



Uses of the Shire Horse through History

Horses have been domesticated for many thousands of years. Indeed, late bronze age grave goods have included bits and bridles. They were used for riding and as pack animals, although it was not clear when they were first used in agriculture. Oxen were the traditional draught animal, as they were more readily available than horses.

By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries horses had become more common, especially for pulling carts and transporting goods. These animals had to be strong to cope with the appalling nature of medieval roads, although they were considerably shorter in height than the giant Shire we know today.

The seventeenth century saw a great deal of development in horse breeding. An increased demand for travel by coach, culminating in the development of coach springs in 1690 led to the breeding of a large and powerful horse, that also had the capacity for speed.

By the eighteenth century the improvements in carriage design and road surface meant that lighter faster horses were used for long distance driving, whereas the heavier, slower horses found a role for themselves on the farm.

Eighteenth century changes in the technology of farming implements, such as Tull's Seed Drill, made the horse the animal of choice on the farm, replacing the ox. These horses were by now of a height and stature recognisable as a modern Shire.

The second half of the eighteenth century saw the construction of a nationwide system of canals which enabled heavy loads to be transported long distances. The Shire horse was the ideal beast to use as a Barge Horse, pulling the barges along the canals. They were also used to haul large wagons, drays, omnibuses and trams.

Although the Shire might now seem to us most at home in the fields, it must not be forgotten that up until the last half of the twentieth century, the horse was also the main urban means of transport, too.

The rise of urban living throughout history has always fueled a demand for goods from the countryside. The coming of the railways is often thought to have signaled the beginning of the decline in horse-drawn traffic, but in fact horses were in great demand for transporting goods to and from the railway yards. In fact, in 1893, the railway companies 'collecting and delivering goods to the metropolis have amongst them a stud of 6,000 (horses).' These horses would have had to be capable of large loads and so would have been Shires or a similar breed.

Carrier firms had around 19,000 horses in London alone, while the Capital's rubbish collection would have employed another 1,500 horses, all of whom would have been draught breeds.

Also in 1893 it was estimated that London's brewers used around 3,000 horses, many of which were Shires. Indeed, some brewers still use Shires today, not only for promotional purposes, but also for local deliveries.

The transportation of coal, the vital source of heating and cooking fuel, had to be done by horses, and with wagons weighing up to 3 tons, this was definitely a job for the heavies!

From the 1920s onwards the use of motorised transport rose rapidly and the need for the horse declined. Tractors replaced horses on farms and lorries replaced horse drawn wagons. Finally more and more road vehicles were powered by engines and the Shire horse's days soon seemed numbered.

Shire horse numbers fell from well over a million to just a few thousand by the 1960s and the breed was in serious trouble. A small group of dedicated breeders came to rescue though and the Shire is seeing a resurgence in popularity both as a working animal and a riding horse.

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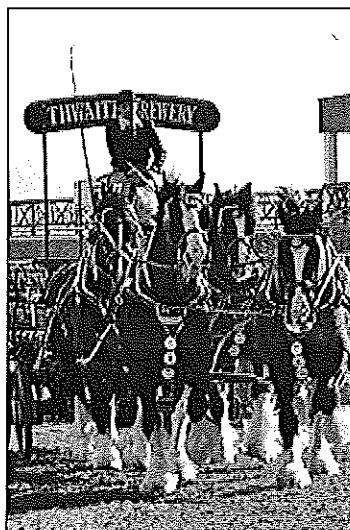
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Heavy horse breeds under threat

By Frances Lewis
BBC News

Britain's heavy horse breeds are under threat with one - the Suffolk punch - reduced to a few hundred mares, say conservationists.

The Rare Breeds Survival Trust says the numbers of shire horses, Clysdale horses and Suffolk punch horses have dwindled to such an extent that their very future is at risk.



There used to be thousands of shire horses in Britain

Although "heavy horses", as they are known, are renowned for their intelligence and gentle nature, encouraging more people to breed the horses in the UK has been become increasingly difficult.

For centuries, heavy breeds such as the shires worked as farm horses pulling carts and helping to plough the fields.

After the World War II, however, their numbers started declining. The need for increased food production meant more farmers used tractors for farm work rather than horses.

Most at risk

Dr Dawn Teverson, conservation officer at the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, says of the three breeds, the Suffolk punch is most at risk. There are fewer than 300 registered breeding females now left in the UK.

"If it wasn't for a handful of breeders after the war, who kept this horse

“ You are looking here at an icon for the UK and we don't want to let it go

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going, there would be no more Suffolk punch horses. It's absolutely crucial to our heritage and our future to save this horse.

Amanda Hillier, Suffolk Horse Society

"We have the responsibility to keep these breeds intact for future generations. If you do get to a very low number you could be talking about extinction," said Dr Teverson.

David Bakewell, from West Runton in Norfolk, has been breeding heavy horses for 25 years.

"The Suffolk punch is absolutely critical. As little as 100 years ago there were thousands of them," he said.

The Rare Breeds Survival Trust is working closely with breed societies such as the Suffolk Horse Society, which register the breeds, to encourage more heavy horses.

It is also monitoring the quality of the Suffolk punch breed to help maintain the breed's purity. State of the art computer software is being used to look at the genetic relationships and the different blood lines within the breed based on pedigrees.

Dr Teverson says the trust is spending a lot of money on a semen bank to help increase breeding, because it is easier to transport the semen around the UK than the horses themselves. The semen will be used in the future for conservation breeding.

Amanda Hillier, administrative secretary for the Suffolk Horse Society, says she is concerned about the current number of Suffolk punch horses but is quietly confident the numbers will improve.



Suffolk punch foals like Sunny are now a rarity (pic: Nigel Smith)

She said: "You are looking here at an icon for the UK and we don't want to let it go. The breed has been at a very low ebb for decades because the need for these horses wasn't obvious. Now we are very keen to maintain skills for these horses so numbers will then increase."

Good news

The society is actively promoting breeding by giving grants to owners who breed horses and also running training courses to teach people the skills to get heavy horses working in agriculture again.

"There's been a definite marked increase in the breed recently. In 2007 there were 37 new foals added to the stud book, an increase on the previous year and there are 26 registered licensed stallions on our list, which is more than a few years ago. There is good news as well as bad," said Ms Hillier.

Shire horses are now found across the world in countries such as Germany, Italy, Australia and the US.


PLACES TO SEE THE

- Lakeland Heavy Horse Centre
- Sherwood Forest Farm Park
- Norfolk Shire Horse Centre

Andrew Mercer, secretary to the Shire Horse Society, says shires are increasingly popular abroad but it has been a challenge to encourage more breeders in the UK.

He says more shire horses are being used for showing, riding, and cross-country driving.

"We have been working hard to highlight the different leisure activities the horses can be used for, in order to encourage more breeders. These horses certainly have a future but only if there are successful breeders," he said.

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