

Background Information:

Pit Ponies, Overview



Ponies

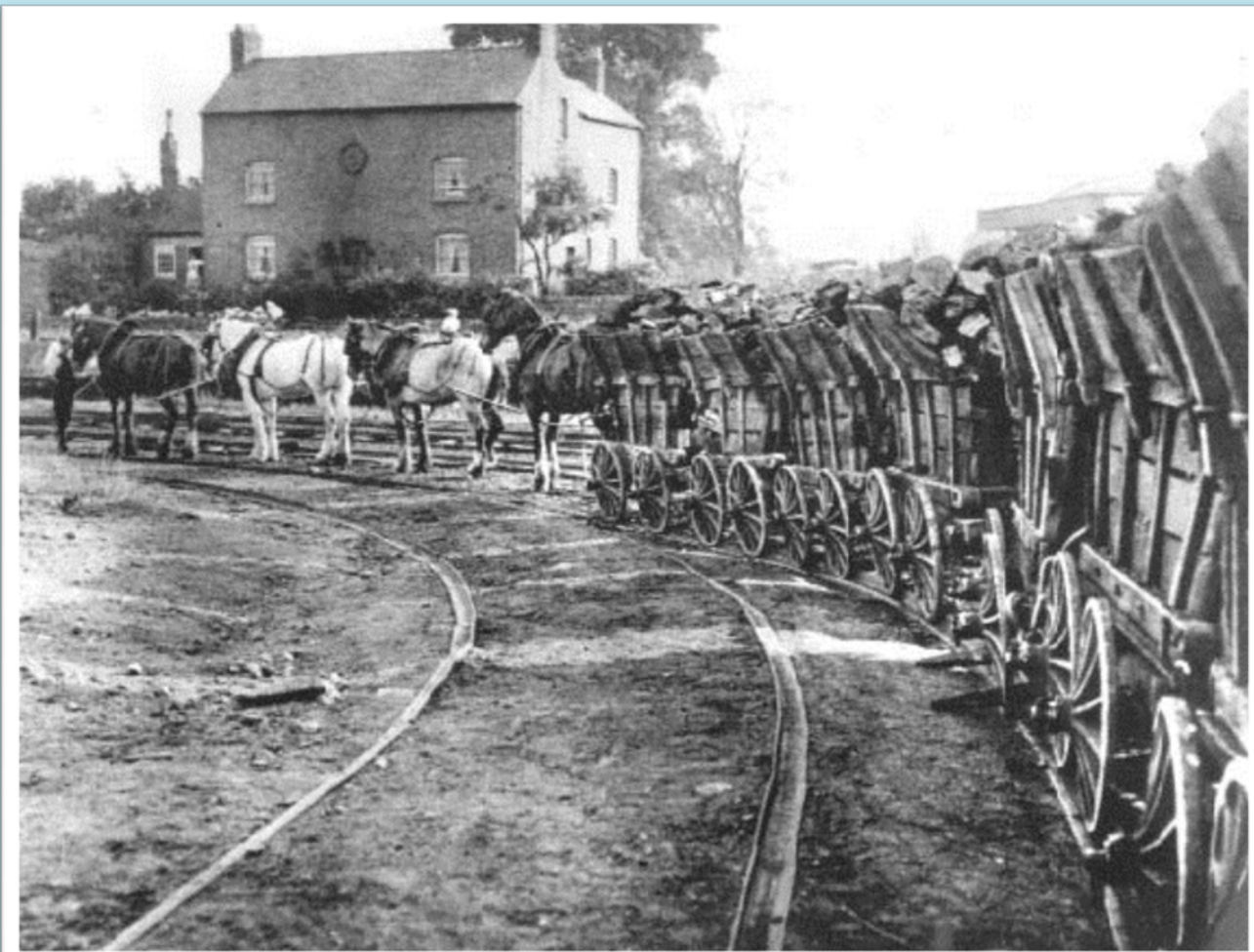
A pony is a small horse which measures up to 14.2 hands (1.44m).

A hand is a measurement based on the width of a man's hand. The measurement is taken from the withers (the ridge between the shoulder blades) to the floor.

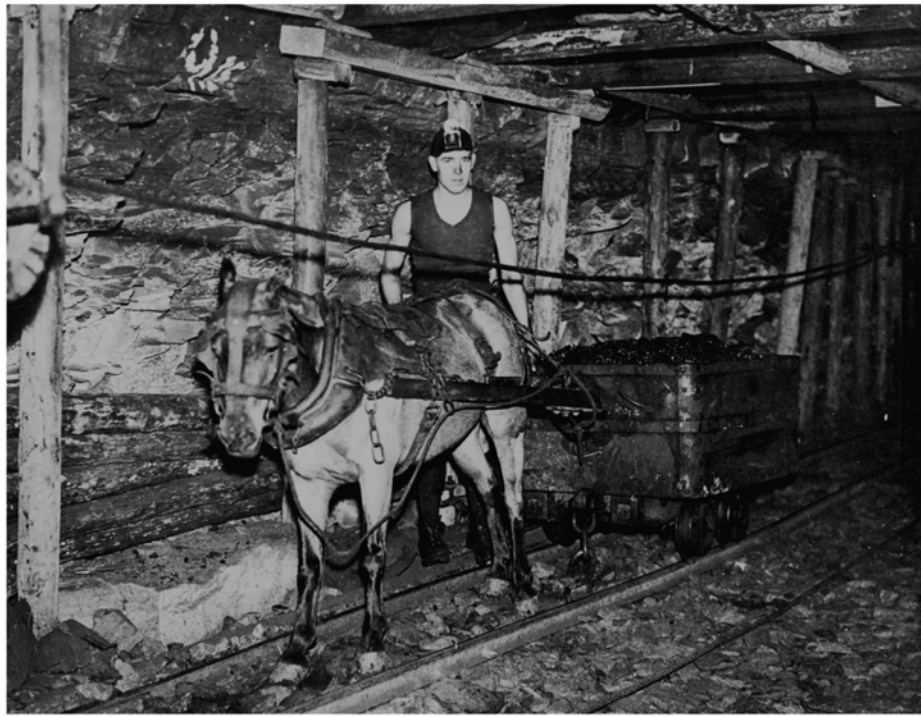
Pit Ponies

Pit ponies were mainly used in coal mines in the 1800s and early to mid-1900s. They did a variety of jobs.

On the surface at a mine, horses measuring 1.7 metres (16 hands) were used to transport coal and mining materials such as timber for roof supports.



A team of horses ready to pull a train of carts containing coal.
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A pony and driver.

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The majority of ponies worked underground. The smallest ponies, measuring 1.2 metres (11 hands), worked with miners called putters or trammers. They took full tubs of coal to a collecting point called the 'flats'. From this point, they would bring empty tubs back to the coal face.

Larger ponies, measuring 1.4 metres (13 hands), working with a miner called a driver, would collect the tubs from the 'flats' and pull them along the main roadways underground to the pit bottom ready to be taken to the surface. They returned empty tubs to the 'flats' for the smaller ponies to take to the coal face.

Ponies were also used to transport supplies such as tools, equipment, new pit-props or items needed for repairing parts of the mine. Boys of 13 or 14 were often employed as drivers when they first started working down the pit after leaving school.

Four important characteristics made ponies suitable for the work and the conditions found in coal mines.

- Size: small ponies could work in low and narrow roadways.
- Strength: they could pull several tubs at the same time and work long hours.
- Hardiness: ponies could cope with the harsh working and environmental conditions of the pit.

- Intelligence: a pony could be trained to do the job.

Horse dealers bought ponies from different areas of the country and sold them to individual collieries. The ponies were nearly always male and had to be at least four years old.

Many different horse and pony breeds were used in coal mines, including: Highland, Galloway, Shetland, Fell, Dartmoor, New Forest, Dales, Welsh Cob, Exmoor and Dartmoor. Larger breeds such as Clydesdale and Shires provided bigger horses for work on the surface. In times of shortage, such as after World War I, ponies were imported from Iceland, Russia and even the U.S.A.

Some collieries bred their own stock so that they could breed ponies with characteristics most suited to that particular colliery's underground conditions.



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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