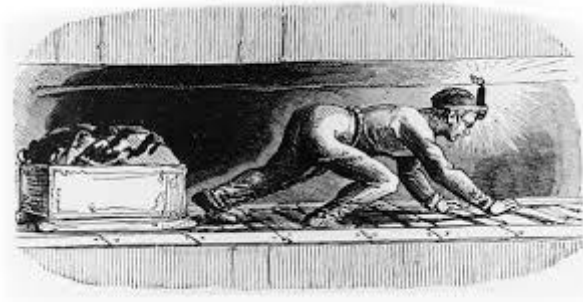


Pit Ponies in Britain

Katharine Marquis

Firstly, pit ponies, also known as mining horses, worked in coal mines in the British Isles *grosso modo* from the mid-18th (Durham coalfield, north-east England) until the mid-20th century. Originally it was women, and children aged 10 or under, who dragged the coal out of the mines.



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However, on 4th July 1838 a tragic accident happened at Huskar Colliery in Silkstone, Barnsley, in which 26 children drowned. It led to the Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1842 forbidding this practice hence pit ponies were used instead. Disgracefully, only one inspector was nominated to verify the Act's application, and no compensation was given to the women and children, so they were financially constrained to continue working: illegally. The British Mines Regulation Act of 1887 was created to better protect horses underground whose numbers were assessed to be 200'000 at that time, 70,000 in 1913, 21,000 when the National Coal Board was set up in 1947, and 55 in 1984. "Scout" and "Gypsy" were amongst the last ponies to be brought back up to the surface in February 1994 (Ellington Colliery, Northumberland), the last being a grey gelding named "Flax".



©National Equine Defence League

"Scout" and "Gypsy" spent a well-earned retirement at The Animals Refuge, Oak Tree Farm, near Carlisle. Ellington Colliery, 800 metres at its deepest, extended 15 miles (24 kilometres) under the North Sea.



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"Robbie" worked in Pant-y-Gaseg (tr. Horse's Hollow), near Pontypool, Wales up to 1999 in a drift mine (a near-horizontal coal-seam passageway with access to the exterior).

What exactly is a pit pony? It could be a horse, pony, or even a mule. Breeds included were Shetlands, Welsh, Dartmoor, Cornish and Russian and some even came from Iceland, the Faroe Islands and the United States during the interwar period. At the Big Pit, Blaenafon, Wales, most were ~15hh horses (a hand = 4"/10cm) with ponies for light haulage duties. Whatever, they all had one thing in common: they were geldings and, occasionally, stallions. Ideally they needed to be low set, with plenty of substance and bone, and sure-footed. The British Coal Mines Act of 1911 stipulated that ponies had to be "four years old and work ready" i.e. shod and checked by a vet before going underground. They could work until their twenties. Good pit ponies were a valuable asset and not easily replaced.



©Cornwalls.co.uk

A Bodmin Moor pony, Cornwall.

So what type of work did these "pit ponies" carry out since they varied in size? Well the smaller ones of 11hh or 12 hh could be found near the coalface. The 13 hh ones were used for the main haulage ways and big horses measuring 16 hh kept close to the shafts, where the roofs were higher, to keep the tubs moving. Some horses owned by these collieries also worked above ground transporting coal to their customers, for power winding or pumping engines but the vital work was moving coal from the coalface to the shaft.



https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pit_pony

Illustration of a pony being lowered down a mine shaft at Creuzot, France in 1879.

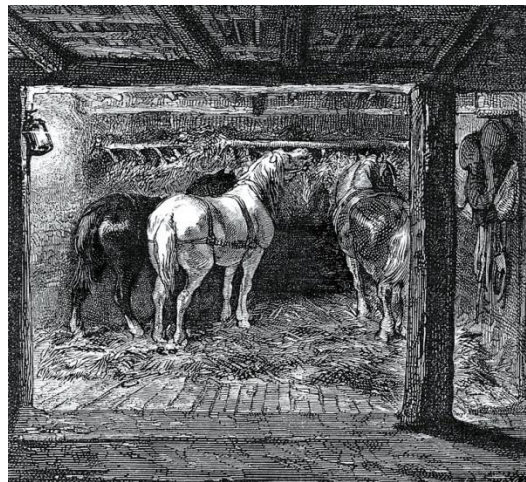
What about training? Ideally pit ponies were aged 4-5 and definitely not more than 14 years old. Training lasted several weeks under careful observation. Lively ones were immediately sidelined since they could cause fatal accidents underground whereas nervous, timid or shy ones were too expensive timewise to bring on. Temperament was paramount: they had to be even and good-tempered since, should danger arise, the natural equine instinct is "flight mode". Once accepted they were lowered underground: the smaller ones on a cage whereas the bigger ones' legs bound in straps, on a cable under the cage. It was a dangerous business. A lot of training was learnt once underground "on the job" such as being harnessed, pulling a heavy weight (tubs/drams taking pit props etc. in and bringing coal to the shaft), turning around within a small area (britching), pushing open the ventilation doors with their heads and understanding verbal commands. Pit ponies' names were, for practical reasons, often monosyllable (Carl, Flax, Patch, Pip).



Brass horseshoe nails
courtesy of aliexpress.com

However, another essential task had to be carried out before any equine went underground. Not only were the equines' hooves checked over and trimmed by a farrier before hot shoeing took place, but a specific template of that animal's hooves was created because, once underground, the shoes needed to be "cold-fitted". These shoes were made of a copper and zinc alloy under the generic term of "brass" as were the nails because, unlike steel, "brass" didn't produce sparks which would cause a fire or an explosion on the coalface. No equine was allowed to work unless it was fully shod. All pit ponies had their feet lifted and checked daily. No hoof... no horse! Normally shoeing was done by a team of farriers that dealt with the miners' specific requirements for their pick axes during the day and who then cold shod the designated ponies once returned to their stalls.

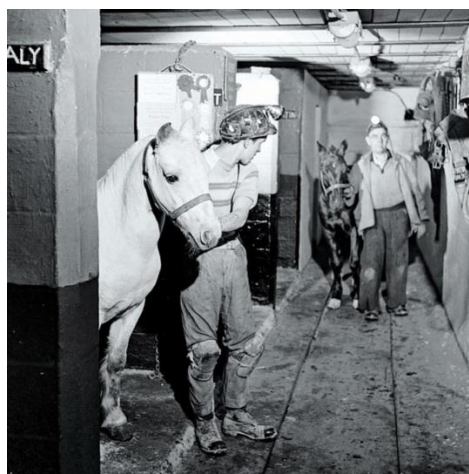
How were pit ponies cared for down in the mine? Initially they were stabled as seen in this old print:-



Wikipedia/Public Domain https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pit_pony

An 1879 artist's depiction of a stable inside a mine.

Conversely, in the 20th century cement stalls were favoured for safety purposes. Stabling had to be high enough not only for the animal to easily lift its head but to relax and stretch its neck muscles too. Horses can doze standing upright due to their "anatomical mechanism". Nonetheless, they need to lie down for a deep sleep hence the stalls had to be reasonably comfortable to enable them to do so, and kept clean. They had plenty of groundwater to drink and were fed maize and hay. Maize (cracked corn) provided equines with energy (starch) and stamina whilst helping them retain their body weight.



©National Coal Mining Museum for England/Harold White Collection (b/w image in stables)

The underground stables showing each pony's harness opposite its stall.

The halter's noseband is correctly placed halfway between the pony's eye and its mouth.

The grey pony in the stall is gently restrained and faces the passageway thus it can see the oncoming pony: this practice averts accidents.

Their coats were clipped and tails and manes “hogged” even as early as 1890. It should not be forgotten that they worked in a hot, moist environment filled with coal dust and it was important to keep them clean and cool. Requisite ventilation, and the provision of good air throughout the mine, was provided by intake and outflow pipes at the surface with closed air doors in specific passages to control their separate flow. Some later mines had electricity. Normally pit ponies worked two 4-hour shifts (maximum 48 hours per week as stipulated in the 1911 Charter). After their final daily shift, either their legs would be hosed down or they were walked through a bath to eliminate the coal dust. Usually they had one handler, occasionally more, which created friction amongst the miners since some were more caring than others. Indeed some equines, because they were easier to handle, were overworked until stricter laws were duly enforced.



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A horse with its tail and mane “hogged”.

This article should also include innovations and improvements for man and beast in the coal mining industry. The first was the miners’ safety lamp to detect firedamp invented by Sir Humphrey Davey (1778-1829) in 1815, preceded by the Clanny safety lamp created by William Reid Clanny (1776 -1850) in 1813.



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The Davey Lamp

Although the Martin Act to protect domestic animals came into being in 1822 the tribunals ignored it. More direct and drastic action was necessary. Richard Martin (1754-1834) and the Rev. Arthur Broome (1779-1837) became the founding fathers of the RSPCA in Old Slaughter’s Coffee Shop in London in 1824. William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was amongst its trustees. It underlined from its inception that animals were sentient beings and not just a commodity. Indeed, according to RSPCA calculations in 1878, 200’000 equines were working long shifts down in British coalmines with little food or water. Children too were in desperate need of better protection. The Liverpool Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (LSPCC) was established by Thomas Agnew (1834-1924) in 1883. The initial discussions in 1886 for the London SPCC were held in the RSPCA boardroom with Anthony Ashley Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury (1801-1885) as its first president. In 1889, it culminated with the first ever UK law to protect children from abuse and neglect and the SPCC became known as the NSPCC.

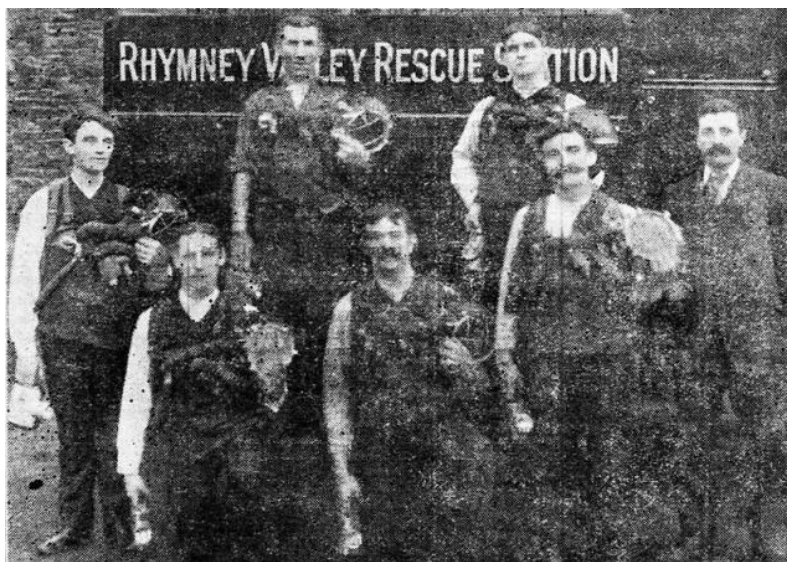
The conveyor belt, invented in 1905 by Richard Sutcliffe (1849-1930), would also revolutionise the mining industry. As regards the "Pit Pony's Charter" of 1911, it was Sir Harry Lauder (1870 –1950), whose life had been saved by a pit pony named "Captain", and Sir Winston Churchill (1874-1965) who were instrumental in improving the welfare and protection of pit ponies. This included protective head gear with eye guards, stalls of a decent size with clean straw/bedding to be cleansed/sanitised on a daily basis, canaries (1911-1986) to detect carbon monoxide (white damp) in mines, and mine rescue teams. Acts passed in 1949 and 1956 reinforced these mandatory conditions and enhanced protective equine care.



Photo: Wikipedia/Public Domain <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cave-in>

Illustration of a mine collapse aftermath from 1878

It was on 14th October 1913 that the worst disaster in coal mining history in Great Britain occurred following an explosion in the Universal Colliery, Senghenydd, Caerphilly, Wales. Out of 1'000 miners 439 were killed as well as a rescuer.



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Universal Colliery, Senghenydd, Caerphilly, Wales, coal-mining disaster rescue team.



©Charlotte Hall

*Of the 200 horses stabled underground only 100 survived the Senghenydd disaster.
An inkwell formed from the hoof of a pit pony.*



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One of the rescued ponies at Universal Colliery, Senghenydd, Wales

Indeed getting out 30 tons of coal a day was hard, dirty and dangerous work for both man and beast. Accidents and tragedy were commonplace. Many ponies died either from mistreatment, accident or explosions and had to be euthanized. The causes of accidents were many: brakes failing on tubs/drams, feet getting caught or damaged in the points of the tub rails, broken legs, heads and withers scraped to the bone due to low ceilings, infections in a dirty environment following injury, or tetanus due to a bacterial infection.



Photo: Courtesy of the Torfaen Museum ©Deborah Wildgust

*One of the Tirpentwys pit ponies.
The pit pony's head harness was conceived to protect its head and eyes from falling objects and low roofs.
Its conception also helped equines avoid both rails and points.*

Although these ponies worked in darkness they were very aware of their surroundings, some stopping dead in their tracks realising that a roof fall was imminent just ahead of them. Some were blinded in one eye due to being hit by sharp objects, falling rocks or roof falls in which case they used their noses against the hard stone to know where to turn in the passages. If a pit pony lost its sight in both eyes due to accident or old age it was no longer permitted to work (by law) and its fate was sealed. If a lamp fizzled out miners were conscious that pit ponies, having good night vision, always knew their way back to the stable... however far away it happened to be. They could count too and counted the click of tubs/drams... a fourth one meant that they did not budge until it was removed. Injuries to animals was the responsibility of the Horse Keeper/Ostler ("Gaffer Hallier" in Wales) who reported injured and sick animals to the vet who had the authority to prevent them from working.



©Steve Humphreys

A miner's snap tin.

The metal tin, shaped like a slice of bread, prevented the plentiful mice and rats underground from accessing the miner's lunch. The clip, when fastened, snapped the two elements together and allowed miners to attach the tin to their belts or hang it up.

A pony driver sometimes had to deal with a stricken/injured pony trying to bolt or kicking in all directions with shod hooves. It cost some miners their lives. Although equines were treated by a minority of miners as "tools" others had strong bonds with them and took two "snap" (lunches) to work... one for himself and the other for his pony. John William Bell of Elsecar Colliery, near Barnsley, was given an award in 1904 by the Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Pit Ponies. Instead of crawling through a small opening to escape to the pit face with fellow miners he remained with his horse to ensure that both were rescued.

Both man and beast contracted COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), due to the inhalation of dust and toxins in coalmines.

In 1938 the Pay Bill came into being allowing pit workers to go on a fortnight's holiday. This had its benefits and drawbacks for both pony and man. Bringing ponies up and down the mine shaft wasn't without risk to both human and equine. The change of schedule led to these normally quite ponies becoming very agitated. Some collieries worried whether it was cruel to take them above ground and then to return reticent ponies to a life underground whether it was for holidays, lockouts or long strikes as was the case in the 1980s. Being used to the dark passages, often sacks were put over their eyes to give them time to adapt to sunlight, and also to keep them calm, or otherwise they were put out at night. A handler was designated to oversee them when above ground.



©National Coal Mining Museum for England

"Sparky" and "Carl" retired from Ellington Colliery in 1994

Not only did some enjoy being put out to grass but some also participated in community events such as pit pony races, or being shown at regional shows, and thereby kept off of work so they looked their best.

Eventually, with one pit closing after another the remaining pit ponies were brought to the surface. Those who were too ill or too old had to be destroyed. Many were suffering from respiratory diseases. When it became apparent that some were being sold for slaughter the British public, appalled, remonstrated. The National Coal Board assisted by the RSPCA spent 18 months ensuring good homes for 1'500 of them, checking that these were knowledgeable households, with decent stabling, and the financial ability to cover food costs. Some went to open air museums. It must not be forgotten that, for those fortunate enough to enjoy retirement, it was nonetheless difficult. These ponies had never lived in a paddock or been part of a herd. Their working life had been spent with man and they might fret or fight if first left in a field. A lot of people offered extreme care to help rehabilitate them. Yes, indeed they cared.



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Retired from Sacriston Colliery in 1986, "Pip" was one of the last ponies to work on the Durham Coalfield. Here he is decked out in his old working harness. This photo was taken at the drift mine, part of the Beamish Open Air Museum where he lived for 22 years until his death at the age of 35.



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A much loved "Pip" celebrated his 30th birthday with a carrot cake.

It should not be forgotten that a lot of coalminers were less fortunate: they simply lost their jobs and many remained out of work "scarred by the legacy of the past".

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