

Pit Ponies

by Dave Johnson

Long before steam powered locomotives, horses and ponies were working at coal mines on the surface providing general haulage such as the transportation of coal for local use. Prior to the development of steam powered pumping, and winding gear, horses were used to power the gins or whims which worked the underground pumping and winding machinery.

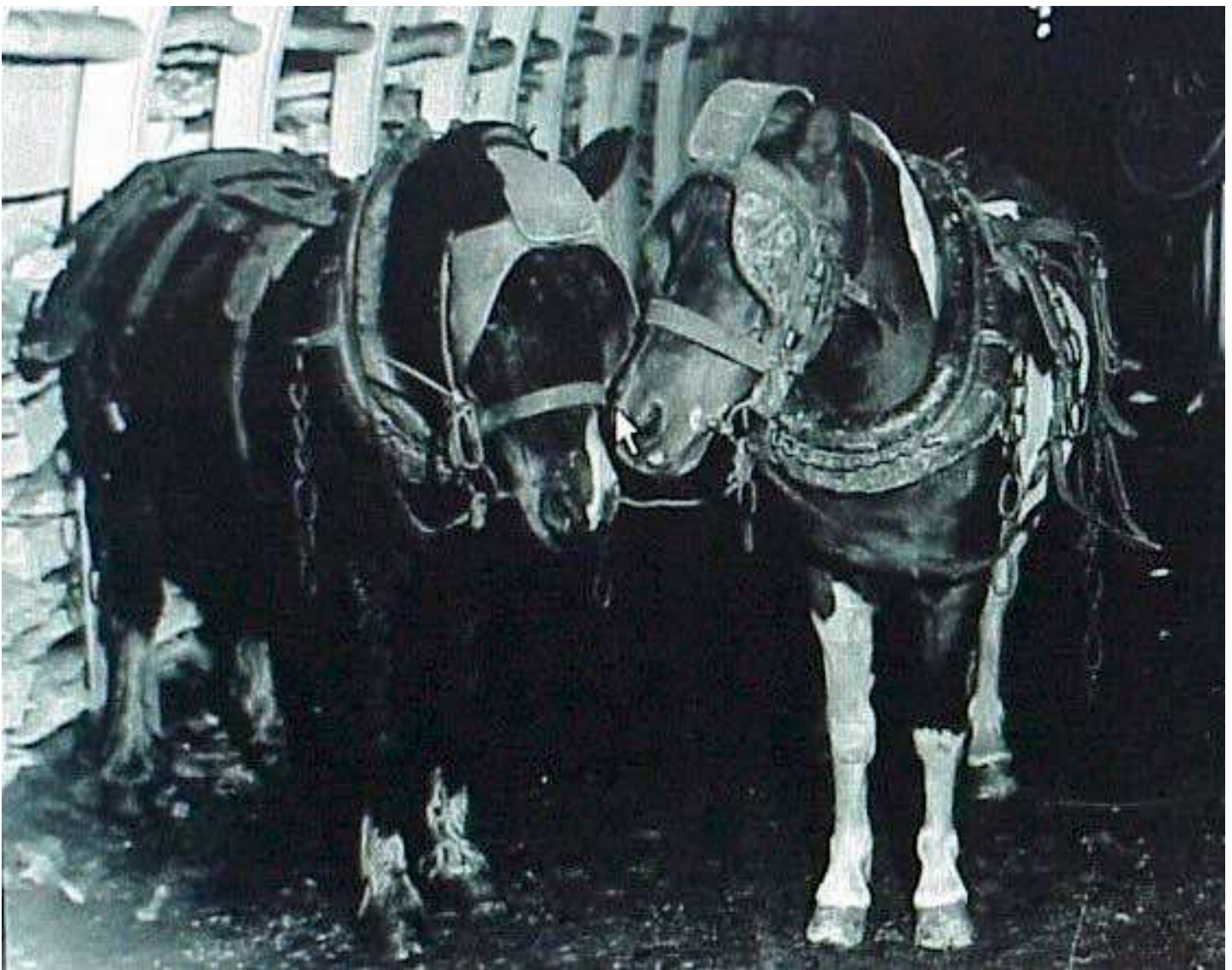
The first records of ponies and horses being used underground in coal mines in the UK appear in the mid-18th century when they are reported to have been used to drag a single corf (basket) on a sledge with iron covered runners. The introduction of wooden rails underground meant that a single horse could draw several wheeled tubs at once. By the 1790s, when cast iron rails were becoming more common, one horse could pull about ten-rail tubs, each holding around 300 kg of coal.



Pit ponies pulling ore car.

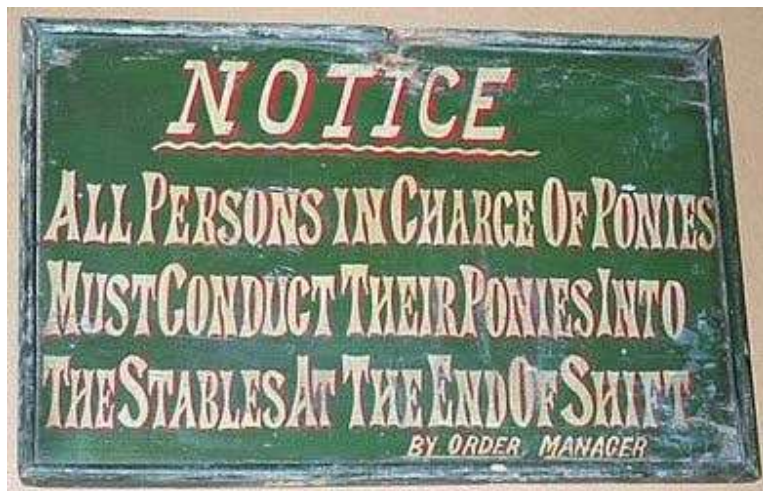
Records reveal that in thin-seam mines, where roadways were too low for ponies, women and children continued to be used to drag the coal to the bottom of the shaft. The Mines Act of 1842 prohibited all women, and children under the age of 10, from hauling coal or working underground in the mines, this accelerated the use of horses and ponies for underground haulage. At this point times were hard for miner and pony but the situation was to improve.

The first national legislation to protect horses underground was included in the Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1887. Under its limited provisions, the mine inspectors could investigate the treatment of horses and whether haulageway roofs were high enough to prevent injury to the horses' backs. Casualties were common, the ponies had to be put down due to broken legs and their feet getting stuck in "partings" or points in the tub rails. The ponies seemed to have a sixth sense for danger, they were known to stop dead and refuse to move, and suddenly the roof would collapse in front of them.



Pair of pit ponies in Harness.

Major protective legislation, in 1911, followed protests by groups such as the National Equine Defense League, the Scottish Society to Promote Kindness to Pit Ponies and a subsequent Royal Commission Report. This Pit Ponies' Charter governed the condition of stables, daily record keeping and the requirement for a competent horse-keeper for every fifteen horses. Ponies had to be at least four years' old before they could start work underground, and continued until they were no longer fit, often in to their twenties. There was a popular belief that pit ponies go blind underground which is untrue, and the use of blind ponies was prohibited by law. While some ponies did go blind from old age, and until effective leather headgear with eye guards was designed many ponies injured their eyes at work. Additional legislation in 1949 and 1956 regulated conditions for pit ponies even more closely. These amendments provided for their welfare in far greater detail.



Pit pony stable sign.

sent to the surface to be initialed by the Colliery Under-manager and Manager. While life in the coal mines has never been easy for men or horses, few working equines have received better care and respect than the pit pony. A pony in the mines received excellent care and attention throughout its working life.

Depending on the task to be done different breeds and sizes of ponies were selected. Horses of 1.7 m (16 hands and 3 inches) height could be used close to the shafts, where many tubs had to be kept moving and the roofs of the haulageways were higher. Small ponies of around 1.2 m (11 hands and 3 inches) height were generally used near the coal faces, with bigger animals up to 1.4 m (13 hands and 3 inches) being employed in the main haulageways with their higher roofs.. Generally geldings were preferred, though some stallions were used, but it was rather unusual to find mares underground.

Breeds varied considerably in different areas, but both Shetland and Welsh ponies were common, as well as sturdy Dale horses. During times of high production, particularly after a slump when stocks of ponies would be low, very high prices could be paid for good animals and in times of shortage, ponies were imported from as far away as the USA, Iceland and Russia.

The hours a pony could work were prescribed by law. A forty-eight hour work week was the maximum, except in special circumstances, but it could be less. A pony employed to carry supplies or on repair work, for instance, often worked only three or four hours in a shift. A pony did not work for more than two shifts in 24 hours or more than three shifts in 48 hours. A shift was set at 7 1/2 hours or less. Each pony had a driver who was responsible for it and might work with the same pony throughout its working life. Every pony taken from the stables was required to be recorded in a Mines & Quarries Act record book. Each day the book had to be signed by the Chief Horse-keeper and



Pit ponies at the hoist cage.

The selection of the pit pony was a matter of great importance and much care was taken in the process. Numerous characteristics of each horse were weighed before it was accepted for work in the mines. For instance, because of low roofs, steep grades and forced production, a pony had to be low set, heavily bodied, heavily limbed with plenty of bone and substance. They had to be low-headed and must be "sure-footed" and should be not under four to five, and generally not more than 14, years of age. The weight of the animal was important because often heavy loads had to be moved up and down steep grades which, in turn, necessitated sure-footedness because of road conditions. Another consideration was the temperament of the pony. Nervous or shy horses would be very expensive to break in and could cause a great deal of lost time. A good pit horse was one that was even-tempered and kind, a vicious horse was a danger to the drivers, liable to cause bodily injury and/or fatal accidents underground.

Before a pony started working underground, he received training lasting several weeks. During this period unsuitable ponies were weeded out. Once underground, ponies were used to pull empty tubs or carry materials such as pit props into the workings and to bring back tubs full of coal to the shaft.

Stable conditions were very important and as much as possible was done to tend to the comfort of these animals and lengthen their term of usefulness. In the stable, the height of the roof was to be seven feet when a five foot horse was in use. It should be able to raise its head and relax its muscles because it had to work all day carrying its head low. As little wood as possible was used in the stable to prevent underground fires.

Records in the UK show that the peak of employment for horses underground in the UK was in 1913, according to the Government Digest of Statistics, which coincided with Britain's maximum coal output, when around 70,000 horses were working. The use of pit ponies declined as mechanical coal cutting and haulage systems became more efficient .

The new coal cutting machines actually cut coal too quickly for horse transport to keep pace with increasing production and they began to be replaced by high-capacity systems, at first locomotives and then conveyors. By the end of the 1930s there were around 32,000 horses underground. When the National Coal Board was formed in 1947 it inherited 21,000 pit ponies and numbers continued to decline to around 15,500 in 1952, 6,400 in 1962, then to just 490 in 1973 and only 55 still working in major mines in the UK in 1984. By 1992, one deep mine, Ellington Colliery in Northumberland, England, still had 24 ponies which were used in salvage work. The last of these was retired in 1994 though this was not quite the end as a few remained in use in private drift mines in South Wales.

Today the National Coal Mining Museum for England keeps 4 retired pit ponies in their stable for visitors to see. Many other retired pit ponies have found good homes through the efforts of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the National Coal Board. These are the last of those intrepid ponies that hauled the coal that fuelled the British Industrial Revolution.



Scottish Society to Promote Kindness to Pit Ponies.