

Background Information:

Pit Ponies, Working Life



Training

Horses used for riding or other work have to be broken-in, and pit ponies also needed to become used to being handled and harnessed. The horsekeeper might spend a few days preparing them for the type of work and conditions underground. The pony was trained to wear a harness and pull tubs along rails. The horsekeeper might also try to get the pony used to noise and darkness, but this type of training was not common.

A pony's first journey underground was stressful; therefore it often took place at night. If there was a drift (a sloping roadway to get underground), the ponies might be walked in through this route. If not, ponies went down in the cage or were slung underneath it.

Once underground, ponies would spend most of their lives in that environment. There would be properly trained in the following five areas:

- Being harnessed
- Pulling a heavy weight
- Turning around in a small space (known as "britching")
- Opening the ventilation doors with their heads
- Responding to verbal commands

A pony that showed he could adapt to working underground was accepted. Unsuitable ones were returned to the horse dealer. The pony was then prepared for a life working underground.

Preparation

The pony's hair was clipped to help it keep cool in very warm pit conditions. The mane and tail was "hogged" (clipped very short) to keep it clean in the dirty environment.

Ponies were given a name. Sometimes the ponies that had been bought at the same time were all given names starting with a particular letter of the alphabet. This helped the colliery keep accurate records. In some cases the pony would take the name of the pony that previously lived in their stable stall as their own.

Short names of one syllable were popular because the pony would be able to respond quickly to verbal commands.

Work and Equipment

The pony and his 'driver' or 'putter' worked as a team underground. They needed to be able to trust each other. There are stories that show how a miner understood when his pony was trying to warn him of impending danger.

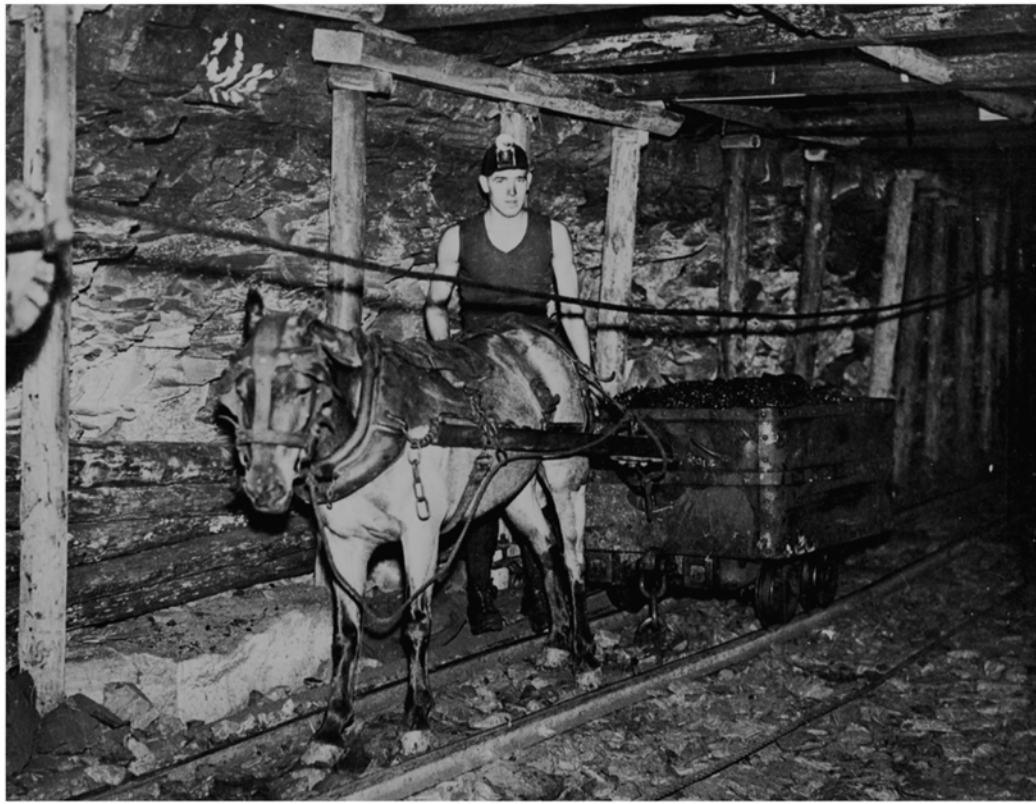
As with all working horses they had to wear a harness to enable them to do their job. They wore a leather head harness, called a bonnet, to protect the top of the head when coming into contact with the low roof and narrow walls of the underground roadways. Some bonnets were also designed to protect their eyes from flying debris.



A pony in full harness and bonnet, and driver.

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In order that the pony could pull carts, shafts called limmers, or limbers, were attached to the body harness. These limmers could then be attached to tubs for pulling and easily detached from the tub when the tubs were changed.



A pony and driver.

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Conditions

Gradually, working conditions improved for the pit ponies. The Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1887 stated that roadways should be big enough to allow ponies to walk along without rubbing against the tunnel. The Coal Mines Act of 1911 was more effective. The part of the act specifically dealing with ponies became known as the 'Pit Ponies' Charter'. It set out clear instructions on the use and care of pit ponies, governing aspects such as their working hours, and how they should be kept underground.

- Some of the points included the following:
- No horse shall go underground until it is four years old [...].
- Every horse shall be examined once at least in every 12 months by a veterinary surgeon.
- Each horse shall be housed in a stall adequate in size, and supplied with clean straw or other suitable bedding.

- All stables shall be cleaned daily and kept in a sanitary condition [...].
- No horse shall work during any period:
 - of 24 hours for more than 2 shifts ;
 - of 48 hours for more than 3 shifts ;
 - of 7 days for more than 7 shifts or for 48hours in aggregate except by reason of unforeseen circumstances for the purpose of saving life, remedying the effect of an accident, or preventing serious interfering with the working of the mine.

Further acts of 1949 and 1956 added to these rules to ensure that working ponies were properly looked after.



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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