

Aspects of Horse Breeding and the Supply of Horses in Victorian Britain*

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Abstract

The draft power and hauling capacity of the horse remained of fundamental importance to the economy and defence of Victorian Britain. This article seeks to examine various aspects of the supply of horses in the Victorian era. It shows, moreover, that lack of attention to selection in the female line resulted in both a quantitative and qualitative shortfall in the supply of some categories of horses, while overseas exports substantially depleted stocks of breeding animals for agriculture, trade and the Army. Shortage of supply and inefficient purchasing arrangements threatened the continuity of army remounts, and various official agencies, prompted by German successes in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1, reviewed the situation. The reports of the House of Lords committee of 1873 and subsequently of the Royal Commission on Horse Breeding of 1888 were little more than platitudinous and refused to recommend government involvement in equine improvement, despite the efforts of continental counterparts in this direction. However, the establishment of the Remount Department as a special branch of the Army in 1887 brought about qualitative improvements in military horses, as did the various stallion improvement schemes and premium arrangements put into motion by the Royal Agricultural Society, the Hunters Improvement Society and other official bodies. These were aimed at the generality of horses and laid the basis for twentieth-century licensing arrangements. By the beginning of that century, however, Britain was a net importer of horses and was to remain so for the next three decades.

FOR ALL the triumphalist articles in the contemporary agricultural and engineering press applauding the achievements of steam and mechanization, the horse remained the fundamental unit of power in Victorian Britain and was to retain its pre-eminence into the first decade of the present century. Agriculture, the extractive and manufacturing industries, urban and rural transport systems, and the civil and military authorities all relied, to a greater or lesser extent, on the draught power or carrying capacity of the horse.¹ This being the case it might reasonably be assumed that a burgeoning and potentially lucrative home market would have stimulated farmers and breeders to strain every sinew in an effort to produce sufficient

horses of the type and quality required. For a variety of reasons, however, contemporary sources suggest that the production of certain categories of horses fell short of meeting demand and this, combined with inadequacies in quality and conformation, meant that by the late 1880s, '... this country has been left for the most part with the inferior and unsound animals ... and the result has been the gradual but marked deterioration in the general breed, for which England at one time was famous'.² Nevertheless, despite this, and other adverse observations of commentators noted below, the collective effort of British and Irish breeders seems, from a quantitative standpoint at least, to have gone a long way towards supplying some sectors of the general market. Assuming an average lifespan of twenty years, the annual replacement rate moved from around 100,000 in the 1870s to somewhere in the order of 150,000 twenty years later, and

* The author is obliged to the Editor and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

¹ See, for example, F M L Thompson, 'Nineteenth-century horse sense', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXIX, 1976, pp 60-81; A Everitt, 'Country carriers in the nineteenth century', *Jour Trans Hist*, new ser, III, 1976, pp 179-202; R J Moore-Colyer, 'Horses and equine improvement in the economy of modern Wales', *Ag Hist Rev*, 39, 1991, pp 126-42.

² BPP, 1888, XLVIII, *Royal Commission on Horse Breeding*, first report.

although there was a steady increase in gross imports throughout that period, the fact remains that British and Irish sources contributed to overall supply in a major way (Appendix). It is the main purpose of the present article to examine various aspects of the production of horses for the market in the later decades of the nineteenth century. As a point of departure attention will be focused on some general breeding problems and a review of some of the more important non-Thoroughbred horse types and their functions, leading eventually to a consideration of the supply of horses for the Army.

I

It was generally acknowledged in the early nineteenth century that although breeding of Thoroughbreds for the turf had reached the 'point of perfection', production of the saddle-horse had been, and continued to be, left largely to chance, with little care and attention being devoted to the selection of either parent.³ The choice of mares as dams of riding or harness animals was especially neglected, moving John Lawrence to write in 1809 that this was '... a prime cause of failure in casual and misinformed breeders'.⁴ Almost a generation later the same sorts of comments were being voiced. John Wilkinson, employing forms of language comprehensible to equine experts but almost impenetrably obscure to others, noted that a mare was only used for breeding when she was of little use for anything else, '... disregarding the fact that she may have a large head, ewe-neck, upright shoulders, calf-knees, long crooked pasterns, long slack back, weasel waist, short drooping quarters, short thighs, curby or cow hocks with dishing speedy cutting or slouching

action'.⁵ By 1860 country gentlemen were being urged to encourage the improvement of brood-mares as a patriotic duty, while the deeply-seated tradition that '... anything in the character of a mare that has been a valuable animal on the farm will, in spite of her present condition, answer perfectly well for stock purposes' continued roundly to be condemned by the pundits.⁶

On the male side of the breeding equation, a growing obsession with style and action among potential purchasers of riding- and harness-horses led to an over dependence on the use of Thoroughbred sires, irrespective of the fact that many of those available were both unsound and too light of bone to produce offspring of quality and endurance.⁷ To many smaller farmers, cheapness of stud fee was a primary criterion in choosing a Thoroughbred sire for their mares, while to the gentlemen breeder an exquisite and unblotted pedigree was of far greater significance than suitability of conformation.⁸ That most of the travelling Thoroughbred stallions in the country were rejects from racing yards appears to have been conveniently ignored both by farmers and breeders, while the practice among local stallion show judges of awarding premia to animals in high condition, which often obscured conformational inadequacies, merely aggravated the situation.⁹

In the time-honoured manner, these various genetic solecisms were ascribed by many to ignorance. Ignorance there may certainly have been, but it would be naive in the extreme to neglect a variety of other factors involved both in the lack of atten-

³ W Youatt, *The Horse*, 1831, p 220.

⁴ J Lawrence, *The History and Delineation of the Horse*, Albion, 1809, p 113.

⁵ J Wilkinson, 'On the supply of horses adopted to the requirements of the British Army', *JRASE*, 24, 1863, pp 94-5.

⁶ J Welby, 'Report on the riding horses and ponies shown at Canterbury with remarks on the present breed of riding horses', *JRASE*, 21, 1860, p 521; Professor Brown, 'On the improvement of agricultural horses suited to the west of England', *Jour Bath and West of England Soc*, 2nd ser, XI, 1863, p 47.

⁷ W C Spooner 'On crossbreeding in horses', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, 1, 1865, p 157.

⁸ Welby, 'Riding horses and ponies', p 517.

⁹ BPP, 1873, XIV, *Select Committee of the House of Lords ... into the Condition of this Country with regards to Horses*, q 419.

tion to quality in horseflesh and in the alleged shortage of horses of various types in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Leaving aside for the present the fact that many of the best breeding stock in the country had been sold to foreign purchasers in the decades before 1870, it must be remembered that for the working farmer the breeding of horses was a risky and time-consuming operation. Even where a man estimated that he could gain a modest profit in breeding saddle-horses for sale to dealers or well-heeled hunting folk, the interval between coming to the decision to breed and making his first sale of a three-year old horse was a lengthy one. If, for example, he had three mares suitable for breeding, he would have to maintain these mares, their foals, yearlings, two- and three-year olds before enjoying his first sale income. Not only would this represent a major commitment in time but, in view of the ruinous effect of horses on pasture land, it would reduce the numbers of other grazing animals which he could sustain if his acreage were limited. On undrained land, held at a low rental and unsuited to sheep and cattle, a farmer might afford to keep a mare or two, but a combination of land improvement (leading to increased rents) and advancing labour costs, would make the proposition less attractive. After all, where land had been drained and fenced, it would be the height of folly to use it for maintaining horses when it could be occupied by the increasingly profitable cattle and sheep.¹⁰ Even on the small family farm, the bastion of horse breeding in the earlier nineteenth century, the forces of change were discouraging this traditional activity. Farm amalgamation and land drainage on estates throughout England, and the emigration of small farmers from Ireland, meant that horses gave way to ruminant stock in many areas. This was as much the case in the English midlands as

in the long-famed horse breeding regions of Yorkshire and Durham, and those celebrated centres of hunter breeding, the counties of Meath, West Meath and Kildare.¹¹ While it is arguable that even the 'improved' farm would still retain some poorer land suited to horses, the decision of the Army in the 1860s to purchase four- as opposed to three-year old remounts, and the preference of foreign buyers for the four-year old, meant that the farmer/breeder was obliged to retain his colts and fillies for an extra year at a cost of some £10 per head. This would hardly be an incentive for a farmer to involve himself seriously in what was essentially a rather specialized enterprise.¹²

The question of the carelessness of farmers in selecting brood-mares as dams of saddle-horses, so heavily emphasized by contemporary commentators, can in part be set down to changes in fashion, and to the use of mares during their pre-breeding life. To begin with, the growing fashion among gentlemen for riding-mares as well as geldings inevitably meant that the better type of saddle-mare was ridden until she was at a relatively advanced age when her level of fertility and capacity for producing a thriving foal were reduced.¹³ Similarly, harness-and draught-horses tended to be kept at work for a longer period than in the earlier nineteenth century when stage-coach- and post-mares, unable to stand the pace, were retired to stud at eight or nine years of age when their breeding potential was at its best. On the other hand, as increasing numbers of these animals were assigned to slower omnibus and van work, they continued at their labours until well past their reproductive prime.¹⁴ While this does not excuse the seeming indifference to the qualitative and conformational aspects of the breeding mare, it helps to

¹¹ *Ibid.*, qq 1395-9, 3446.

¹² *Ibid.*, q 2140.

¹³ Youatt, *The Horse*, p 221.

¹⁴ BPP, 1873, XIV, q 2300.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, q 2613.

explain the frequently articulated complaints of the reproductive inefficiency of some classes of mares in the later nineteenth century.

Farmers and breeders may, or may not, have been aware of the association between working life and breeding potential. They were, however, only too aware of the obligation of providing a warranty when selling a horse to a dealer, an obligation which served as a further disincentive to breeding. A custom, rather than a codified law, the signed warranty indemnified the dealer against purchasing an unsound horse: in principle a perfectly reasonable expectation. Problems arose, however, when a less than scrupulous dealer, unable to find a market for a particular horse, managed to persuade a veterinary surgeon to pronounce the animal unsound on some trivial pretext, whereupon it was returned to the unfortunate vendor in return for the original purchase price. As Henry Phillips, a much-respected dealer and Army contractor explained to the 1873 select committee of the House of Lords on horses, 'I have known hundreds of cases where people are obliged to take back a supposedly perfectly sound animal in consequence of the opinion of some veterinary surgeon'.¹⁵ Such were the abuses of the system that as time went on those farmers, who had not eschewed horse breeding on account of the existence of the warranty arrangement, came to refuse to abide by it. Indeed, even the dealers themselves began to realize that the continuance of the warranty threatened their sources of supply, so that by the mid-1870s it was largely abandoned in favour of 'vetting' in the presence of buyer and seller.

II

Of the various horse types produced in the country, among the more important was

the cart-horse, principally used in agricultural and urban haulage. The heavy demand from urban and industrial concerns for this class of horse meant that prices rose to unprecedented levels in the 1860s, causing organizations like the General Omnibus Company to investigate a cheaper alternative in the form of the French Percheron.¹⁶ The General Omnibus Company and large traders like Pickfords, whose haulage business was expanding dramatically, had been prepared to pay well over the odds to secure heavy horses with the overall effect that others requiring the services of these animals were faced with steeply increasing prices. 'The agricultural horse', declared William Shaw in 1873, while in adequate supply, '... has never been known to be so dear since England was a country as they [*sic*] are at the present time'.¹⁷ The directors of the London and North Western and London and South Western Railways doubtless agreed with Shaw's general remarks since, in 1872, they were faced with prices of £50-55 for horses which had cost £35-44 six years previously.¹⁸ The effect of industrial demand and demand for local transportational tasks on heavy-horse prices was also being felt down on the farm where the high capital costs, heavy annual depreciation and questionable reliability of steam-operated equipment ensured a continued role for the horse in heavy and lighter draught work. Yet, while the high cost of work-horses was an undoubted burden for many farmers, it had the very distinct advantage of encouraging some of them to breed their own animals. Like the forthright Holderness farmer, John Thompson, many were *forced* to maintain brood-mares to produce working geldings for the simple reason that useful specimens

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, q 175.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, q 784.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, q 1076.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, qq 71-2.

were too expensive to purchase on the open market.¹⁹

The relative contributions to heavy-horse supply made by farmer-breeders like Thompson, and the specialist pedigree men discussed below are difficult to assess. It might justifiably be assumed, however, that farmers intent upon breeding their own draught-horses would, at some stage, purchase foundation-mares from breeders at the apex of the pedigree triangle and make use of the services of travelling stallions as sires of working offspring. Having embarked upon this course their primary objective would be to secure their own draught resources and to sell any surplus to the non-farm sector. In view of the comments made earlier respecting the profitability of the grazing ruminant compared to the horse, the degree to which this activity was viewed as a serious contributor to net farm income as opposed to a mere opportunist 'windfall' might well prove a fruitful area for specialist research into the economics of horse production on the Victorian farm.

In any event, the farmer intent upon breeding his own replacement draught animals would be concerned to select a sire suited to the requirements of his farm, which would depend upon soil type, topography and the system being pursued. While he might express some interest in the details of the pedigree of a particular travelling stallion, the animal's conformation and capacity to generate power would be uppermost in his mind. Since he needed to farm at a profit, the particular published virtues of its breed or the purity of pedigree of an individual would be of little relevance compared to the suitability of that individual to sire draught replacements appropriate to the situation of the farm. What is undeniable is that, however cavalier or slipshod his attitude towards choosing sires for breeding saddle-horses

(more often than not an opportunist activity), the farmer would have viewed the selection of sires for draught replacements in a serious and professional manner.

Essentially the farmer, the drayman and the haulier had access to three distinct home-bred heavy-horse types: the Suffolk, the Clydesdale and the Shire. By the mid-nineteenth century usually designated the Suffolk Punch, the Suffolk horse had evolved in the eponymous county where it had long been distinguished by its low shoulder which allowed it to generate great power by throwing much of its weight into the collar. Throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century, infusions of both Thoroughbred and Flemish blood had transformed the compact and rather slow Suffolk 'sorrel' into a horse combining the qualities of strength with those of speed and action.²⁰ The earl of Stradbroke, with a lifetime's experience of breeding heavy horses, declared in 1873 that the Suffolk Punch was now the pre-eminent cart-horse of eastern England due, in large measure, to the steadfast efforts made by farmers for several generations to improve the breed by careful selection and inbreeding of the local type.²¹ As the Suffolk horse was being created on the lighter lands of eastern England, so the Clydesdale was emerging in southern Scotland. Noted initially as a fast-working horse in light draught conditions, the Clydesdale was carefully nurtured by farmer-breeders, who created a quality light draught animal much in demand in the manufacturing towns of Lanarkshire and the northern counties of England.²² With the progress of the nineteenth century the Clydesdale horse, both the lighter and heavier type (the latter deriving from crosses with the Shire), attracted the interest of foreign buyers, so

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, q 2117.

²⁰ Youatt, *The Horse*, p 38; D Low, *Elements of Practical Agriculture*, Edinburgh, 1838, p 526.

²¹ BPP, 1873, XIV, q 2291.

²² Low, *Practical Agriculture*, p 571; R Forsythe, *The Principles and Practice of Agriculture*, Edinburgh, 1804, pp 384-5.

that a flourishing export trade with Europe and North America came into being in the 1880s.²³

To a considerable extent, both the Suffolk Punch and the Clydesdale became overshadowed, if not eclipsed, by the virtually ubiquitous Shire horse in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, travelling Shire stallions had been so widely used in Clydesdale country by the 1880s and 1890s that the local breed had been converted from a light to heavy draught type similar in many ways to the Shire itself. In like manner, Shire stallions had been widely used in other parts of Britain, typically in Montgomeryshire where they almost totally transformed the local under-sized draught type.²⁴ Derived originally from the massively strong Old English Black Horse of the eastern Fens, the Shire had evolved on the limestone soils of the midlands and, by the time the stud book was opened in 1878, the breed was to be found the length and breadth of the country. So great was the popularity of the animals and so buoyant the home and overseas demand both for breeding stock and working specimens, that 'a young Shire is always as good as a Bank note'.²⁵

If the critical comments of John Wilkinson, John Lawrence, William Youatt, and their fellow pundits were well-founded as far as saddle-horses were concerned, their stringent condemnations did not apply to the breeders of the British heavy horse who, in general, resisted transient fashions and concentrated on producing the horses of power and substance required for agricultural draught work. In stark contrast to the breeding of saddle-horses, the pedigree Clydesdales and Shires

whose pure or crossbred offspring provided the primary power sources on farms throughout Britain were produced essentially by specialist breeders of great knowledge and experience. Be he in the lowlands of Scotland, the Fylde of Lancashire, the limestone country of Derbyshire or on the fens of Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, the heavy-horse breeder had no illusions about the importance of maintaining the quality of his product. As home demand edged up prices and the expanding market in North America siphoned off some of the second quality animals, the heavy horse began to reach a standard of quality yet to be superseded. Men like J H Truman of Whittlesea, Arthur Pratt of Suffolk and Andrew Montgomery of Netherhall, all of whom bred and exported large numbers of Shire, Suffolk and Clydesdale horses, were immensely influential in encouraging their fellow breeders towards the pursuit of excellence. Although the lucrative transatlantic market required a horse of somewhat different conformation from that demanded by the home agricultural and haulage industries, the propagandist activities of Truman and his son (who settled in Illinois and did much to foster American interest in the Shire horse), and men like the breeder and publicist Sanders Spencer of St Ives, Huntingdonshire, managed to persuade others that the British market rather than fickle overseas outlets would produce the greater profit in the longer run.²⁶ In effect, then, the draught-horse sector was in good heart and there was a sufficiency of animals of good quality for both agricultural and non-agricultural purposes, albeit at steadily increasing prices. As long as the farm, the urban haulier and the extractive industries required equine draught power, élite breeders of Shire and Clydesdale horses would be assured of a profitable market. Some working farmers

²³ W Graham, 'The breeding of draught horses', *Jour Bath and West of England Soc*, 4th ser, III, 1892-3, pp 14-19.

²⁴ K Chivers, 'The supply of horses in Great Britain in the nineteenth century', in F M L Thompson, ed, *Horses in European Economic History: A Preliminary Canter*, British Agricultural History Society, 1983, p 35.

²⁵ G S Lowe, 'Our horse supply', *Jour Bath and West of England Soc*, 4th ser, XVI, 1905-6, pp 17-20.

²⁶ The subject of the North American export market for heavy horses is currently being studied by the author.

might have been reluctant to pay the stud fees demanded by the owners of premium heavy stallions, but others were keen to upgrade their stock, while North American demand, particularly for Clydesdale horses, was to develop dramatically in the 1880s and to provide, for a few years, a welcome and highly-profitable sales outlet.

The heavy horse, be it Shire, Suffolk or Clydesdale, trudging its way down country lane or urban thoroughfare, increasingly competed for road space with coach-horses as the growing prosperity of the Victorian middle classes brought about an increasing demand for travel in stylish turnout. As family coaches became lighter and more sophisticated, and their occupants increasingly concerned with style and fashion, so the eighteenth-century coach-horse, a nondescript type, '... clumsy-barrelled, cloddy-shouldered, round-legged [and] ... as fat as an ox', came to be replaced by an animal of pace and motion.²⁷ Pace, in particular, became something of an obsession and the selection of horses for their speed, at the expense of steady dependability and endurance, attracted the disapproval of many contemporary observers, with William Youatt, in typically no-nonsense mood, observing, 'The rage for rapid travelling is the bane of the postmasters, the destruction of the horse, and the disgrace of the English character'.²⁸ In Youatt's younger days men had been quite satisfied for their coaches and carriages to be drawn by the old-fashioned Cleveland Bay, a distinctive breed local to Yorkshire and Durham which carried neither cart-horse nor Thoroughbred blood, and was used with equal facility for riding, draught and carriage work. However, as fashion increasingly dictated high-stepping action and lighter form, Cleveland Bay mares were repeatedly covered by Thoroughbred sires to produce

the Yorkshire Coach Horse, a procedure leading inevitably to a decline in stocks of the original breed.²⁹ This decline was further accelerated by overseas exports of Cleveland Bay stock, especially to Germany where they helped in the creation of the Oldenburg and Hanoverian horses, and to Holland where Dutch breeders used the Cleveland to breed harness-horses, of which many were imported to Britain later in the nineteenth century.³⁰ So rapid was the reduction in numbers of the original Cleveland Bay horses that whereas in the 1840s and 1850s up to twenty stallions would compete each year for premia at the Cleveland Agricultural Show, there were only five entrants of indifferent quality in 1872.³¹ Indeed, it was the buoyant demand from America for both the older type and the Yorkshire Coach Horse that saved the breed from extinction before the opening of the stud book in 1884. But by this time most of the best animals had travelled overseas and the bulk of the coach-horses used in Britain by the closing years of the century were imported European stock, many of them descended from Cleveland-type horses exported several decades previously.³² Not, according to the auctioneer Edward Tattersall, that foreign breeders had managed to effect much improvement. They were docile and fine-tempered indeed and, like so many foreign imports, impressively 'showy', but in contrast to the good old hardy British stock, were incapable of being driven hard since '... the next morning they are quite unfit to come out; they have lost all their action and courage'.³³

Testifying to the dearth of quality riding-horses and hackneys in England in

²⁷ Youatt, *The Horse*, p 32.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p 35.

²⁹ H Fawcus, 'The horse breeding industry of Yorkshire', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, 47, 1911, p 164.

³⁰ J Hill, 'The breeding of light horses', *Jour Bath and West of England Soc*, 4th ser, IV, 1893-4, p 60.

³¹ BPP, 1873, XIV, q 1520.

³² Lord Cathcart, 'Half-bred horses for field or road: their breeding and management', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, 19, 1883, p 213.

³³ BPP, 1873, XIV, q 3788.

the 1870s, Henry Thurnall, for some fifty years a respected judge at agricultural shows in eastern England, claimed that to a great extent this was '... owing to the goodness of the roads [since] farmers always drive now when they used to ride 30 years ago. Any little scrubby thing will draw a dogcart to market safely, but when a 15 stone man rode to market and then came back after dinner, he liked to ride a pretty good horse'.³⁴ He might have added that many of those attending market and rounding off the day with ample draughts of spirits-and-water tended increasingly to use the railways for at least part of the journey to and from their farms and hardly needed to bother with a classy driving- or riding-horse.³⁵ All the same, among those and others who continued to maintain riding-horses, it was widely accepted that quality was declining consequent upon the insistence on extravagant action, and the widespread use of poorly-formed Thoroughbred sires. However much Jockey Club members and men of the turf like Admiral Henry Rous might claim that the value of a riding- or driving-horse increased in direct proportion to its level of Thoroughbred blood, the fact remained that much of this blood derived from reject racing stallions often little better than useless hacks.³⁶ The general-purpose riding- and harness-horse, variously termed the 'hackney' or 'roadster', embraced a variety of types ranging from the 15-16 hand animal capable of pulling a light carriage or van with high-stepping action, through to the riding cob of a genotype carrying a greater or lesser proportion of Thoroughbred blood. The celebrated Norfolk Roadster, developed in the later eighteenth century, was typical of the first type, and provided an ideal

harness-horse, of which many specimens were exported to Kentucky and Virginia to produce trotting-horses, and to France where they were crossed with local cart-mares to yield heavyweight carriage beasts.³⁷ In the mid-nineteenth century two Thoroughbred stallions 'Champion' and 'Phenomenon', both noted for their scope and action, were taken into Yorkshire and mated to a variety of carefully selected Roadster mares to produce 'a superior looking breed of roadsters to the original Norfolk breed'.³⁸ As with the Norfolk stock, these horses, more suited to the saddle than the harness, were extensively exported so that by the 1870s many of the best specimens had travelled overseas and quality animals were difficult to acquire either by individuals requiring a general-purpose horse or by city cab proprietors seeking replacement stock.³⁹

Exports of quality breeding stock, and the use of cheaply-obtained nondescript sires was as much instrumental in the alleged qualitative decline of the English hunter as it was with the riding- and harness-horse.⁴⁰ In the eighteenth century, when the countryside was generally more wooded and the going tougher, emphasis was placed on producing an endurance rather than a speedy hunter so that a strong, short-legged cob-type horse was considered the ideal. But as 'scientific' hunting evolved under the influence of Osbaldestone, Assheton-Smith and others, speed across country became the essential hallmark of the hunter and to develop this speed Thoroughbred sires were used on stout and well-formed common mares.⁴¹ This was perfectly acceptable where care

³⁴ *Ibid.*, q 2400.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, q 2310.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, q 3366; for Rous and his life see R. Mortimer, *The Jockey Club*, 1958, p 79.

³⁷ H Euren, 'The hackney horse', *Trans Highland and Agricultural Soc.*, 5th ser, 8, 1896, pp 149-56.

³⁸ BPP, 1873, XIV, q 202.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, q 1074.

⁴⁰ H Corbet, 'On the breeding of hunters and hacks', *Jour Bath and West of England Soc.*, 2nd ser, XI, 1863, p 34.

⁴¹ J Gangee, 'The breeding of hunters and roadsters', *JRASE*, 24, 1863, pp 342-3.

was taken to select a sire with a staying pedigree, suitable conformation and freedom from hereditary defects. It was, however, extremely difficult to find these qualities enshrined within a Thoroughbred stallion since during the evolution of the breed virtually no attention had been paid to conformation and endurance in the pursuit of ever-increasing speed. The upshot was that while many hunters were quite capable of short bursts of high speed on hard going, they found it difficult to sustain a day's hunting with 12 stone on their backs, and by the end of the season were so worn out as to be virtually valueless.⁴² In view of the association between the breeding of hunters and the supply of cavalry remounts this was seen by many as a serious problem. Contemporary critics, apparently oblivious to the relative economics of cattle and horse breeding, and the changing mode of travel of farmers, were baffled by the care and attention devoted to the selection of bulls and the seeming indifference to the choice of stallions as sires of potential saddle-horses and hunters. Hunting, after all, was a 'patriotic' occupation encouraging sterling qualities in Englishman and English beast, and the farmer should be a key player in the hunting field. Of course, 'no-one would deem it right or proper for any farmer dependent on his farm for means of support to appear day after day at the covert side', but he would nevertheless do as much good educating a young horse in the hunting field '... as he would be at home engaged in the most drudging occupation on the farm'.⁴³

III

The British light cavalry establishment, traditionally reliant on hunter-type horses for remount supplies, had been allowed to decline numerically in the post-Waterloo years. Qualitatively, the unsatisfactory condition of cavalry horses had been questioned by Wellington himself while, despite the insistence of the 1844 Queen's Regulations that they be improved, deterioration, both of horse type and training efficiency, had reached such a level that a greater part of troop horses were unfit for war service.⁴⁴ Remarkably though, little official action was taken to rectify this lamentable situation and for all the concern expressed by pundits, parliamentary commissions and regimental purchasing officers, the government remained seemingly indifferent until later in the nineteenth century, taking the sanguine view that in the event of war, the patriotism of the English gentry would ensure the supply of officers' horses of suitable stamp.⁴⁵

Essentially, the Victorian Army employed four specific horse types, leaving aside the cobs and ponies used for carrying supplies for infantry units. Mounted regiments, comprising heavy and light cavalry, required respectively horses of 15.2 to 15.3 hands capable of supporting at least 17 stone in weight, and animals of similar size able to carry up to 15 stone. Meanwhile, the horse artillery sought heavy cavalry-type beasts suited to harness work, and the field artillery active draught-horses of sufficient substance to draw a burden of one ton at a steady six miles per hour.⁴⁶ By the 1840s and 1850s such horses were being purchased at between two- and three-years old and trained to full work by the age of five, after which it was hoped

⁴² J Burke, 'Breeding and management of horses on a farm', *JRASE*, 5, 1845, p 510.

⁴³ J Paterson, 'The breeding and rearing of horses for the farm, road and field', *Trans Highland and Agricultural Soc*, 4th ser, 14, 1882, p 26. The expansion of hunting fields, the demands of the railways and individuals for saddle-and light van-horses were considered by some to account for the shortage of hunters, which could only be obtained at a premium. In some parts of the country, expanding interest in hunting (as in Cornwall and Anglesey) had stimulated breeding, while elsewhere, in Cumberland and Lancashire, for example, the enthusiasm of local agricultural societies had produced the same effect (BPP, 1873, XIV, qq 850, 3181).

⁴⁴ J Lawrence, *The Complete Farrier and British Sportsman*, 1806, p 28; G Tylden, *Horses and Saddlery*, 1965, pp 19-20.

⁴⁵ For details, see, for example, R J Moore-Colyer, 'Gentlemen, horses and the turf in nineteenth-century Wales', *Welsh Hist Rev*, 16, 1992, pp 47-63.

⁴⁶ R H Eden, 'Army remounts', *Jour Bath and West of England Soc*, 4th ser, XI, 1900-1, p 6.

that they would remain sound and serviceable for at least a further fifteen years.⁴⁷ The policy, on the part of cavalry purchasing officers, or agents acting on behalf of the artillery, of buying at three-years old worked well enough in peacetime since general horse dealers, seeking material for the home or overseas markets, were normally only interested in four-year old animals. In time of war, however, the Army, keen to purchase any available horse, came face-to-face with the dealers in competition for the older animal. Prior to 1857, the military authorities were permitted only to spend a maximum of £26 5s 0d on a remount horse so that the confrontation was usually resolved in favour of the dealer, and regiments were left with the rump of the poorer animals, a point brought forcibly home during the Crimean War.⁴⁸ By the end of that war the government was sanctioning prices of up to £36 for artillery and £30 for cavalry remounts, yet the continuance of the wartime policy of buying four-year old horses to reduce rearing costs and, indeed, the abandonment of three-year old purchase, meant that competition with dealers remained fierce. Besides, as the latter bought up both breeding-mares and geldings for export into the European market, so the availability of army horses declined, and continued to decline as domestic demand for carriage-, riding- and harness-horses intensified.

As evidence given before the House of Lords select committee of 1873 makes abundantly clear, overseas demand throughout the 1860s had created a shortage of horses which, in view of the time-lag between the birth of a foal and its introduction to work, was felt with some severity by 1872 and was reflected in a steep increase in prices. John East, in partnership with Henry Phillips as one of the largest army purchasing agents in the

country, was forced to concede that foreigners or their agents were almost invariably able to offer higher prices than home buyers in the market for four-year old horses. On one occasion Colonel Edward Price of the Royal Horse Artillery had accompanied Phillips and East on a buying expedition which involved travelling 2827 miles to acquire a mere seventy-five horses, and with only £36 per head to spend 'the foreigners took them away from under my eyes'.⁴⁹ Overall, maintained East, the purchase price of certain types of army horses had risen 30 per cent between 1862 and 1872, while Edward Tattersall cited evidence to show that the sales prices of 'inferior' non-Thoroughbred stock had increased by more than half, and those of 'superior' non-Thoroughbreds had more than doubled in the same period.⁵⁰

The alarming realization that the Germans, in a remarkably short space of time, had managed to mobilize one million horses for the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1 stimulated the lethargic British government to set up the select committee of the House of Lords on horses in 1873. Under the chairmanship of the youthful Lord Rosebery, a man of distinguished intellectual attainments who was eventually to become leader of the Liberal Party and Prime Minister, the select committee assembled almost 400 pages of evidence concerning the supposed supply crisis. While it seemed that the hunter-type horse from Britain or Ireland was available in reasonable numbers (provided French purchasers stayed out of the market), witnesses were virtually unanimous in the view that the country would be hard-put to raise 2500 cavalry and 5000 artillery horses of acceptable quality in the course of six months, and even then many of these would have to be acquired abroad, with all the attendant risks.⁵¹ The contractor

⁴⁷ BPP, 1873, XIV, q 1750.

⁴⁸ Wilkinson, 'The supply of horses', p 93.

⁴⁹ BPP, 1873, XIV, q 1026.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, q 1820.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, qq 2068-71.

responsible for buying the artillery horses used in the 1872 autumn manoeuvres admitted that some three-quarters of these animals came from France and Belgium, and that he would be 'put to my wits end' to obtain sufficient horses on the home market.

Witnesses before the select committee were not slow to come forward with suggestions for solving the problem of horse supply. Prohibiting equine exports, providing an 'abundance of money' to subsidize prizes at agricultural shows and thereby to encourage competition among farmers and breeders, together with modifying warranty customs and limiting the requirement for dealers' licences were among some of the proposals. On the question of rationalizing the home supply of military horses, opinion was polarized into two camps. The Crimean War veteran General Robert Wardlaw, drawing on twenty-five years' experience of buying cavalry horses in Ireland, articulated a widespread view when he suggested that the government should revert to the traditional practice of acquiring remounts at three-years old and rearing them in a depot or stud farm before despatching them to regiments. By this means, competition from foreign purchasing agents would be circumvented while farmers, spared the cost of an extra year's keep of their saddle-type horses, would be encouraged to sell to the Army at a discounted price.⁵² Adopting this policy would ensure that the Army had a ready reserve of horses at various stages of training.⁵³ Although the logic of this argument was not lost on the committee, they listened with equal interest to other witnesses who pointed out the high cost of the establishment and maintenance of depots and, for that matter, of the government maintaining its own stock of quality stallions which might be used for

siring cavalry and artillery remounts. In tones which strike a familiar note in the 1990s, the committee roundly dismissed the notion of any sort of government interference in the smooth running of the horse market. 'In a country like Great Britain, interference in such matters as this is justly unpopular, even when practicable', and as far as the purchase of horses at three or four years of age was concerned, 'this should be considered simply with a view to what is expedient for the Army, and not in any way with the object of encouraging or discouraging breeding in the country. And it is not disposed to recommend the formation of Government military studs ... for the supply of the English service'.⁵⁴ In effect, beyond commending the zeal of some local agricultural societies, hinting that the government might consider supplementing the prize money offered by those societies, and effect minor changes to legislation regarding taxes on farmers' riding-horses, the committee took a generally negative view. Unconvinced, even, by the expert evidence testifying to the overall deterioration of equine quality in Britain, the committee was opposed to the establishment of some formal means of ridding the country of unsound travelling stallions. It was all very well for witnesses to applaud the official government licensing system operating in France, but, '... there is not the requisite machinery in England, and even if there were, it is questionable if such a compulsory examination would not be regarded, and perhaps with some justice, as a piece of "paternal government" and as an interference with the liberty of the subject'.⁵⁵ This view would continue to prevail until the late 1880s when the annual reports of the *Royal Commission on Horse Breeding* highlighted the scope of the disease problem, and the urgency of taking positive

⁵² *Ibid.*, q 1730.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, qq 348-9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, report, p 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, report, p 6.

TABLE 1
Imports and exports of horses (quinquennial averages)

Years	Exports	Imports
1851-55	2375	4387
1856-60	2594	2274
1861-65	4309	1540
1866-70	4341	1785
1871-75	3912	9763
1876-80	3606	17010
1881-85	6619	11027
1886-90	8517	13458
1891-95	14575	21896
1896-1900	32807	45755

Sources: Figures for 1871-1900 are taken from the *Agricultural Returns*; those for 1851-70, BPP, 1873, XI, *Customs House Returns*, appendix. Although the law did not require all horses to be entered at the Customs House before shipment, officials considered the return to be 'reasonably accurate'. The 1851-55 average is inflated by 12,800 horses imported during the Crimean War, 1853-4.

TABLE 2
Percentage distribution of imported horse types

Years	Stallions	Mares	Geldings
1888-92	6	18	76
1893-97	2	33	65
1898-1900	2	39	59

action by precluding from public service any stallion afflicted with one or other of a range of hereditary disease conditions or unsoundnesses.

By this time, Britain had become a net importer of horses, the great majority of which were mares and geldings (Tables 1 and 2). The important transatlantic trade in breeding stock, and more especially of heavier horse types, was virtually halted by the financial panic of 1893 and by the succession of droughts besetting the mid-western American states in the early 1890s. Although this market was to recover for a few years before the outbreak of the Great War, and stallions and mares of the Clydesdale, Shire and Suffolk breeds continued to be exported to South Africa, Australia and elsewhere, the heady days of the 1880s when shiploads of breeding stock

left Tilbury, Liverpool and Glasgow almost on a daily basis were never to return. Yet, mares, stallions and geldings still departed these shores in considerable numbers, mainly for the European market (Tables 3 and 4). Stallions of the English Thoroughbred breed continued in demand from the racing fraternity in France, breeding females of pace and action for military and leisure use found their way to studs in Germany, Holland and Russia, while worn-out 'bus- and carriage-horses were unceremoniously despatched to the Belgian meat market. Meanwhile, as the internal structure of the British economy adjusted to the creation of world markets in many commodities, horses continued to be required to fuel that economy. As a universal source of power the internal combustion engine remained little more than a future possibility while steam-powered industry, for all its marvels, still required the draught animal for feeding goods and raw materials into the system. Railway marshalling yards, coal-mines, the iron industry, short-haul transport systems, urban mass transport and local travel still relied heavily upon the horse, while steam-operated field machinery on the farm remained restricted to specialized niches. Accordingly, the exports of horses from Britain were offset by the importation of mares and geldings, principally from North America, to help meet the demands of the commercial and leisure economy and to contribute substantially to the needs of army supply (Table 2).

So far as the Army was concerned, the paranoia of the early 1870s had largely receded a decade later, and it was agreed that the peacetime establishment of 11,700 horses could be sustained by replacements from home supplies, although it was accepted that in the event of war recourse to American or European markets would be inevitable.⁵⁶ Despite the inherent risks involved, and the fact that farmers were

⁵⁶ Cathcart, 'Half-bred horses', p 138.

TABLE 3
Destinations of exported horses

Years	Percentage exported to		Germany	France	Holland	Belgium	Others
	USA	Canada					
1888-92	6	5	10	17	17	29	16
1893-97	2	—	6	18	21	48	7
1898-1900	—	—	8	16	15	56	5

TABLE 4
Percentage distribution of home-bred
exported horse types*

Years	Stallions	Mares	Geldings
1888-92	16	33	51
1893-97	2	18	80
1898-1900	2	21	77

* Subsequent to 1880 many of the 'home-bred' exports were themselves derived from stock previously imported from Europe.

unlikely to respond positively to any call in wartime to produce horses specifically for the Army, the authorities took a generally sanguine view. It went without saying that, '... as long as our navy is efficient we can draw our supply of remounts in wartime from all over the world at prices with which the English farmer cannot possibly compete, and it is hardly worth their while to breed horses in order to be in the market in the event of our navy failing to keep the waterways open'.⁵⁷ With the establishment of the Remount Department as a separate branch of the Army in 1887, the old system of purchasing horses through the medium of agents or regimental colonels was abandoned in favour of direct purchasing by the Inspector-General of Remounts. Animals so acquired were drafted to the remount centres at Woolwich and Dublin and first used on manoeuvres when they reached six years of age.⁵⁸

Whereas this arrangement ensured a uniform policy as to the quality of horses and their training, it did not address the central questions of horse supply and the fact that

the Remount Department was only allowed to spend a maximum of £40 each for its horses — a figure several pounds below the value of a decent mount on the open market. The various stallion improvement schemes and premium arrangements operated by the Royal Agricultural Society, The Hunters Improvement Society and The Royal Dublin Society, although helping to eliminate hereditary unsoundness and to establish a basis for twentieth-century licensing procedures, did little to stimulate home-based horse breeding outside the Thoroughbred fraternity.⁵⁹ When Britain blundered into the Boer War, frenetic efforts were made to procure equine replacements for the large numbers lost from sickness and chronic unfitness, by importing from Canada and the USA, to which countries the government also resorted shortly after the outbreak of the Great War. That they were obliged to requisition 140,000 horses from English farms and stables in the autumn of 1914 merely highlights the point that the 'patriotism of the English gentleman' could no longer be relied upon to furnish remounts in times of war. But this yielded ample opportunities for dealers in the Empire and elsewhere, and in excess of one million horses, principally from North America, Australasia and India, were shipped towards the Flanders mud. To the relief of all, the *arme blanche* proved totally inappropriate to a form of warfare in which the machine gun and explosive shell reigned supreme. The cavalry horse would henceforth be

⁵⁷ Eden, 'Army remounts', p 6.

⁵⁸ Tylden, *Horses and Saddlery*, p 23.

⁵⁹ C Lewis, 'Premium travelling stallions in Britain', *JRASE*, 145, 1984.

largely relegated to ceremonial duties, while the artillery horse, plunging through spent shell cases and shattered human torsos, would soon be replaced by motorized vehicles. Horses would become as irrelevant to modern warfare as the cel-

ebrated sentence, included in the Queen's Regulations of 1895 at the insistence of the duke of Cambridge, 'officers entering captured enemy balloons need not wear spurs'.

APPENDIX
Horse numbers in the United Kingdom (quinquennial averages)

Years	Number of horses returned by occupiers of land and unbroken horses and mares for breeding ^a				Horses charged to duty ^b	UK total
	England	Scotland	Wales	Total		
1869-73	1,004,820	177,714	120,802	1,303,336	826,436	2,129,682
1874-78	1,051,185	186,656	127,664	1,365,505		
1879-83	1,089,593	191,513	137,899	1,419,005		
1884-88	1,090,068	189,613	139,770	1,419,451		
1889-93	1,113,463	195,516	146,165	1,455,144		2,839,000 (1891) ^c
1894-98	1,176,684	205,098	152,373	1,534,155		
1899-1900	1,162,553	196,823	154,652	1,514,028		3,276,000 (1901) ^c

a: Agricultural Returns; b: BPP, 1873, XIV, appendix A: Board of Inland Revenue Return; c: Thompson, 'Nineteenth-century horse sense'.

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