

Thoroughbred Breeding in the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire in the Nineteenth Century*

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Abstract

The article provides a case study of the operation of the thoroughbred horse breeding industry in the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire during the nineteenth century as a first step towards its analysis at a national level. It analyses the changing theoretical underpinning of thoroughbred breeding practice and shows its relationship to changes in demand from the racing community. During the century the breeding industry changed from the predominantly part-time activity of farmers, racehorse trainers, innkeepers and gentry to an activity increasingly dominated by larger stud farms and stud companies. Breeding could be carried on through the keeping of both stallions and brood mares, and changes and continuities are both identified in terms of the key places where stallions were based, of breeding costs in relation to stallions, mares, yearlings and foals, of general stud organization, of the roles of stud-grooms and stable grooms, and of the selling of stock through private treaty and auction means. Although conclusions are tentative, it would appear that only a minority of studs made a profit; although many others believed they had but failed to take sufficient account of depreciation in their accounting procedures.

DURING the course of the nineteenth century thoroughbred horse-breeding developed as an important rural industry. By 1873 a Select Committee of the House of Lords, examining the general state of horse-breeding, could point to thoroughbred horses having increased significantly both in number and value.¹ In 1876 the *Racing Calendar* estimated the combined value of yearlings, brood mares and stallions as over a million pounds.² By 1892 there were nearly five thousand brood mares alone in the British Isles, and nearly 1400 breeders involved in the industry.³

Surprisingly historians have given this feature of regional English rural life little attention. Writers on racing history have concentrated more on the key stallions and foundation mares of the eighteenth century,

and on major classic winners thereafter.⁴ We know little about the industry, despite its obvious economic importance as a source of both direct and indirect employment. The following case study explores the occupation's theoretical underpinning, the groups involved in the organization and ownership of stud farms and stud companies, the keeping of stallions and brood mares, the selling of stock, and the extent to which studs made a profit, in relation to York and the East and North Ridings of Yorkshire. The Yorkshire area was selected because over the nineteenth century it was one of the key 'breeding counties'.⁵ The thoroughbred, the breed used for racing, derives from interbreeding between identified native British and Arab stock, and the volumes of the *General Stud Book*, first issued in 1791, reveal that almost all English 'tap-root mares' were based in Yorkshire, generally around Bedale. Many early Arab

* I would like to thank the anonymous referees for their valuable comments on this article.

¹ BPP, 1873, XIV, *House of Lords Select Committee on the Condition of the United Kingdom with Regard to Horses*, p 1.

² L H Curzon, 'The horse as an instrument of gambling', *Contemporary Review*, 30 Aug 1877, p 378.

³ C M Prior, *The History of the Racing Calendar and Stud Book*, 1926, p 33.

⁴ See W Vamplew, *The Turf: A Social and Economic History of Horseracing*, 1976, ch 12; P Willett, *The Classic Racehorse*, 1989, chs 1-3.

⁵ See Amphion, 'For the season 1876', *Baily's Monthly Magazine*, 28, Jan 1876, pp 64 ff.

stallions were also based in the area, whilst York was the centre of much early racing. Indeed, by the early nineteenth century interest in thoroughbred breeding was an expected attribute of Yorkshire gentle society. A young Quaker, Charles Fothergill, recorded in his diary in 1805 that he 'visited Hambletonian, Shuttle and Bagsman with the brood mares and foals at Middlethorp'.⁶ Fothergill's regional pride led him to think the county 'the best kind of country for breeding racers'.⁷ Certainly the county's temperate climate, plentiful rainfall, and soil and water constituents sometimes created almost 'ideal conditions for breeding thoroughbreds'.⁸

I

During the nineteenth century breeders had limited knowledge of and were inconsistent in using the range of theoretical principles governing breeding. Initially, most relied on practical experience, emphasizing the stallion's pedigree and racing success. Then the *York Herald* and journals such as *The Sporting Magazine* began disseminating statistical details about a stallion's offspring, including their winnings and numbers of races entered and won. Such data made certain stallions fashionable. Breeders also followed individual theories: Richard Watt of Bishop Burton, for example, successfully used inbreeding from Eclipse. Most focused on key qualities like speed or stamina or a limited combination of qualities. This led to rapid progress in both key aspects of racing performance up to the 1870s.⁹

Alongside this came increasing awareness of the importance of the mare.¹⁰ By 1840,

it was claimed that 'it is now a fact universally acknowledged amongst breeding men that the perfection and subsequent value of the offspring depend much more upon the choice of dam'.¹¹ J H Walsh (Stonehenge) reflected views current in the 1850s by arguing for the importance of conformation, whilst recognizing some excellent exceptions.¹² He accepted the mare's importance, but believed that since the male was 'usually more carefully selected and of purer blood' it exerted more influence on offspring.¹³ The earl of Suffolk, writing in 1886, having reviewed 'many theories ... upheld by various authorities', also introduced constitution, arguing that few breeders took sufficient notice of the health of horse and mare at the time of mating.¹⁴

The mare's role was re-stressed by the Yorkshire sportswriter W Allison, who championed the theories of Bruce Lowe. Lowe identified 'chief winning families' from statistics showing how much had been won in terms of the three key classic races by the descendants of 'tap-root mares'. Further data revealed the extent to which each mare had produced great sires – 'chief sire families'. Allison argued that breeding of 'winning' with 'sire' families would achieve best results.¹⁵ Although based on false statistical premises, it led many to accept that 'the success of every breeding stud depends more on its mares than on anything else'.¹⁶ But views were still mixed. Allison's contemporary J Osborne, in his equally influential *The Horse Breeder's Handbook* (1898), rejected

⁶ P Romsey, ed, *Diary of Charles Fothergill (1805)*, 1985, entry for 26 May 1805.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 Oct 1805.

⁸ Willett, *The Classic Racehorse*, p 253.

⁹ See the comments of modern geneticists quoted in Willett, *The Classic Racehorse*, pp 256–7.

¹⁰ The standard work on the history of the turf mistakenly argues that nineteenth-century breeders 'did not realise that the female line could contribute as much to the development of the breed as could that of the stallion': Vamplew, *The Turf*, p 186.

¹¹ Anon, 'Thoughts upon breeding and rearing blood stock', *New Sporting Magazine*, May 1840, p 292. Sir C Leicester, *Bloodstock Breeding*, 1983 ed, p 3, makes it clear that at the time of mating each parent contributed an equal number of chromosomes, although dominant genes can vary. Clearly thereafter the mare contributes environmentally to the foal.

¹² Stonehenge [J H Walsh], *The Horse in the Stable and Field*, 1892 ed, pp 82–3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, ch 10: 'The principles of breeding applicable to the horse', p 139.

¹⁴ Earl of Suffolk, *Racing and Steeplechasing*, 1886, p 117.

¹⁵ W Allison, *The British Thoroughbred Horse*, 1901, *passim*; Vamplew, *The Turf*, pp 186–7.

¹⁶ *Country Life Illustrated*, 2 Feb 1897, pp 216 ff.

Lowe's ideas in favour of a return to inbreeding to the three key early sires, Eclipse, Herod and Matchem.¹⁷

Breeders also responded to a series of changes within racing itself. In the early nineteenth century the majority of provincial races were run in heats. Runners were three- to six-year olds, racing over longer distances, with weight for age. Breeders then bred more for middle distance and stamina demanding events like the high status classics. By the 1880s a majority of races were either handicaps, where poorer horses could compete, or shorter sprint races by two- or three-year olds, which attracted much of the prize money. In consequence, most commercial breeders bred for the latter. Some breeders developed 'forcing systems' to help achieve this.¹⁸ Stamina was unimportant: more horses broke down, or became roasters. Only a minority, mainly breeder-owners, bred more patiently for the speculative success of classic middle-distance events.

Theoretical underpinning and demand were linked but imperfectly. Changes in the relative demand for stamina or precocious speed over a shorter distance affected numbers of stock bred for such traits; but beliefs concerning the relative importance of sire and dam, pedigree, racing performance, inbreeding, health and conformation were somewhat mixed, and unsystematic.¹⁹ Thus, most breeders had some opportunity of selling their stock, no matter which theory they upheld, although dominant theories made certain mares' or stallions' offspring 'fashionable,' and hence more expensive.

II

In categorizing the groups involved in breeding, size of stud and motive are key

categories. Breeders can be placed on a continuum from private owner-breeders, usually aspiring to produce a winner in the great weight for age and classic events, to fully commercial breeders. Somewhere between the two, private owner-breeders might sell their apparently poorer stock, or keep mares of their own, whilst leasing their stallion's services to owners of other mares.

A majority of owner-breeders in Yorkshire were wealthy, landowning, and of gentry background. Most kept a small stud of fewer than six mares. While at the start of the nineteenth century this group, and its attitudes and expectations, were predominant among Yorkshire breeders, by the end nine-tenths of thoroughbreds were bred for sale.²⁰ A late century example from the earl of Roseberry's York Gimcrack speech summarizes the owner-breeder philosophy. He claimed not to stay in the turf for gain. It was 'a most discouraging amusement'. His love lay 'in the breeding of a horse ... the brood mare and foal; in watching the development of the foal, the growth of the horse, and the exercise of the horse'. His 'secret ambition [was] to become the owner of the horse of the century ... We are all striving to produce that'.²¹

Many others of his class, however, tried to purchase success on the turf from commercial breeders. Such breeders can be categorized as part- or full-time. For the first group, more common in the first half-century, breeding was a sideline: innkeepers, farmers, trainers, and landowners were all involved. Innkeepers more usually kept stallions and sought subscriptions. Coaching or posting inns often had substantial stabling, farmland and paddocks, excess capacity, and large numbers of potential customers passing through. Use fluctuated: the George and Dragon Inn and the Black

¹⁷ J Osborne, *The Horsebreeder's Handbook*, 1898, p lxxv.

¹⁸ Suffolk, *Racing and Steeplechasing*, pp 214-5.

¹⁹ For a recognition of such differing views see Anon, 'Breeders and breeding', in A E T Watson, ed, *The Racing World and its Inhabitants*, 1904, p 87.

²⁰ Osborne, *The Horsebreeder's Handbook*, p lxxv.

²¹ Quoted in *ibid*, p xciv.

Swan, Catterick are mentioned in 1813, yet by 1840 the Angel Inn was a base; at Dringhouses near York the Cross Keys took over the Turf Tavern's business.²²

Farmers fell into two categories. The first group kept a mare or two to supplement their income, sometimes very successfully. A Shipton tenant farmer bred Alice Hawthorn, winner of fifty-two races out of seventy-two all over England in the period 1841-5. Things had changed by 1899, when it was noted that 'seldom in snug farmhouses great horses are bred. Formerly, especially in Yorkshire, it was a common thing to find a couple of brood mares'.²³ The chief causes were lack of economies of scale, increased recognition of the value of brood mares, and changes in farm size and structure stemming from the improvements due to 'high farming', particularly in Holderness. Other farmers bred on a larger scale, and established several well-positioned stud farms, some of which displayed large elements of continuity. Thus, the Middlethorpe stud farm near York was run by Mr Hornsey at the beginning of the century. Sometime later the former innkeeper George Smallwood took it over,²⁴ and the family were still running it in 1880.²⁵

A third group of breeders were trainers, particularly those based round the main training areas, which often had spare paddock or stable capacity.²⁶ The Blink Bonny stud, Malton, was set up with the proceeds of trainer W I Ansons' classic wins, and inherited by his ex-trainer son, Miles.²⁷

Full-time horse dealers were also involved in breeding although up to mid-

century usually on a relatively small scale, based on the personal ownership or leasing of a successful stallion, and a few mares. The major exception was Thomas Kirby, who had stables in York and at Murton by the 1830s.²⁸ Kirby was an astute businessman, with a knack of choosing the right stallions. In 1847, Lanercost, leased from a Cumberland owner, cleared £1600 for him, a top income for the period.²⁹ Kirby also kept a dozen mares, and would change his stallion once subscriptions showed any sign of flagging.

The commercial breeders so far described all largely came from the lower ranks of society. In contrast, the single, largest group of commercial breeders possessed a higher social standing, most being from an untitled gentry background. They expected both their racing and their breeding activities to show a profit, employing a stud-groom for the more practical aspects. Most had moved on from breeding for their own racing pleasure. Lord Fitzwilliam's wealthy steward and land agent, Mr Allen, set up one of the best known mid-century studs at Rockingham House, Malton on that basis.³⁰ Occasionally they ran larger studs. R M Jacques of Easby Abbey, near Richmond, had thirty brood mares in 1854. He had excess accommodation so he hired stallions to serve his mares, and advertised for subscriptions as well. Birdcatcher, hired from the Curragh in 1853, cleared upwards of £1000 besides serving Jacques' mares.³¹ The first Sir Tatton Sykes of Sledmere, a wealthy East Riding landowner, had up to three hundred brood mares in his haphazardly run paddocks.³²

²² *York Herald*, Jan-May 1840. The use of inns as coaching and breeding establishments is covered in T Bradley, *The Old Coaching Days in Yorkshire*, Leeds, 1889 p 129 and *passim*.

²³ Anon, 'The romance of breeding', *Yorkshire Chat*, 29 July 1899.

²⁴ *Sporting Magazine*, May 1838, p 14.

²⁵ PRO, H107/1356 and 3254, RG 10/4746, Census enumerators' returns for Middlethorpe, York, 1841, 1851 and 1871; *Weatherby's Racing Calendar*, 1880.

²⁶ The overall lifestyle of Yorkshire trainers is given detailed attention in M J Huggins, *Kings of the Moor: North Yorkshire Racehorse Trainers 1769-1900*, Teesside, 1991.

²⁷ See *Bell's Life*, 5 Feb 1881.

²⁸ *York Herald*, 23 July 1831.

²⁹ The Druid, *The Post and the Paddock*, 1856, pp 201-2. A whole chapter was devoted to Kirby and his horse-trading life.

³⁰ J Kent, *The Racing Life of Lord George Cavendish Bentinck MP*, 1892, p 136.

³¹ *Sporting Review*, Jan 1846, pp 46 ff; *The Easby Abbey Stud*, Richmond, 1860, *passim*.

³² See J Fairfax-Blakeborough, *Sykes and Sledmere*, 1929, *passim*. A full obituary of Sykes is given in the *Scarborough Gazette* (16 April 1853), as is a description of the sale of his stud (17 Sept 1863).

Breeders saw themselves as a community to a very limited extent. They usually subscribed to the *Stud Book*, but they produced their own publication, the *Bloodstock Breeders' Review*, only in 1912. Generally, they seem to have preferred not to share expertise, and rarely acted together. On one of the few occasions when they did, meeting in 1880 to petition an alteration in the closing of entries for the St Leger, those 'not breeding for sale' were very careful to distinguish themselves.³³

Stud companies were a logical extension of individual activity, and featured from mid-century onwards. The first was the Rawcliffe Stud Company, based on 1350 acres rented just outside York, an expansion of the existing commercial stud run by Mr H Thompson. In 1850 Thompson set up a company to lease the top four-year old, the Flying Dutchman, from Lord Eglinton after his expected Doncaster Cup win. His defeat, and subsequent narrow win in a York re-match in 1851, forced the company to reduce his fee from fifty sovereigns to thirty. Adroitly, Thompson then created a joint stock company, with its objectives 'the breeding of thoroughbred stock and other horses, and the keeping of horses for the public; and leased the Dutchman to it. The share price of £100 effectively restricted share ownership, whilst the first directors unsurprisingly overlapped with the original company.³⁴

The company adopted a business mode. As the Druid remarked 'for a downright business and not mere breeding for the love or honour of the thing Rawcliffe Paddocks quite bear the palm'.³⁵ The company marketed aggressively, sponsoring the Rawcliffe Stakes at the York Spring meeting, and using direct mailing. Thompson, for example, wrote directly to the owner

of Beeswing, the famous Northumberland mare, stressing his gentry associations and patrons.³⁶ By 1860, £24,600 worth of shares had been called up, held by thirty-two shareholders, almost all of aristocratic or gentry background, including the duke of Devonshire and the earl of Scarbrough, but the Flying Dutchman was still not attracting sufficient subscriptions.³⁷ By 1862 the stud was in financial trouble and being advertised for sale.³⁸ It was still trading in 1863-4, but thereafter there were no returns to London. Thompson set up the Moorlands Stud farm nearby with his son. Any loss from the Rawcliffe stud does not appear to have damaged his life style.³⁹

From the 1870s commercial breeding came increasingly into the hands of breeding companies and specialist stud farms, both predominantly owned by gentry or near-gentry breeders. Magazines like *The Field* or *Country Life Illustrated* featured their studs. Examples include the Fairfield stud, then owned by R C Vyner, a member of the Jockey Club and major owner, and the Sledmere stud owned by the second Sir Tatton Sykes. Managers carried on the day-to-day business in both cases.⁴⁰

III

The utilization of stallions lay at the heart of most commercial breeding. Stallions were serving an ever rising number of brood mares through the century. There were only 735 brood mares in the *Stud Book* in 1822 but by 1848 there were 1337. By 1872 there were 2593 and by 1900 the figure had reached 5890.⁴¹ Stallion adver-

³³ Doncaster RO, Doncaster Race Committee minutes, 11 June 1880, Details of correspondence.

³⁴ PRO, BT 31/58/226.

³⁵ The Druid, *Post and Paddock*, p 227.

³⁶ Northumberland RO, NRO/1356/D/7, Letter from H Thompson to R Orde, 26 July 1856.

³⁷ *Sporting Magazine*, Dec 1858, p 371.

³⁸ *Baily's Magazine*, 4, 1862, p 227.

³⁹ In 1881 as a 'gentleman farmer' he could maintain a butler, cook, and three other house servants: PRO, RG11/4715, Census enumerators' returns for Moorlands House, Skelton.

⁴⁰ See *Country Life Illustrated*, 13 and 27 Feb, and 6 March 1897, pp 159, 216 and 249.

⁴¹ C M Prior, *The Early History of the Thoroughbred Horse*, 1926, pp 21-36.

TABLE I
Location of major stud farms, 1800–1900

Locality	1800–10	Mid-century	1890–1900
York area	Middlethorpe Shipton Kirby Bridge Huntingdon Tadcaster	Middlethorpe Fairfield Dringhouses Murton Rawcliffe	Myton Fairfield Tadcaster
North Riding	Catterick Richmond Middleham Boroughbridge Thirsk Ainderby Steeple Bedale Yarm	Catterick Richmond Middleham Boroughbridge Ripon Sheriff Hutton	Catterick Leyburn Middleham Northallerton Bedale
East Riding	Malton Bishop Burton Hull Bridlington Driffield North Barton	Malton Beverley Howden Driffield	Malton Beverley

Sources: R. Pick, *The Sportsman and Breeder's Vade Mecum*, York, 1800; *York Herald*, 1806, 1852; R. Johnson, *Racing Calendar*, 1845; *Ruff's Guide to the Turf*, 1856, 1890, 1899.

tisements help identify changes and continuities in terms of the key places where stallions were based, the prices charged, marketing strategies, and general stud organization.

Stud farms could be found in a number of areas of Yorkshire. As can be seen from Table I, there were significant continuities, not least because the setting up of a new stud farm required significant investment to provide stabling or loose boxes, accommodation and pasture. In terms of continuity, the area around York was the main location. It was centrally situated, with excellent transport links, and excess stabling capacity. Breeding was also consistently linked to training areas, such as Malton, Richmond or Middleham. The key discontinuity is the evidence of late century decline. Some studs disappeared through urban expansion or railway development, but competition from breeders further south was also a major element. In the first

decades of the nineteenth century the region usually had between 25 and 30 per cent of national stallion advertisements. This proportion had dropped to almost 20 per cent by mid-century, but this was from a growing total and numbers of studs in the area showed little change. By the century's end, however, the region had declined in importance as a breeding centre. It now had less than 9 per cent of national stallion advertisements, with the East Riding particularly hit.⁴²

The subscription fees charged for Yorkshire stallions are an index of its relative importance through the century. In the first decades fees rarely exceeded 15 gns. Whilst mares had to walk from their owner's stud, most subscribers were from within the region because of the risk.

⁴² *Sporting Magazine*, 1800–25; *Ruff's Guide to the Turf*, 1856, 1899. BPP, 1890, XXVII, *Third Report of the Royal Commission on Horse-Breeding: Minutes of Evidence*, p 327, qq 2968–75, show a recognition of the decline of Holderness as a breeding area.

When the Northumbrian owner Orde of Nunnykirk walked his mare back from York in the early 1840s, he was warned by the breeder that 'the fole will be sore travelling all that way on the harde rode'.⁴³ The highest Yorkshire price was usually 15 gns as late as 1844, when all but three Yorkshire stallions had subscriptions of 10 gns or less.⁴⁴

The expansion of the railway system in the 1840s increased crowds and prizes at race meetings. As a result, demand for thoroughbreds increased, whilst horses could travel further without risk. While northern bred and trained horses could in consequence experience success in the southern classics, the railways also encouraged many northern magnates south to live. They increasingly bred and trained there, coming north to their estates more rarely. After the 1870s there were no further northern classic successes. Training and breeding expertise followed the wealthiest available patrons south. By 1879, 49 per cent of stallion fees quoted in the *Racing Calendar* were over 25 gns, with one stallion at over 100 gns, almost all being based in the south. Yorkshire fees were generally lower, being usually between 15 and 25 gns. There was a limited recovery in the region by the 1880s and 1890s, with fees in Yorkshire approaching the national pattern – 10 per cent of its stallions being priced at 100 gns or more, but around 70 per cent priced at 30 gns or less.

Stallions were marketed in a number of ways. Breeders usually advertised them in the newspapers, although small printed cards or larger sheets were often sent out. Free publicity could be obtained from sports writers' descriptions of stud visits.⁴⁵

Advertisement details varied. Some early ones have voluminous and glowing descriptions. After mid-century they became more concise. Wiser and more experienced purchasers, or their representatives, would inspect a stallion's conformation, and his pedigree: racing performance and potency interested all prospective subscription purchasers. It was vital that a stallion proved himself a sure foal getter. Press and magazine league tables could be consulted to see to what extent offspring were winning races.⁴⁶ Thoroughbred stallions also became a popular draw at agricultural shows, especially at the Great Yorkshire Show. At York in 1848, Melbourne and Lanercost, both top grade stallions, were entered.⁴⁷ From the 1880s, Queen's Premiums were offered at agricultural shows to encourage good quality thoroughbred stallions to contribute to half-bred rearing.⁴⁸ Most owners offered stallions to a limited number of subscribers. Stallions usually covered between thirty and fifty mares a season, although more than one visit could be needed for each mare. Take-up of subscriptions was greatest for fashionable stallions. Untried stallions had a difficult time attracting custom, and adverts would often offer coverage of 'dams of winners half price' as sweeteners, in hopes of future winning offspring then making the stallion fashionable. Portraiture in connection with breeding had a long history, and was used more widely with the advent of photography. Some photographers were specializing in this by the century's end.⁴⁹

Most stallions based at commercial breeders' studs were leased, often from gentry

⁴³ Northumberland RO, NRO/1366/D/5, Orde correspondence, York, 15 April 1844. Other correspondence relating to Northumbrian horses travelling can be found in Northumberland RO, ZCO/VIII/13. There are examples of horses travelling to York from as far south as Epsom: *The Yorkshireman*, 2 Feb 1839.

⁴⁴ *Johnson's Racing Calendar*, 1844.

⁴⁵ *York Herald*, 13 Feb 1847; *Baily's Magazine*, 28, April 1867, pp 251–6.

⁴⁶ For example, 'The sires of the season', *Yorkshire Gazette*, 7 Dec 1861.

⁴⁷ C M and F M Prior, *Stud Book Lore*, 1951, p 195. After BPP, 1888, XLVIII, *First Report of the Royal Commission on Horse-Breeding*, 1888, the government ceased its ineffective support for breeding through the offering of Queen's Plates for racing. Instead Queen's Premiums for stallions were offered in key areas, with prizes given by the Royal Agricultural Society.

⁴⁸ BPP, 1888, XLVIII, p 1.

⁴⁹ Osborne, *The Horsebreeder's Handbook*, p lcv.

owners of top classic winners who lacked the accommodation or interest to manage their stallion at stud but wished to retain ownership. The breeder took the risk that the stallion might not be a success.⁵⁰ Breeders could also purchase stallions, usually at a high price, but this was an option more for the wealthy, aiming to breed their own classic winner. John Bowes' Triple Crown winner West Australian was sold to Lord Londesborough for 5000 gns, and was at stud at Tadcaster for 30 gns. Unfortunately, the horse was not a success as a stallion, and such a risk would have been too great for a less wealthy breeder. Commercial breeders who apparently purchased stallions were more likely to be acting as agents for others. There was a flourishing foreign trade, mainly through Hull, especially up to the 1860s, when northern horses were still successful, and northern-bred stock was therefore in high demand. The York breeder Thomas Kirby was a central figure from 1791 until the 1850s in building up this trade.⁵¹ Foreign buyers played a significant part in the national market, and the export trade will be addressed in a future article.

IV

Surviving gentry archives and legal cases arising from disputations over the origins of a horse which could affect the results of a race both reveal much about the way studs were managed and run.⁵² Most studs kept between one and three stallions, which would not only serve their own mares but would be walked to local mares, although sometimes another stud's stallion was used to 'nick' better with a particular

mare.⁵³ Less fashionable stallions usually filled up their subscriptions with some half-bred mares, at a much reduced fee. Travelling thoroughbred stallions were at the lowest end of the market. They largely covered half-bred mares to get hunters. Each followed a particular circuit: Napoleon le Grand was shown at Hull, Hendon, Brandesburton, Driffeld, Market Weighton, Howden, Cave, and Beverley in 1839.⁵⁴

Costs for a mare's accommodation and feed whilst at a stud were around 7s a week in 1800, rising to just over 8s by 1813. By mid-century, most stud farms were charging between 9 and 10s, and prices climbed steeply thereafter. In 1883 the Fairfield stud was charging 22s for foaling mares and 16s for barren mares. Such prices might not help stud profits. It was claimed that breeders were increasingly sending their mares just for covering, and then bringing them back by train, because of the 'risk of misadventure during gestation' and 'the dangers of starvation at certain depots more remarkable for their grasping propensities'.⁵⁵

The stud-groom's care and judgement were both important. During the season he assisted at the foaling of mares that arrived 'heavy'. This was a skilled task, often carried out in poor light at night. At the Easby Abbey stud, the stud-groom slept over the foaling shed so as to be always on-hand. The groom assessed when mares showed themselves ready to be covered, sometimes using a 'teaser' stallion, and then prepared mare and stallion. He took care of mares, foals and yearlings, and managed staff.

A stud-groom's earnings varied according to a stallion's success. From the start of the nineteenth century most stud advertisements included mention of a groom's fee for each mare a stallion covered. Between

⁵⁰ For a letter from one Middleham trainer wishing to hire a horse 'on the same terms as last year' see Northumberland RO, NRO/1356/D/1, 22 Oct 1841.

⁵¹ The Druid, *Post and Paddock*, pp 71 ff, deals with 'Mr Kirby and the Foreigners'.

⁵² For examples, see *Yorkshireman*, 24 Aug 1839, 6 July and 10 Aug 1844.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 24 Aug 1839.

⁵⁴ *York Herald*, 27 Feb 1841.

⁵⁵ *Baily's Magazine*, Jan 1876, p 65.

1800 and 1820 fees ranged from 5s to 1 gn, depending on the stud fee. There was little change through time. At the end of the century most grooms' fees were still between 10s and 1 gn per horse, although a mare's owner might also give an honorarium for extra service. The fact that stud-grooms identified in census enumerators' returns rarely employed servants suggests that they perceived themselves as skilled workmen, not members of the lower middle classes, and that earnings were not high. The Fairfield groom in the 1890s received £100 a year plus unfurnished accommodation, gas, firewood and coal.⁵⁶

Stud-grooms needed basic literacy to write to their masters and to customers. When Beeswing was at Easby Abbey in the late 1840s and early 1850s regular reports on progress were sent by the two stud-grooms concerned.⁵⁷ Grooms kept day-books, giving records of coverings, and horses going in and out of the yard.⁵⁸ Managers or grooms had to attend to a farm's day-to-day management, and deal with a vast amount of correspondence. Record keeping carried out by stud-grooms could be erratic. The nominations for races, giving sire and dam, and entries in the *Stud Book* both relied heavily on a groom's honesty and careful record keeping. These could be problematic, as stable evidence at court cases showed.⁵⁹

Stable-grooms were also employed. Census data show ages well distributed from fifteen to late forties. Job mobility was high, since the job was specialized, and mares and stallions were regularly moved, facilitating job contacts. Most grooms living-in were Yorkshire-born, like other 'horse-lads' in the region.⁶⁰ An

exception was the Fairfield stud in 1891, six of whose eleven grooms came from outside the county. The success of the stud may explain why they were also slightly better paid, the head man earning £1 10s a week, two men earning 18s, and one boy 12s a week, plus bed and board.⁶¹

V

The way in which stock was commonly sold changed through the century. Up to the 1840s most gentlemen sold by private contract. The few surviving letter files of stud owners contain correspondence from a range of interested parties wanting to buy well-bred stock, sometimes as yet unborn. Owners took the best offer they could get, negotiating at length by letter. Information about prices was confidential. One would-be aristocratic purchaser, appraised of costs of young stock hitherto, wrote 'I am much obliged for your frankness...and I need hardly appraise you that the information shall go no further'.⁶²

Commercial breeders found auctions more attractive. Studs and yearlings were best sold during race weeks, when there were large numbers of prospective purchasers. Auctions were also held, but less often, at the beginning or end of the racing season, or at gentry houses when a stud was being broken up. Doncaster, during St Leger week, had become a major Yorkshire venue for auctions by the 1820s. Tattersalls auctioned there from mid-decade, and by 1831 the Doncaster auctioneer R. Tilburn was auctioning blood-stock at York August races as well.⁶³

The auction became more important to thoroughbred sales than private treaty after mid-century. Purpose-built auction facilities were erected at York and Doncaster in the 1860s, despite the opposition of publi-

⁵⁶ Leeds RO, Vyner Records, NH 141, Box 2.

⁵⁷ Northumberland RO, NRO/1356/D/7, Correspondence concerning the foals of Beeswing.

⁵⁸ Leeds RO, NH additional papers 75, Day-books, letters of application for stud-groom jobs.

⁵⁹ For example, see *Yorkshireman*, 24 Aug 1839. There is some doubt, however, of the veracity of some of the evidence.

⁶⁰ S. Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses: the Horselads of East Yorkshire*, Stroud, 1991.

⁶¹ Leeds RO, NH additional papers 141, Box 1.

⁶² Northumberland RO, NRO/1356/D/9, Letter from Lord Eglinton, 11 July 1852.

⁶³ *York Herald*, 23 July 1831.

cans.⁶⁴ *Ruff's Guide to the Turf* introduced a return of the sales of bloodstock in 1868, based on auction sales. Tattersalls were by then dominating bloodstock sales, although they were experiencing an increased level of debt default, and imposed the condition that the yearlings were expected to be paid for before removal in the same year. This may have been because auction purchasers had fewer opportunities to spot the weaknesses of yearlings fattened up and 'molly-coddled' for the sales. The Yorkshire trade was more limited than the turnover at London and Newmarket, or at the Hampton Court, Cobham or Middle Park studs in the south, but grew sufficiently for Tattersalls to introduce a Doncaster December sale later in the century.⁶⁵

Prices paid for foals and yearlings rose alongside the growth of auctions. This was in large part a consequence of the increased numbers involved in racing. Prices in the first half-century are difficult to calculate, because few horses were auctioned and the Yorkshire press tended to concentrate on particularly high prices. As the number of reported auctioned foals and yearlings grew patterns became clearer. In 1861 the average price of thoroughbred foals and yearlings at the Doncaster September sales was £164, with prices ranging from £5 to £850.⁶⁶ By 1883 the average price of foals and yearlings had reached £237, with Doncaster prices ranging from £25 to £2550.⁶⁷ Oversupply at the bottom end of the market by 1898 saw average foal prices drop to £95 and yearling prices to £187, but accompanied by an increasingly wide range of prices.⁶⁸ Nationally, highest prices were mainly in the south, where St Simon's eight yearlings averaged 1569 gns. In Yorkshire, only the Sledmere stud could compete. Its six yearlings, from a range of

top stallions, averaged £1311.⁶⁹ These values can be contrasted with the struggling Blink Bonny stud, its yearlings only averaging 63 gns.

The profitability of studs is a moot point and needs a wider data base than the limited Yorkshire sources provide, with their general omission of marginal costings.⁷⁰ Conclusions must therefore be tentative. Breeding was a risky business; 'a lottery'.⁷¹ Successful racing stallions were not always successful at stud. Mares might not produce racing stock.⁷² Although overall yearling and foal long-term price trends are clear, they were subject to significant cyclical variation.⁷³ Nevertheless, a minority of breeders, like Kirby or the Smallwood family, managed a good standard of living over the longer term. Others, most commonly the joint stock stud companies, generally struggled.⁷⁴ Failures were due to a combination of land rental and building costs, poor financial management, and the practice of breeding from inferior mares. Some owner-breeders recognized and accepted their losses as the price of potential success.⁷⁵ A third group, possibly the largest, wrongly assumed they were achieving profits. Few accepted that mares, accommodation and stallions were all depreciating assets, arguing that there was 'no standard value by which any of the animals can be assessed'.⁷⁶ Stallions' value, for example, rose or fell rapidly depending on stud success. Recognition of depreciation made profitability questionable. The apparently successful yearling sales of Sir Tatton Sykes'

⁶⁴ *Sporting Magazine*, Sept 1868, p 163.

⁶⁵ Osborne, *The Horsebreeder's Handbook*, p lxxxix.

⁶⁶ *Yorkshire Gazette*, 21 Sept 1861.

⁶⁷ *Ruff's Guide to the Turf*, 1883, sales of bloodstock.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 1899, sales of bloodstock.

⁶⁹ For a breakdown of Sledmere prices from 1888–1900, see Fairfax-Blakeborough, *Sykes* p 235.

⁷⁰ See Humberside RO, DDCC(2)/20A, Stable account book, 1828, and DDCC/140/101, Stable account book, 1837–40.

⁷¹ *Manchester Courier*, 4 June 1867, Letter from Admiral Rous.

⁷² The Druid, *Post and Paddock*, p 223, provides details for 1853–6.

⁷³ For Doncaster sales data illustrating this, see R Orchard, *Tattersalls: 200 Years of Sporting History*, 1953, pp 239–40.

⁷⁴ PRO, BT 31 files have a large number of examples: amongst the most famous were BT31/2581/13530 the Cobham stud, and BT31/2357/11588 the Enfield stud.

⁷⁵ Lord Glasgow spent a fortune on his Glasgow Paddocks at Doncaster and never won a classic: Thormanby [W Willmott Dixon], *Kings of the Turf*, 1898, pp 177–87.

⁷⁶ W Allison, *My Kingdom for a Horse*, 1919, p 248.

Sledmere stud produced just over £10,500 income per annum in the mid-1890s. His inclusion of depreciation and income tax converted an apparent profit into a loss.⁷⁷ Alternative ways of investing money would have been more effective, if profit alone were sought.⁷⁸

Few breeders bred purely for profit. Love of horses, the opportunity of mixing with the gentry, and the honour of seeing their horses' success all played a part. Thoroughbred breeding was part of Yorkshire's rural culture. At Hovingham the country people attending the internment of the brood mare Atlanta were given plenty of 'good bread and ale' by the steward.⁷⁹ Words like 'pilgrimage' or 'levee' were often associated with a stud visit.⁸⁰ The death of 'the breeder and owner of Alice Hawthorn' was a major local event to a diarist and reading room secretary ten miles distant.⁸¹

VI

By the end of the nineteenth century the amount of money circulating in racing, and the numbers involved directly and indirectly in racing and in betting on races rendered horse-racing amongst the largest of Victorian industries.⁸² The breeding of thoroughbreds was a crucial part of this, as

the price rises through the century indicate. Breeders were a source of rural employment, whilst success conferred status both on the breeder, and on the rural society of which he was a part.

Its structure was complex, supporting a range of views about the relative importance of the various factors determining the quality of offspring. Although there were significant continuities in terms of location and organization, the industry changed significantly over the century; from breeding for distance and stamina to breeding for shorter sprints; from the predominantly part-time activity of gentry breeders, innkeepers, farmers, and trainers to the dominance of the specialized stud company and stud farm; from private contract selling to selling by auction.

There are, however, some dangers in attempting to generalize from this case study. Despite the clear increase in bloodstock numbers bred and prices charged, the Yorkshire industry was in relative decline from the 1870s, due to the growth of the railways and the move of Yorkshire magnates south. Much more work is therefore needed, especially on breeding in the south, before firm conclusions can be drawn. Data from the Newmarket, London and South Downs areas would be particularly useful. The paper, nevertheless, indicates some directions for future research. A wider range of data might make clearer what proportion of studs actually made a profit, and provide the opportunity to assess the extent of regional variation in the occupational wage structure and in stallion fees. The role of the thoroughbred export trade has only been touched on here, but the exportation of bloodstock was important, not least in its central contribution to thoroughbred breeding in Europe, North America and the British Empire, an area yet to be fully explored.

⁷⁷ Humberside RO, DDSY 98/51, Sykes account book p 44.

⁷⁸ BPP, 1898, XXXIII, *Reports and Minutes of Evidence of the Royal Commission to inquire into the Horse-Breeding Industry in Ireland*, pp 261, 295 (in particular, the report of the earl of Enniskillen), seem to indicate that a very small proportion of general breeders were profitably engaged in the trade. Nevertheless, it was suggested that the thoroughbred horse was 'the most profitable kind of horse to breed' (q 7512).

⁷⁹ *Sporting Magazine*, June 1828, p 190.

⁸⁰ *Baily's Magazine*, Jan and June 1876, pp 67, 251-6. A young Marton farmer walked ten miles to see the 'object of pilgrimage' Barbelle, the dam of the famous Flying Dutchman, in the 1850s: W Scarth Dixon, *Men, Horses and Hunting*, 1931, p 248.

⁸¹ H Hibbs, ed, *Victorian Ouseburn; George Woodhead's Journal*, York, 1990, p 551.

⁸² L H Curzon, *A Mirror of the Turf*, 1892, pp 60 ff.