

Background Information:

Pit Ponies, Care



The Horsekeeper

The man in charge of the ponies underground was known as an ostler or horsekeeper. Horsekeepers had a good knowledge of both horses and mining. They would be responsible for the ponies' welfare around the clock. In recent years, the law required one horsekeeper to every fifteen ponies, but usually there was one man to eight horses. Their jobs included:

- Grooming and feeding the horses.
- Mucking out the stalls and replacing the sawdust bedding.
- Repairing harnesses and other tack.
- Preparing ponies for their shift.
- Washing their legs and belly in the washing stall (stall fitted with a hosepipe).
- Checking horses for injuries and ailments after their shift.
- Keeping the ponies' manes and tails clipped
- Carrying out simple veterinary tasks.
- Working with vets and farriers.

After Nationalisation of the industry in 1947 the horsekeeper also had to complete a daily report form on the condition of each pony.

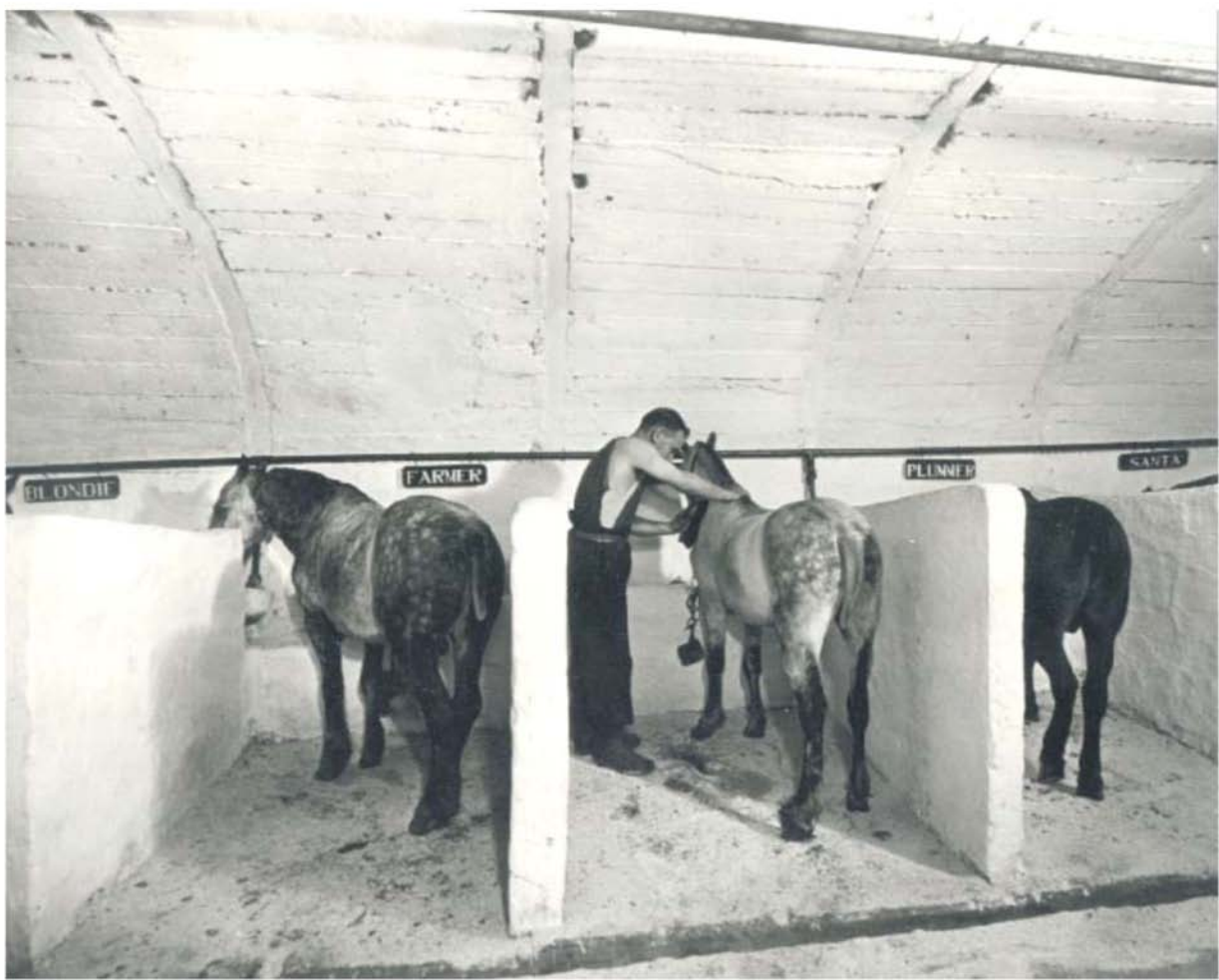
The Stables

Underground stables were usually placed near to the pit shaft to make bringing in food and bedding easier. This also meant that the ponies would get fresh air from the surface.

The stables generally ran along one side of the stabling area and were divided into stalls. The passageway between the stalls and the harness area was used to distribute food and bedding.

Nationalisation in 1947 led to many improvements. The stable walls were white-washed and electric lighting was installed. Vermin such as rats and mice were controlled. Disinfectant foot baths or walk-in troughs were installed so that ponies could be washed after a shift.

"Black with sweat and dust they all looked the same colour, it was quite a job to recognise your own pony on occasions" p68, Bright, J. 1986. Pit Ponies (Batsford).



A horsekeeper cares for the ponies in an underground stable.
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Feeding

A major part of the cost of keeping pit ponies was the food bill. Colliery owners knew that well-fed ponies made better workers so a healthy diet had to be provided.

The feed was made up of certain basic foods; chopped hay, oats, pulses (field peas and beans), maize and barley. It was known as 'choppy' or 'chop'. In general, ponies had a good diet, which was often supplemented by their drivers, who might bring treats such as fresh grass pulled up from the road-side, fruit, sweets or even specially prepared sandwiches.

Shoeing

A pony's hoof is soft and will wear away if it is made to work every day on a hard surface like the rocky floor in a coal mine. It needs the protection of an iron shoe.

A farrier is a blacksmith with a special understanding of the legs and feet of horses. He makes shoes by shaping the iron, whilst it is hot and malleable from his forge's fire, until it is a perfect fit for the pony's hoof. Due to the risks of having an open fire underground, pit pony shoes were formed on the surface, and then fitted to the ponies underground when the shoes were cold. This process was known as cold-shoeing.

Cold shoeing required the pony's hoof to be filed down to fit the shape of the shoe, rather than the shoe altered to fit the hoof. Before nationalisation, this skilled job was not always done by a specialist farrier, it could just be the colliery blacksmith or even the horsekeeper who did the shoeing. If they were not skilled, this work could cause discomfort and sometimes result in damage to a pony's hooves.

Ponies regularly lost their shoes by catching their feet between the rail tracks as they hauled the tubs along. So cold shoeing had to be done regularly.



Cold-shoeing would take place underground.
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Injuries

Coal mining is a dangerous job. Ponies shared the miner's dangers and were involved in accidents caused by flooding, explosions, gases, fire and rock falls.

Common injuries such as 'rooving' and 'scrubbing' were caused by banging and scraping parts of their bodies, especially the head and back, in the low underground roadways. 'Topping' was used to describe head damage caused by the sharp edges of roof supports. The rails and uneven floor could also cause injuries to legs and feet. A special head guard, with shields to protect the pony's vulnerable eyes, was used after the 1911 Act.

After nationalisation the National Coal Board started to phase out the use of pit ponies. Some ponies were looked after in retirement by miners. Others were looked after by the local community. The RSPCA and other animal protection societies assisted in finding them suitable homes.



further reading

Fact

Bright, J, 1986. *Pit Ponies* (Batsford).

Squires, E, 1974. *Pit Pony Heroes* (Latimer Trend & Co).

Kirkup, M, 2008. *Pit Ponies* (Summerhill).

Thompson, C, 2008. *Harnessed, Colliery Horses in Wales* (National Museums Wales).

National Coal Board (Public Relations) 1956. *Pit Ponies*

Fiction

Harland, J, 2006. *Temper- The story of a boy and a pit pony* (The Peoples History).

Whitby, L, 2009. *Ponty the Pit Pony* (Curriculum Concepts).



museum links

Find out more about ponies and horses, on site at the Museum in the Coal Interface Gallery, at the stables and on the underground tour.

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