

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2012

Horses on and off the Farm

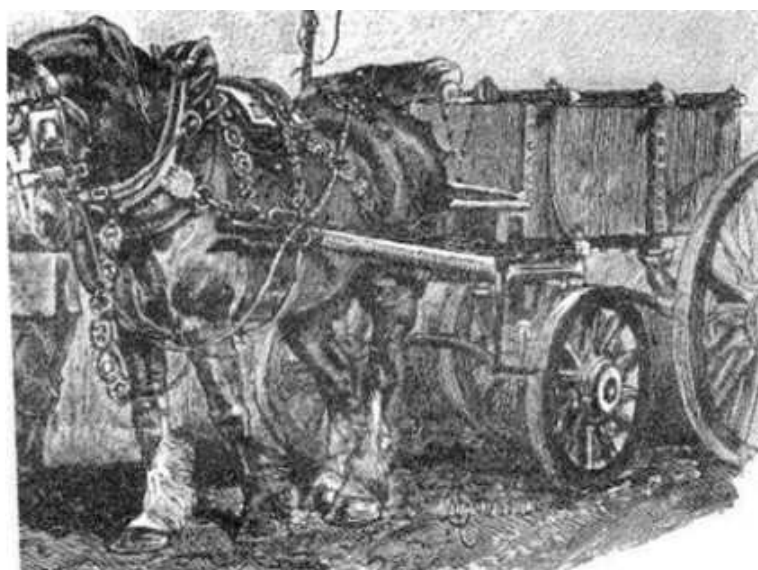
Professor Ted Collins, President of the Berkshire Local History Association, was the guest at the October meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, when he spoke about Horses on and off the Farm - exploring how working horses were used not only in the agricultural setting, but also in towns.



A moving mass of thirteen tons

around 1910 - 1912. Although they were no longer used much for long distance journeys, horses became in greater demand for short trips - to and from the station, for passenger or commercial work in towns etc. At this time the non-farm horses outnumbered those used on farms. By 1939, numbers had declined to about 800,000, and to just 30,000 by 1960 as the motorization of transport had its effect.

The greatest casualties were those which had been for passenger transport, as tram, bus or cab horses. In 1903 there had been 11,000 horse cabs and 1 motor taxi in London, but only 10 years later in 1913 there were just 1,900 horse cabs and 8,000 motor taxis. By 1920, the motorbus, electric tram and motor taxi had driven horse drawn passenger vehicles from the streets. Heavy horses were, however, still used by railway yards, brewers and dairies - but even those were rarely seen by the mid 1950s (except for the use by the 'elite breweries' for 'publicity').



Vestry horse

In the 1890s, the horse traffic was considered a problem in towns. The congestion they caused led to the introduction of the first one-way streets, whilst the fouling of streets - and the cost of removal - was a major problem.

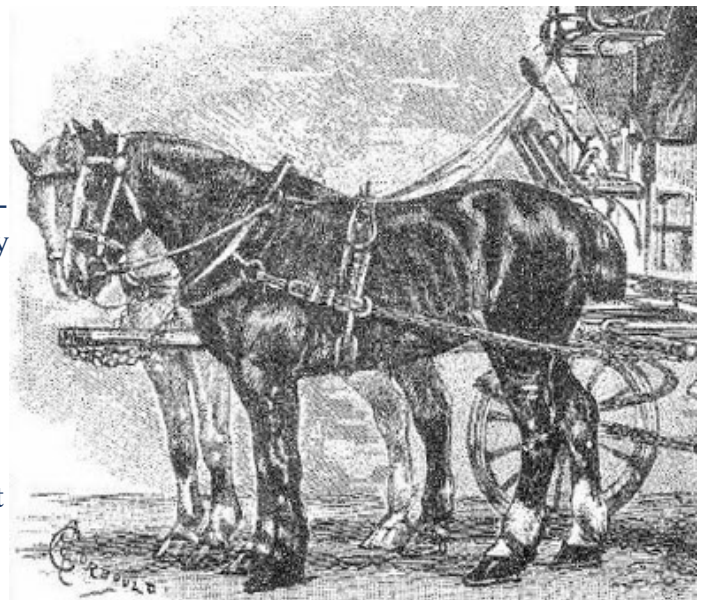


Coal horse

heavy horses'. They would be bought 'ready trained' at about 6 years old. The London brewers' horses were the largest and strongest in the world, and had to be unnerved by noise or traffic. They would be sold on at about 10 years old - either to other trades people, or back to use on farms, and when well looked after, would fetch good prices in the sales.

One specific variety used in towns was the funeral horse - the 'black brigade' used for fashionable funerals. These were mainly stallions imported from Belgium - (geldings tending to turn brown). Light horses were mainly imported from Ireland or Europe - mainly mares. Omnibus horses tended to be especially hard worked, often lasting just 3 or 4 years. Vanners, however, were often high-stepping horses that were frequently passed on for further use.

In agriculture, the use of horses was still the main source of power into the 1930s and 40s - despite the availability of tractors - the latter being generally kept as 'power in reserve'. Few farms in Berkshire used tractors exclusively at the end of the 1940s - but by 1960 the situation was reversed, and the farm use of horses had all but disappeared.



GWR van horses

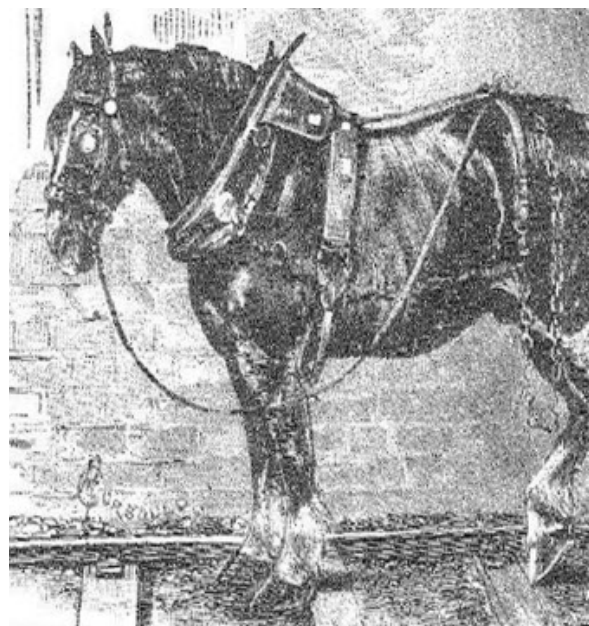
The horse economy was complex. Farms had a strategic role to play, supplying replacement horses for the towns, being a source of draught power (the majority of heavy horses being home-bred), and a source of horse feed. On the farm, the horses would be broken-in at 1 year, and in their second and third years trained to work in teams in shafts, so that by the age of five they were ready for steady work. Horse feed was expensive. Five acres of farmland were needed to feed a heavy horse (equivalent to 6 - 8 people), and it was estimated in 1910 that 1/8 of farm output was just to feed horses. The eventual decline in horse population nationally led to land being freed up for other uses.



Out for a holiday

Ted then told us about the wide variety of trades needed to sustain the operation of horses. Cab-men, fly-men, car-men, carriers, carters and hauliers were all involved in using horses for transporting people or goods; horse-

breakers, horse-dealers, job-masters, and livery stable keepers were concerned with dealing in or providing horses; wheelwrights, coach fitters, painters, carriage/coach/van and wagon builders and upholsterers, would either make or repair the carts and carriages pulled by horses, whilst stirrup, spur and horse furniture makers and saddlers were specialists in the manufacture of those items. The farrier was another specialist trade - not only fitting horseshoes, but acting as a specialist horse doctor and dentist. Many of these trades were run as small one-man businesses - often combined with similar trades (eg jobmaster and livery stable keeper). Many of the trades have long disappeared, although others survive in limited numbers. Although there were over 30,000 saddlers, for instance, in 1907, there are now about 950 in Britain (of which less than 20 are in Berkshire - the majority of saddlers being in the West Midlands). Some trades, such as making tradesmen's carts, were carried out on an industrial scale, but others (such as making farm wagons) were done as 'spare time' tasks between routine other work.



Shunter's horse

The decline in horse related trades in Berkshire from 1907 to 1939 was matched by a corresponding increase in those concerned with motor transport - the number of coach builders falling from 45 to zero in this time, whereas the number of motor agents rose from one to 70, for example. Across the county in the early 20th century, lots of small businesses (such as village shops) had relied on horse transport for their supplies, but the coming of motor transport, and a network of buses across the area, had changed shopping habits. A large number of horse drawn cabs were evident in a photograph of Broad Street, Reading, in 1910 - such were the changes that in a similar view taken in 1935, not one horse drawn vehicle was in sight.

The next meeting takes place on Tuesday, December 11th, when the Society will hold its Christmas Party, whilst on Tuesday, January 8th, Brian Armstrong will recount his Experiences of a Rowing Coach - his involvement with the England rowing team, including the preparations for the 2012 Olympics.

The meetings start at 8pm in the Pavilion, on the Recreation Ground. For more information, visit www.wargravehistory.org.uk