered to check the recorded performance of the sire's progeny in the Sporting Calendar or Stud Book, while they frequently ignored conformational defects so long as the services of these 'flashy-looking pampered stallions' could be obtained cheaply.⁶⁹ The prevailing, and misconceived, view that a potentially valuable foal could be obtained from the union of a very ordinary mare and a run-of-the-mill Thoroughbred sire was roundly condemned as '... a national loss as well as a national disgrace to a country hitherto famed all over the world for its breed of horses'.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ See R J Moore-Colyer, 'Horse Supply and the British Cavalry; a review, 1066-1900'.

⁶⁶ See J Burke, 'Breeding and Management of Horses on a Farm', *JRASE*, Ser I, V, 1845, p 508.

⁶⁷ Lord Ribblesdale, 'The Report of the Royal Commission on Horsebreeding', *JRASE* Ser III, I 1890, p 297.

⁶⁸ See C A Lewis, 'Premium and Travelling Stallions in Britain', *JRASE*, 145, 1984.

⁶⁹ W C Spooner, 'On Crossbreeding in Horses', *JRASE*, Ser II, I, 1865, p 157.

⁷⁰ Burke, *op cit*, p 510.

Something had to be done. The government, alarmed at the extraordinary efficiency of German cavalry mobilization in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, and concerned that the bulk of the horses used on the British army's autumn manoeuvres of 1872 were imported from Europe, established a House of Lords Committee under the chairmanship of Lord Rosebery to review the overall situation. In attributing the scarcity of cavalry horses to a combination of exports overseas, home demand from an increasingly affluent population, and the relative profitability of cattle and sheep on British farms, the Committee was able to come up with few recommendations. For all the voluminous evidence at its disposal, including positive ideas for establishing government studs along French lines, the Report of Rosebery's committee did little more than to suggest that the government might intervene by helping to subsidize stud fees, and to commend the local agricultural societies and farmers' clubs for their efforts towards equine improvement. Cardiganshire horsemen were singled out for particular praise, which probably came as something of a surprise in view of the traditional association of that county with agrarian inertia. Nevertheless the Committee lauded '... the simple and successful regulations of the Cardiganshire Agricultural Association which, with some modifications, might serve as a useful model for other societies'.⁷¹

With admirable, if occasionally misguided zeal, the various county agricultural societies in Wales had been actively promoting the breeding of horses since the closing decade of the eighteenth century. Meeting in the Golden Lion Hotel in Brecon where 'very good stalls for upwards of 50 horses' were available, the Brecknockshire Agricultural Society agreed in 1789 to offer a premium to the breeder of the best stallion of between four and six years old capable

of carrying sixteen stones weight. The premium was to be awarded on the strict understanding that the stallion remained in the county for twelve months to cover mares at 1 guinea per head, although it was not made clear by the Society whether it was the intention to sponsor sires suited to producing saddle, pack, or draught animals.⁷² As time went by, premiums came to be offered for more specific purposes. In 1791, for example, that select group of gentlemen meeting in the Bedford and Gray's Inn coffee-houses and calling themselves 'The Radnorshire Society', advertised a premium of 20 guineas to the man producing the best cart stallion in the Presteigne, Knighton and Radnor districts, preference in this case being given to the Suffolk Punch breed.⁷³ The latter was also actively promoted by other societies in the southern and eastern counties of Wales. The Brecknockshire Society, besides awarding a premium for Suffolk Punch stallions in 1810, concurrently offered a price of 10 guineas to any suitably qualified man prepared to live in Brecon for a year and to instruct the locals in the art of horse breaking.⁷⁴ By the early 1800s interest in improving draught horses was extended to other equine classes. Premia and silver cups were on offer to owners of brood mares (particularly non-Thoroughbred dams in foal to Thoroughbreds), and breeders of nags, ponies and, with heavy emphasis, Thoroughbred stallions. In sponsoring breeders, both agricultural societies and private individuals were keen to promote *local* initiative so that when Walter Maybery and Major Gwyn Holford offered silver cups to owners of quality brood mares in 1840 it was specified that these be residents of Brecknockshire.⁷⁵

⁷² H Edmunds, 'History of the Brecknockshire Society, 1755-1955', *Brycheiniog*, II and III, 1956-9, *passim*.

⁷³ NLW, 22416 C.

⁷⁴ Edmunds, 1956, *op cit*, p 104.

⁷⁵ NLW, Penpont Supp 1409.

⁷¹ *Select Committee of the House of Lords on Horses*, 1873.

That the hunter/hackney class was pre-eminent among the numerous horse classes at the agricultural shows held by the local societies reflected the role of the Thoroughbred stallion as the sire of weight-carrying offspring. Accordingly the gentry were encouraged to purchase blood horses and to foster their widespread use, while societies in Cardiganshire and Glamorgan were actively sponsoring Thoroughbred stallions in the 1830s and 1840s.⁷⁶ The promotion of Thoroughbred blood and the breeding of hunter-type horses suggest that serious horsebreeding in Wales before the mid-nineteenth century was essentially the preserve of the gentry and more substantial farmers, a fact clearly underlined by the published lists of winners of premia and silver cups offered by the county agricultural societies. The average working farmer with his cobs and ponies could scarcely afford to bother with the pursuit of premia even if he had the time to do so. In so far as he was at all impressed by the activities of the county societies, he was much more likely to take an interest in the financial incentives which they offered towards the improvement of sheep, cattle and turnips, farm products of more immediate relevance to earning his daily bread and securing his future well-being.⁷⁷

With the increasing democratization of the county societies and the growth of local farmers' clubs from the 1850s onwards, farmers themselves became more closely involved with horse improvement, and of the various premia on offer, a growing proportion were directed specifically towards tenants' horses. Typically, when the Pembrokeshire Farmers' Club met at Haverfordwest in September 1885 it agreed that among the annual prizes to be distributed would be one for the best four-year-old colt or filly hurdler, the bona fide

property of a tenant farmer.⁷⁸ Whereas farmers' clubs, masters of foxhounds and the remnants of the earlier county societies continued their attempts to encourage hunter breeding, the farmers' clubs in particular became increasingly concerned with the promotion of draught horses.

This they hoped to achieve by introducing the Shire Horse (for which a Stud Book was opened in 1878), in much the same way as the promoters of the Suffolk Punch generations earlier. It had long been the practice for landlords to hire draught sires for the use of their tenants at nominal stud fees, but from the 1870s onwards this practice began to wane as groups of tenants came to organize their own affairs. Sir Arthur Stepney and Lord Cawdor may well have won prizes from the Royal Agricultural Society for their importation of Clydesdale stallions to Glamorgan and Carmarthenshire, but it was the combined efforts of the more substantial tenant farmers that were to have the most significant impact on draught horse quality in the long term. By the 1880s farmers' groups in Anglesey and Pembrokeshire were hiring prize-winning Shire stallions for service in their respective counties, while the Carmarthenshire Shire Horse Society purchased the distinguished stallion 'Rosano' for 500 guineas in 1893. 'Rosano' plodded his way down the high-ways and byways of Carmarthenshire, covering members' mares at nominal fees and those of non-members at relatively modest cost. In like manner the Welshpool Entire Horse Association ensured that members had access to the finest possible blood when they hired 'Vulcan', winner of the London Shire Horse Show of 1889 and 1891. Costing the Association 1000 guineas for the 1894 season, 'Vulcan' covered 100 mares at 10 guineas each, as did 'Bury Victor Chief' another London champion winner which they hired for 800 guineas the following year. The clear success of this

⁷⁶ NLW, 15507 D; NLW, Lucas, 3239.

⁷⁷ See R J Moore-Colyer, 'Early Agricultural Societies in South Wales', *Welsh History Review*, 12 (4), 1985, pp 567-581.

⁷⁸ NLW, Picton Castle 4505.

enterprise was reflected in the high prices which members were able to obtain for colts and fillies bred by these champion sires from home-produced mares.⁷⁹

In like manner the landowners and larger farmers of Cardiganshire sought to improve the quality of draught horses in the county. Recognizing, as did their colleagues elsewhere, that overall draught efficiency would be enhanced if two heavier animals could replace three lighter beasts between the shafts, they looked beyond the county for appropriate sires.⁸⁰ With this objective, and that of reducing the incidence of inbreeding, the Cardiganshire Horse Show Association, established in 1872, brought in numerous Clydesdale stallions which travelled the county and dominated the heavy classes in local shows for the remainder of the century.⁸¹ After merging with the Cardiganshire Agricultural Society in 1877, the Show Association began to offer annual premiums of £50 to owners of travelling stallions suited to covering local mares for producing potential draught offspring. Besides being inadequate to attract the best stallions, the success of this premium scheme foundered on the unwillingness of smaller farmers (for whose benefit it was intended) to pay the stud fees demanded, although these were set at very modest levels.⁸² Once again those 'dormant and unappreciative' farmers, to quote one local newspaper, failed to respond, preferring instead to persist with the native breeds whose services could be obtained for almost negligible fees.⁸³

Whatever the successes or otherwise attained by draught horse breeders in Wales and beyond, the improvement of the hunter/cavalry mount remained the principal focus of attention in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Vague exhortations to 'patriotism' in the columns

of the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society* and elsewhere had not, it seems, stimulated any real improvement in the overall quality of the six thousand or so Thoroughbred sires travelling the country each breeding season. However, the stallion premium schemes established in 1885 by the Hunters' Improvement Society and the Royal Agricultural Society were soon to be supplemented by inputs from the government-sponsored Royal Commission on Horsebreeding. The Commission, whose membership included the Duke of Portland, Master of the Horse, and the Earl of Coventry, Master of the Buckhounds, was mandated first and foremost to devise means of upgrading the quality of saddle horses sired by Thoroughbred stallions on part-bred or light draught mares. With the aid of a very modest Parliamentary grant, together with cash derived from the Queen's Plate (originally applied to promoting prizes at race meetings) the Commission established its own stallion premium scheme. By comparison with the annual sums of £308,000 and £237,000 committed by the French and Hungarian governments to horsebreeding enterprises, the funds available to the Commission were paltry in the extreme, being limited to £5000 per year. Nevertheless the Commission was initially able to award yearly premiums of £200 for 30 stallions though this was reduced to £150 with the withdrawal of a supplementary grant from the Royal Agricultural Society in 1892. The objective of the premium scheme was to enable owners of premium Thoroughbred stallions to offer the services of their animals to farmer/breeders at subsidized stud fees, thereby to disperse the genes of outstanding sires more widely than hitherto. In this way, pointed out Lord Ribblesdale, one of the Commission's chairmen, the efforts of private enterprise in hunter improvement would be effectively complemented.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ RCLWM, *Report*, p 744.

⁸⁰ J Gibson, *The Agriculture of Wales*, Aberystwyth, 1879, p 123.

⁸¹ *Cardigan and Teifside Advertiser*, 1 May, 1891.

⁸² *Cambrian News*, 6 May, 1881.

⁸³ *Cardigan and Teifside Advertiser*, 4 May, 1900.

⁸⁴ Ribblesdale, *op cit*, p 289.

Stallion owners were invited to enter animals at the Commission's annual shows, held at the Royal Agricultural Hall in London variously in conjunction with the Royal Agricultural Society, the Hunters' Improvement Society and the Hackney Horse Society. Entrants, usually more than one hundred each year, including prize-winners from Lord Tredegar (1893 and 1899) and J C Harford of Falcondale (1893), were subject to rigorous examination as to pedigree, conformation and soundness. Anxious to root out the various hereditary conditions linked to unsoundness, the Commission's veterinary inspectors were pleased to note in 1899 that although a significant number of stallions were still being rejected on veterinary grounds, the situation had improved since their first report ten years before.⁸⁵ Moreover they had been agreeably impressed by the enthusiasm of breeders for the veterinary inspection procedures.⁸⁶ Successful premium stallions were eventually dispersed to cover mares in various parts of the country under the strict supervision of the Commission's district committees. South Wales was supplied with four premium stallions each year, including Lord Tredegar's 'Molynoo' and Lewis Shirley's 'Alvin', while a further three stallions travelled the northern counties.

In general the commissioners were heartened by the performance of the progeny of premium stallions when exhibited alongside the offspring of comparable sires at the various local agricultural shows. Yet, like many owners of mares who urged an increase in the number of premium travelling stallions, they were only too aware that the limited funds at their disposal precluded them from having any major impact, and they could but hope that stallion breeders would be spurred on by their example.⁸⁷ Similarly, the commissioners had hoped to be able to persuade Masters of Foxhounds

and Hunt Secretaries to offer prizes to owners of brood mares in foal to premium stallions, so stimulating improvement in female lines. A circular letter outlining this proposal yielded all manner of expressions of goodwill, but little in the way of action as successive Masters and Secretaries complained that their coffers were empty.⁸⁸

The continuing work of the Royal Commission on Horsebreeding, complemented by the efforts of breed societies to limit the spread of transmissible equine diseases, eventually prompted the government—with some reluctance—to enter the horsebreeding arena. Under the terms of the Commons Act (1908), graziers on common land were given the right to form local associations to exclude all non-premium stallions of any breed from the commons, so as to remove '... the sires and dams of scallywags of every variety'.⁸⁹ Shortly afterwards the Board of Agriculture began to award premiums for non-Thoroughbred stallions in an attempt to promote the improvement of native ponies and cobs. This measure was enthusiastically welcomed by the Welsh Pony and Cob Society and other bodies concerned with native breeds, which eventually came to administer the government premium scheme themselves. The pioneering work of the Royal Commission had highlighted the importance of careful veterinary inspection of travelling stallions, whatever their breed, and the Horse Breeding Act of 1918 and subsequent regulations stipulated that no stallion could move from its home base to stand for public service unless it were licensed free of contagious diseases and conformational defects by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries.⁹⁰

Welshmen had featured prominently among those breeders calling for an expansion in the Thoroughbred-promoting activities of the Royal Commission on Horsebreeding. Of greater significance,

⁸⁵ *Royal Commission on Horsebreeding, 7th Report, 1898, Cmnd. 9487.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid., 4th Report, 1893, Cmnd. 7802.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid., 5th Report, 1895, Cmnd. 7811.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid., 7th Report, 1899, Cmnd. 9487.*

⁸⁹ 8 Ed. VII, c. 44, 1908.

⁹⁰ 8 & 9 Geo. V, c. 3, 1918.

however, was their keenness to support local stallion-hiring associations, especially when these associations became eligible for grant aid in 1913 when the government set in motion its scheme for subsidizing the improvement of the nation's stock of draught horses. Even if arable production had declined since the 1870s and the primary emphasis had shifted to pastoral farming, demand for horse labour was maintained and even increased. The high peak of the pastoral farmer's year, the hay harvest, necessitated keeping a certain minimum number of horses to operate the mowers, turners, tedders, hay-grabs, and other mechanical contrivances which had largely displaced land labour.⁹¹ Similarly, on those farms where arable crops continued to be grown, a core working group of horses would be required.⁹² Technical developments leading to the availability of shallow-draught ploughs and more effective cultivation equipment had reduced the number of operations required to produce a seed-bed, yet any means whereby the power-generating capacity of the horse was increased would be to the farmer's advantage. If horses were more powerful, fewer of them would be required for the primary cultivation of arable land and the heavier tasks on pastoral farms, thereby releasing grassland for the use of profitable ruminant livestock.

Ironically, the steady improvement in the quality of both saddle and draught horses in the later nineteenth century and the early decades of the present century was paralleled by advances in other forms of traction and transportation. Although the urban horse population had expanded dramatically, so that by the late 1890s it exceeded the equine population on farms, the development of the internal combustion engine left little doubt in the minds of enthusiasts that the

horse had had its day.⁹³ Against the attempts of equestrian diehards to forestall it, the rate of change from horse to motorized transport in the towns was extremely dramatic and much applauded by those concerned with the growing congestion of urban centres. The streets of London in 1903 were host to 3625 horse-drawn omnibuses and 13 motor buses; but within ten years the situation was entirely reversed and the capital supported 3522 motor buses and a mere 142 horse buses.⁹⁴ The cut-back in urban horses inevitably affected the agricultural sector, especially in horsebreeding areas of the country. Besides reducing demand for saddle and light draught animals bred in Wales and elsewhere, the contraction of the urban horse market probably influenced local agricultural prosperity in the sense that urban demand for hay, straw, and cereal grains would have tended to decline. Yet, on the farms themselves horses remained of major significance, exemplified by the fact that the government had to release 60,000 Army horses to assist in gathering the 1918 harvest.⁹⁵

Aside from their unwillingness to invest capital at a time of agricultural depression, farmers were suspicious of the reliability of the early mass-produced tractors which required a good deal of maintenance and carried heavy annual depreciation costs. Forever cautious, they were sceptical of sinking money into a machine whose daily running costs were double those of a pair of horses, and if tractor numbers in the country as a whole had reached 16,000 by 1930, there still remained almost 650,000 working horses.⁹⁶ In Wales and the western parts of Britain the horse retained its dominant role as a farm power unit until World War II and even then many farmers

⁹¹ R J Moore-Colyer, 'Aspects of the Pastoral Economy in pre-Industrial Wales', *JRASE*, 144, 1983, pp 45-60.

⁹² J Llefelys Davies, 'Horse Labour on Welsh Farms', *Welsh Journal of Agriculture*, VI, 1930, pp 42-53.

⁹³ F M L Thompson, 'Nineteenth Century Horse Sense', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, 28, 1976, p 78.

⁹⁴ *Idem*, p 60.

⁹⁵ J Brown, *Agriculture in England, a survey of farming, 1870-1947*, Manchester, 1987, p 66.

⁹⁶ E Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VIII, 1914-1939, Cambridge, 1978, pp 207-210.

adopting the tractor hedged their bets by retaining a nucleus of working horses. In so doing they ensured the preservation of the numerous and often arcane traditional skills which would serve them well in the equestrian renaissance of the later twentieth century.

APPENDIX I Horse Numbers in Wales, 1870-1955

Year	Used solely for purposes of agriculture	Unbroken horses of any age and mares for breeding	Total
1870	77278	48702	125980
1875	75725	59445	135170
1880	78602	67169	145771
1885	77847	73642	131489
1890	81119	74216	155335

Year	Horses for agriculture and mares for breeding	Stallions over 2 yrs to be used for service	Unbroken horses under 1 year	Unbroken horses 1 year and over	Others	Total
1895	99569	—	21881	45654	—	167104
1900	98747	—	23176	44570	—	166493
1905	103453	—	25187	47592	—	176232
1910	105315	—	22882	43599	—	171796
1915	79520	1413	20333	36074	24719	162059
1920	89474	1218	20574	38498	25925	175689
1925	86285	1147	10459	24441	25082	147414
1930	78534	675	8954	16484	20163	124810
1935	73174	1134	10912	15846	16122	117288
1940	72033	560	10579	20059	17396	121554
1945	63644	415	7054	13619	17643	102375
1950	41036	303	2314	6719	10752	61125
1955	17298	51	239	814	14328	32730

Source: J Williams, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics*, I. HMSO 1985.

The figures relate to the position in June of each year.

APPENDIX II

The figures below, derived from the Census Returns, provide statistical details of four categories of tradesmen associated with the horse industry. Since many blacksmiths and coachbuilders returned in the census worked in the extractive industries of South Wales, figures for five 'rural' counties are included for comparison.

Wales

Year	Blacksmiths	Coachmakers	Farriers/ Veterinary Surgeons	Saddlers/ Harness Makers
1841	5547	93	80	656
1851	6145	180	125	706
1861	7789	252	137	766
1871	7801	360	137	779
1881	7826	402	195	824
1891	8571	901	144	929
1901	9012	905	178	933
1911	9070	885	165	865
1921	3473 ¹	—	110	346

¹ No returns for Glamorgan.

Counties of Cardigan, Caernarfon, Merioneth, Montgomery and Radnor

Year	Blacksmiths	Coachmakers	Farriers/ Veterinary Surgeons	Saddlers/ Harness Makers
1841	1346	18	28	179
1851	2007	46	51	270
1861	2026	53	43	294
1871	1949	64	39	256
1881	1892	125	62	264
1891	1718	151	49	253
1901	1479	226	50	197
1911	1339	191	47	173
1921	980	—	42	141