

INTRODUCTION



I

Surprisingly little research has been done into the horse trade of pre-industrial England, an oversight which Professor J. H. Plumb commented upon in the Stenton Lecture of 1972, and which was also noted by Dr Joan Thirsk, speaking at the same event five years later.¹ Horses played such a vital role in the social and economic life of the country that answering questions about the sources of supply and the means by which they were marketed and sold should have been among the priority tasks which historians set themselves. As Dr Thirsk observed,

When we consider the age-long dependence of man on the horse coupled with the dramatic expansion of economic activity in the early modern period, it is remarkable how little interest historians have shown in the way that horses were made available to meet more insistent and fastidious demands.²

This lack of concern cannot be excused by the absence of information since the horse trade is very well documented. Apart from general sources such as manorial, parochial and borough records, estate papers, legal documents of various sorts and probate wills and inventories, there exists a special category of material, the toll book.³ As a result of legislation passed in the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth, which aimed at reducing the incidence of horse stealing by tightening up controls of the trade, all transactions had to be entered into books set aside for that purpose. Historians have known of their existence for some time and have occasionally used them, but have never done so in a systematic way. This is all the more surprising when one considers the richness of the material, providing as it does, a range of information unrivalled among the sources for inland trade. Among the

1 J. H. Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth Century England* (Reading, 1973), p. 16, n. 58; J. Thirsk, *Horses in Early Modern England: for Service, for Pleasure, for Power* (Reading, 1978), p. 5.

2 Thirsk, *Horses*, p. 5.

3 *Infra*, pp. 55–60 for a fuller discussion of the uses of toll books.

items that can be looked at are details of prices and types of horses sold, their functions and such characteristics as sex, colour, age, size, pace and distinguishing marks. Information can also be obtained about the people involved in the trade – to whom they were selling horses and from whom they were buying, contacts between dealers and the scale of their operations. Comparisons can also be made between individual fairs, especially on those occasions when they overlap in time. Other details include catchment areas, periodicity, annual fluctuations and types of horses sold at particular fairs.⁴

II

Improvements had to be made in the production of horses and in the methods of distribution because, as in the marketing of other commodities, the population rise of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries created an extra demand. Developments in the use of horses for draught and carriage purposes were particularly important, for the expansion of trade that accompanied demographic growth necessitated more horses to pull waggons and carts or to carry packs on their backs. It has been calculated in a recent survey that the effective capacity of the road carrying industry may have gone up three or fourfold during the course of the two hundred years.⁵ The adoption and spread of the heavy four-wheeled waggon, which after its introduction from the Low Countries at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, complemented and to a certain extent replaced the traditional two-wheeled carts and wains, made the industry more efficient but at the same time increased the demand for horses.⁶ The number of pack-horses also rose. In certain circumstances they possessed decided advantages and were especially effective over long hauls: they were faster, could travel over rougher ground, were more flexible in their number and required fewer men to attend to them.⁷ Many thousands of horses were needed to service the varied enterprises of the nation. The important malt trade between Enfield and London, for instance, created such a heavy demand for pack-horses in the period before the Lea was made navigable, that on one morning early in Elizabeth's reign 2,200 animals were counted on the road between Shoreditch and Enfield.⁸

4 P. R. Edwards, 'The Horse Trade in Tudor and Stuart England', in F. M. L. Thompson, ed., *Horses in European Economic History: A Preliminary Canter* (Reading, 1983), pp. 113–14.

5 J. A. Chartres, *Internal Trade in England 1500–1700* (1977), pp. 40–1.

6 J. Crofts, *Packhorse, Waggon and Post* (1967), p. 7.

7 Edwards, 'Horse Trade', p. 117; J. A. Chartres, 'Road Carrying in England in the Seventeenth Century: Myths and Reality', *Ec.H.R.*, 2nd ser., 30 (1977), pp. 83–4.

8 D. O. Pam, 'Tudor Enfield, The Maltmen and the Lea Navigation', *Edmonton Hundred History Society, Occasional Paper*, N.S., no. 18, n.d.

Introduction

3

The growth in the volume of traffic, especially the use of heavy waggons and their large teams of horses, affected the condition of the roads and it is debatable how much improvement was brought about by the employment of statute parish labour and later by the establishment of the first turnpike trusts. What is certain is that trade did increase and that expansion was not limited by the state of the highways.⁹ Even in such inhospitable areas as south Yorkshire and north Derbyshire, a considerable number of wheeled vehicles, mainly wains, had been regularly in use on the roads since the Middle Ages.¹⁰ Links were established between London and the provinces and by the end of the sixteenth century regular carrier services were operating between the capital and a number of towns. The provision of services further increased during the following century, according to Dr Chartres, growing appreciably between 1637 and 1681 and then accelerating between 1681 and 1715.¹¹ Clearly, in spite of the cost advantages enjoyed by river and coastal transport, especially in the movement of bulky items of low unit value, a good deal of internal trade was road based.¹² In the first place goods had to get to the wharves and later to be moved from them. In times of war, moreover, coastal traffic was more likely to be impeded than road transport and this influenced the judgement of many merchants.¹³ In the textile industry road carriage was the normal mode of transport. The light weight and relatively high unit value of the commodity enabled it to withstand the greater cost of overland transport and this method was often quicker and more convenient too. Even where water communication was accessible, roads were often preferred because of the damage done to the wool by the damp.¹⁴

The population rise, by inflating the price of basic commodities, may have had an adverse effect on many people by lowering their real income and thereby their standard of living, but the commercial expansion that accompanied it offered opportunities for the enterprising individual who could acquire a horse. Dr Spufford has shown how important in the career of the pedlar-chapman was the purchase of a horse, since it enabled him to stay out longer and carry a more imposing stock of goods. If he thrived, he could hitch his horse to a waggon and further improve his position. Significantly, whilst the median value of the stock of dealers on foot in the late seventeenth century was £12. 7s. 10d., that of horse owners was

⁹ Chartres, *Internal Trade*, pp. 40–1

¹⁰ D. G. Hey, *Packmen, Carriers and Packhorse Roads* (Leicester, 1980), pp. 91–102.

¹¹ T. S. Willan, *The Inland Trade* (Manchester, 1976), pp. 12–13; Chartres, 'Road Carrying', *passim*, esp. p. 78

¹² Chartres, *Internal Trade*, p. 30.

¹³ W. Albert, *The Turnpike Road System in England 1663–1840* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 7.

¹⁴ Chartres, *Internal Trade*, pp. 27–8; P. J. Bowden, *The Wool Trade in Tudor and Stuart England* (1971), pp. 75–6.

£22. 5s. 4d.¹⁵ In the carrying trade, participants ranged from men with a single horse to individuals such as Joseph Naylor of Rothwell (W.R.Y.) who in 1718 possessed 101 head, but in between these two extremes scattered references indicate that people often owned about a half-dozen animals.¹⁶ Opportunities for small operators were probably best in developing industrial areas, and among the people involved were local farmers who augmented their income by acting as part-time carriers in the slack periods on the farm. In the Neath area of Glamorgan many husbandmen from the late seventeenth century onwards used their horses to carry iron ore and coal, and coal horses became an important capital asset of those of their class who lived near a pit or an iron works.¹⁷ The small man, however, was vulnerable not only to changes in the general pattern of trade but also, on a personal level, to the loss of his capital equipment, his horse. In the Shropshire parish of Myddle in 1700, Richard Gough recorded the case of Richard Maddock who had become a carrier but who had been broken by the death of an old horse.¹⁸

On the farm, horses gradually took over from oxen as draught animals, continuing a process that had been going on for centuries. In the Middle Ages the greatest advances had been made in the use of horses for harrowing and haulage, for oxen still predominated as plough animals. All-horse teams had made an appearance in East Anglia, the Chilterns and in the Home Counties and were more prominent on small peasant holdings than on demesne farms. Elsewhere, horses were used but combined with oxen in mixed teams, a device which speeded up the task of ploughing. By the end of the Middle Ages a certain rationalisation in the use of horses and oxen seems to have taken place, with farmers in particular areas intensifying their use of one animal or the other (though substantial farmers were still more likely than smaller scale cultivators to employ both horses and oxen). Various factors determined the choice. Horses, stronger, quicker and more agile animals, were particularly suited to light or stony soils, whilst oxen did comparatively better on stiff, heavy clays. Horses cost more to keep, however, and were almost valueless when their working life was over. Oxen, on the other hand, could be fattened and sold for a considerable sum.¹⁹

15 M. Spufford, *The Great Reclotting of Rural England* (1984), pp. 45, 49.

16 Somerset R. O., CQ 3/1/34 fo. 42; Richard Gough, *The Antiquities and Memoires of the Parish of Myddle* (Shrewsbury, 1875), p. 93; Hey, *Packmen*, p. 99.

17 M. I. Williams, 'Agriculture and Society in Glamorgan 1660-1760', unpubd Leicester University PhD Thesis (1967), p. 312.

18 Gough, *Parish of Myddle*, p. 93.

19 This paragraph is based on J. Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation* (Cambridge, 1986), esp. pp. 112-14, 164, 220, 246 (harrowing); pp. 95-7, 114-15, 164, 175, 221-5 (haulage); pp. 100-12 (composition of teams); pp. 172-212 (peasants and

Introduction

5

Farmers in early modern England had to make similar calculations, and if by the end of the period horses were being used in all parts of the country, they increased most rapidly in areas where they could be easily integrated into the local farming economy. The growing commercialisation of agriculture, by stimulating regional specialisation, had an important effect. Thus common field farmers with good access to markets for their corn readily turned to horses since they were also used for carting and could be fed on home-grown corn, pulses and vetches. In Leicestershire the substitution of horses for oxen is discernible from the 1530s and seems to have been initially associated with the growth in the acreage of oats. At first these horses were largely bred on the farm but as the area of common land shrank, farmers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries found it necessary to buy in young stock in order to make the best use of their grazing rights.²⁰ The decision to extend the use of horses was easiest to make in common field communities located in areas of light soil, where favourable conditions had led to the early use of the animal. Fodder was plentiful and as the soils were easy to plough, their speed, strength and agility gave them an advantage.²¹ In contrast, oxen survived as draught animals in areas of heavy ground with ample pasture and where the steadier pull that the beasts could exert was more effective. This distinction can be seen in the mode of traction on the farms of south-eastern England in the seventeenth century, for horses had taken over at an early date on the downs but had failed to make the same progress in the weald.²²

Another major consideration was the level of demand for carting, a factor which became more prominent as commercial agriculture developed. In this activity the functional superiority of the horse was crucial, a point that had already been recognised by farmers in the Middle Ages. Larger farmers, as in east Worcestershire, might keep their oxen to pull the

horses); pp. 97–9, 210–12 (late medieval rationalisation in practice); pp. 158–71 (debate over use of horses and oxen).

- 20 W. G. Hoskins, 'The Leicestershire Farmer in the Sixteenth Century', in *Essays in Leicestershire History* (Leicester, 1950), p. 177; J. Goodacre, 'Lutterworth in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Market Town and its Area', unpubd Leicester University PhD Thesis (1977), p. 110; D. Fleming, 'A Local Market System: Melton Mowbray and the Wreake Valley 1549–1720', unpubd Leicester University PhD Thesis (1980), p. 38.
- 21 J. C. K. Cornwall, 'The Agrarian History of Sussex 1560–1640', unpubd London University MA Thesis (1953), pp. 94–5; C. W. Chalklin, *Seventeenth Century Kent* (1965), p. 104; Lambeth Palace Library, Probate Inventories of Cheam, East Horsley and Merstham (Surrey); R. W. Chell, 'Agriculture and Rural Society in Hampshire circa 1600', unpubd Leicester University M. Phil. Thesis (1975), p. 65; E. Kerridge, 'The Agrarian Development of Wiltshire, 1540–1640', unpubd London University PhD Thesis (1951), p. 127.
- 22 Cornwall, 'Agrarian History of Sussex', pp. 94–5; Lambeth Palace Library, Probate Inventories of Burstow and Charlwood (Surrey); Chalklin, *Kent*, pp. 98, 104.

plough but increased the number of horses to do other jobs around the farm or to transport their produce to market. Poorer farmers could not afford the luxury of specialisation, however, and had long concentrated upon horses because of their greater flexibility. They could, of course, supplement their income by acting as part-time carriers.²³

In the post-Restoration period horses were more widely dispersed around the country than ever before and were even making inroads into the strongholds of ox-draught. The acceleration in the pace of change at this time can, to a large extent, be seen as one of the responses made by substantial farmers to the problem of depressed corn prices. The introduction of large draught horses and heavy four-wheeled waggons onto the holdings of prosperous mixed farmers in lowland England were measures designed to promote greater efficiency and, by cutting costs, to maintain the profitability of the enterprises. Similar motives prompted enclosure and the development of more intensive rotations, the opening up of the downlands as corn-producing areas, the consolidation of holdings and the search for new markets both at home and abroad.²⁴ In this critical time for mixed farmers, the prosperous yeomen had a considerable advantage over their smaller neighbours. They could not only absorb greater levels of capital investment necessary to promote efficiency but also benefited from economies of scale. Regional studies, such as those undertaken on Lincolnshire and Oxfordshire, show that the larger farmers were conspicuously more successful than the smaller men in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and this consideration has an obvious bearing on the debate over the decline of the small land holder.²⁵

Facilities for personal transport also improved during the course of the Tudor and Stuart period and further increased the demand for horses. By Continental standards horse ownership was widespread in England and the number of people who rode on horseback was one of the features noticed by foreign observers. In 1558 the Venetian ambassador, in a despatch to his master, remarked that peasants were accustomed to do so and therefore, he said, the country could be called the land of comforts.²⁶

23 J. A. Yelling, 'Probate Inventories and the Geography of Livestock Farming: A Study of East Worcestershire 1540–1750', in J. A. Patton, ed., *Pre-Industrial England: Geographical Essays* (Folkestone, 1979), pp. 102–3.

24 C. Wilson, *England's Apprenticeship 1603–1763* (1984), p. 245; D. C. Coleman, *The Economy of England 1450–1750* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 122–4; Chartres, *Internal Trade*, p. 40.

25 Wilson, *England's Apprenticeship*, p. 250; Coleman, *Economy of England*, pp. 125, 128; B. A. Holderness, 'Aspects of Inter-Regional Land Use and Agriculture in Lincolnshire 1600–1850', *Lincs. History and Archaeology*, 9 (1974), p. 37; M. A. Havinden, ed., 'Household and Farm Inventories in Oxfordshire 1550–90', Oxford Record Society, 44 (1965) and H(istorical) M(anuscripts) C(ommission) Joint Publication, 10 (1965), pp. 275–8.

26 *C(alendar of) S(tate) P(apers) V(enetian)*, VI, iii, 1557–8, p. 1672.

Introduction

7

Inventories of the mid-sixteenth century do indicate a high proportion of horse owners but the information has to be treated with caution because only people of a relatively high social standing had their goods appraised. In particular, it was a more exclusive group than it was to become in the following hundred years when the inflationary spiral, by reducing the value of money, had the result of extending the circle of people for whom inventories were made.²⁷ With regard to the ambassador's observation, therefore, Dr Thirsk's suggestion that the word 'yeoman' should be substituted for the term 'peasant' is a reasonable one.²⁸ In the more difficult conditions of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries a smaller proportion of people possessed a horse. As the income of many workers deteriorated in real terms, they had to put aside a comparatively larger amount to purchase staple items like food and clothing and to pay their rent, and the marginal horse owners found themselves caught in an economic squeeze. After the mid-seventeenth century the number of horse owners increased once more, the result not only of improvements in the general standard of living but also of developments in the organisation of the market. The rise, largely derived from an analysis of sets of inventories from different parts of the country, can be corroborated by other information. At Horbling (Lincs.), for instance, a series of parish rates were made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, based on the ownership of a single animal, and they indicate a growth in the proportion of horse owners in the village after a low point in the reign of Charles I (Tables 1a and 1b).²⁹

Horses could also be hired and as more people travelled the roads of the country, hackney services proliferated, especially in large centres of population. The celebrated Hobson of Cambridge possessed a string of 40, but small men were also involved, taking advantage of economic opportunities. According to the town leet records of Southampton in 1582, 'ev[er]y man allmost in this towne that hath a horse do vse to hyer owt to

27 J. M. Bestall and D. V. Fowkes, eds., 'Chesterfield Wills and Inventories, 1521-1602', *Derbys. Rec. Soc.*, 1 (1977); F. G. Ermison, ed., 'Jacobean Inventories', *Beds. Hist. Rec. Soc.*, N.S., 20 (1938); Havinden, 'Oxfords. Inventories'; P. A. Kennedy, ed., 'Nottinghamshire Household Inventories', *Thoroton Society Record Series*, 22 (1963); J. S. Moore, ed., *Clifton and Westbury Probate Inventories, 1609-1761* (1981); J. A. Yelling, 'Livestock Numbers and Agricultural Development 1540-1750', in T. R. Slater and P. J. Jarvis, eds., *Field and Forest: An Historical Geography of Warwickshire and Worcestershire* (Norwich, 1982), pp. 281-99.

28 Thirsk, *Horses*, p. 5.

29 Yelling, 'Livestock Numbers'; P. R. Edwards, 'Shropshire Agriculture 1540-1750', in G. Baugh, *Victoria County History of Shropshire*, forthcoming; inventory abstracts collected for J. Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*; IV, 1500-1640 (Cambridge, 1967) and V, 1640-1750 (Cambridge, 1984). I am grateful to Dr Thirsk for allowing me to look at this information. Lincs. A.O., Horbling Probate Inventories, Horbling parish rates are Lincs. A.O., Horbling Parish Records, 7/1, 7/3, 12/2.

Table 1a. *Horbling (Lincs.) parish rate assessments: number of horses per holding*

| Number of horses | 1636 | 1701 | 1724 | (1724-42) |
|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 0 | 24 40.0% | 17 26.6% | 10 18.9% | 8 14.3% |
| 1-5 | 20 33.3% | 24 37.5% | 22 41.5% | 28 50.0% |
| 6-10 | 10 16.7% | 10 15.6% | 6 11.3% | 10 17.9% |
| 11-20 | 6 10.0% | 13 20.3% | 14 26.4% | 8 14.3% |
| 21-30 | — | — | — | 1 1.8% |
| Over 30 | — | — | 1 1.9% | 1 1.8% |
| Total holdings | 60 | 64 | 53 | 56 |
| Median (all) | 1 | 3-4 | 3 | 2 |
| Median (those with horses) | 3 | 4 | 5 | 5 |

such as they lyke & also the hostelers of Innes be horse hyrers'. As a result the keeping of horses for hire was restricted to eight men, although within a few years the inhabitants were complaining that this system was worse than the old one, suggesting that the townspeople's action had met a real demand.³⁰ Private travellers could also utilize the facilities of the postal service with its relays of horses. After its establishment in 1511 the service grew rapidly and by the end of the sixteenth century postal roads radiating out from London linked the capital with Dover, Falmouth, Milford Haven, Holyhead, Carlisle and Berwick. Subsequent development filled out the system and by 1666 a number of branch lines had been created.³¹ Other travellers bought a horse at the outset of a journey with the intention of selling it at the end of the trip. At ports, for instance, some of the horses on sale at local markets and fairs were disposed of by people about to embark on board ship – mariners are recorded in surviving toll books at

³⁰ Crofts, *Packhorse, Waggon and Post*, p. 23; F. J. C. and D. M. Hearnshaw, eds., 'Court Leet Records, I, ii, 1578-1602', *Southampton Record Society* (1906), pp. 228, 243.

³¹ Crofts, *Packhorse, Waggon and Post*, pp. 62, 61; H. Robinson, *The British Post Office: A History* (Princeton, NJ, 1948), pp. 64-5.

Introduction

9

Table 1b. *Horbling parish inventories: number of horses per holding*

| Number of horses | 16th century | 1600–46 | post-1660 |
|-------------------------------|--------------|-------------|------------|
| 0 | 24 26.1% | 32 45.7% | 4 13.8% |
| 1–5 | 27 29.3% | 19 27.1% | 9 31.0% |
| 6–10 | 28 30.4% | 12 17.1% | 7 24.1% |
| 11–20 | 8 8.7% | 5 7.1% | 7 24.1% |
| 21–30 | 4 4.3% | 2 2.9% | 1 3.4% |
| 31–40 | 1 1.1% | — | 1 3.4% |
| Total | 92 | 70 | 29 |
| Median (all) | 3–4 | 1 | 6 |
| Median (those with horses) | 6–7 | 5–6 | 9 |

Bristol, Chester, Plymouth and Portsmouth and Irish merchants at Chester.³²

Such developments helped to stimulate activity in the market place. Postmasters could impress horses to supply the post whenever necessary, but in the ordinary course of business had to buy their stock, as did the hackney men. As more and more people became involved, the demand for horses grew, especially as hired horses did not last very long. The quality and condition of post and hackney horses were matters of constant debate, travellers complaining of poor standards and the hirers accusing the riders of ill-treating the animals. In consequence, hackney men and postmasters were among the regular customers at horse fairs and often engaged in a little buying and selling on the side. For people who bought a horse merely to complete a journey, the development of horse fairs and the ease with which horses could be bought and sold, made this a feasible course of action, although, of course, they had to weigh up market conditions. Their

32 Toll Books. In 1610 Sir George Radcliffe, then a student at Oxford, thought about buying a horse on which to ride home. After weighing up the economics of the business, however, he decided against it; T. D. Whitaker, ed., *The Life and Correspondence of Sir George Radcliffe knight, LL.D.* (1810), p. 53.

actions must have had an invigorating effect on the market, not only increasing the rate of turnover of stock but also helping to stimulate the flow of traffic between different parts of the country.

Coaching services developed too. In the early sixteenth century all that was available for transport were a few cumbersome vehicles built like small waggons slung on chains and known as 'chariots'. By the reign of Elizabeth, however, the Pomeranian coach with its elegantly built and furnished body, suspended on leather braces, had made its appearance.³³ The most luxurious models belonged to the gentry and nobility and cost a lot of money but as a mode of conveyance coaches grew rapidly in popularity, especially in London. In 1601 the House of Lords proposed a sumptuary measure to limit their use effectively to the leisured classes, but the bill was lost and the number of coaches continued to increase, causing severe congestion in parts of the capital.³⁴ In *Coach and Sedan* (1636) Henry Peacham has one of his characters, the surveyor, say that there were over 6,000 of them in London and its environs. At Whitehall, the character continues, 'you would admire to see them, how close they stand together (like Mutton pies in a Cookes-oven) that hardly you can thrust a pole betweene'. The main problem was caused by the rapid increase in the number of hackney coaches, those put out to hire, and in the year that *Coach and Sedan* was published, the King issued a proclamation which aimed at restricting the use of these vehicles.³⁵

The seventeenth century also witnessed the gradual spread of stage-coaches along the roads of England, linking a number of towns to the capital and to one another. In 1637 all the services, except one that John Taylor noted, were to places within 30 miles of London. By the time that the *Traveller's and Chapman's Instructor* was published in 1705 the capital was connected with 180 towns and there were regular services to all parts of the country.³⁶ The growth in posting and stage-coach networks had a more general effect on commercial affairs too, because as they improved mobility and the dissemination of information, they helped to integrate the regional economies.

The upper classes adopted coaches partly as a means of ostentatious display: apart from the cost of the vehicles, a considerable sum of money had to be laid out for a matching set of fine coach horses. Top prices were paid for horses from abroad, particularly those with Flemish blood, a

33 Crofts, *Packhorse, Waggon and Post*, p. 112; D. M. Meads, ed., *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby 1599–1605* (1930), p. 245, n. 196; Hey, *Packmen*, p. 99.

34 Crofts, *Packhorse, Waggon and Post*, pp. 115–16.

35 Henry Peacham, *Coach and Sedan* (1636), fo. F1, C2; J. Bruce, ed., 'The Letters and Papers of the Verney Family', *Camden Society*, O.S., 56 (1853), p. 185.

36 Crofts, *Packhorse, Waggon and Post*, p. 125