

Background Information:

Pit Ponies, Myths & Misconceptions



Pit ponies went blind working in the dark for so long

Blindness in pit ponies is not recorded as being any higher than amongst other working horses, and the pit was not allowed to use blind ponies. Perhaps this idea came about from people watching how the ponies behaved when first brought up from underground. Perhaps at first they *appeared* to behave as though they were blind because it would take them a while to get used to daylight after living in the low light levels of a mine.

Pit ponies can see in the dark

There are stories which tell of a driver, caught out in the pitch black, being guided back to safety by his pony. It is likely that ponies, like other animals, have good night vision and are better than people at using other senses to find their way.

Pit ponies have a sixth sense

Ponies' ability to use their other senses may have allowed them to recognise danger before their human partner.

Pit ponies stayed underground all their working lives

Many collieries brought their pit ponies to the surface during annual holidays and periods of strike or lockout. Some miners, however, thought that the change in environment would upset the ponies and that the ponies' routine should not be disrupted. Because of this, some pits allowed horsekeepers to continue caring for the ponies underground.

Pit ponies were treated cruelly

Miners earned their wages by moving the maximum amount of coal in the minimum time. They understood that a mistreated pony would not be able to work well. Conditions in mines were harsh and difficult for both the miner and his pony.

A pony had to be bought and stabled by the colliery company. A pony in poor condition or injured might cost the owner a lot of money. If a pony died, it would mean that another one needed to be bought to replace it. This meant that while ponies needed to work hard, miners were not generally intentionally cruel; but not everyone knew the best way to treat ponies, and so there were always

some incidents to report where animals had been ill-treated.

The 1911 Coal Mines Act is often known as the 'Pit Pony's Charter' as it brought in many changes for pit ponies to improve their welfare and protect them against harsh treatment.

Pit ponies took part in events

Pit ponies were sometimes taken to the surface to take part in community events. For example they might take part in pit pony races at local galas.

Some pit ponies were shown at local, regional and national agricultural shows. These events would be supported by the collieries. For those occasions the ponies were sometimes kept of work for a period to get them into tip-top condition, and would be groomed and provided with well-maintained harness and brasses.



A pony and handler at an event.
© Mrs Mavis Cook

Informal pit pony racing sometimes took place when the ponies were on the surface for any length of time. It became more organised during times of strike action because it provided entertainment and fundraising opportunities for the striking men.



further reading

Fact

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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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