

## Horse and Man in Early Modern England

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Bruce Boehrer

*Horse and Man in Early Modern England* presents itself as an historical overview of its subject-matter rather than as a brief for particular methodologies, ideologies or causes. But even limited engagement with this book will lead readers to reflect on two fundamental propositions: first, that the structure of English social, economic, artistic and political life has been long and deeply affected by the relations between human and non-human animals; and second, that horses have played perhaps a larger role in determining the nature of these relations than has any other non-human species. To read Edwards's book in its entirety is perforce to contemplate the immense shift in human-equine interaction that has occurred in Britain over the past 500 years, and to consider its implications for the world we now inhabit.

As Edwards remarks at the outset of his book, 'early modern England was very largely a "horse-drawn" society' (p. 1), and its reliance upon horses - as opposed to mules and similar livestock - increased over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries before reaching a high point in the 1700s and 1800s. One reason for this development lies in the steady diversification of breeds available in England from the reign of Henry VIII on. Tudor and Stuart monarchs 'took the lead in improving the quality of the stock' by importing Barbs, Turkomans, Neapolitans and other foreign horses; by cross-breeding these with native stock; and 'by setting more exacting standards at [the royal] studs' (p. 8). Likewise, '[t]he landed classes emulated the Crown; they imported foreign horses and used them for breeding purposes' (p. 13), with the result that whereas 'at the beginning of the [early modern] period, the bulk of the country's horses technically comprised ponies, that is, horses of fourteen hands and below' (p. 5), by the Restoration 'the situation improved dramatically' (p. 16).

If English horses literally got bigger and stronger during the early modern period, their symbolic stature grew as well. Always 'valued ... as symbols of power and authority' (p. 27), they increasingly became

associated with the ruling elite. Thus 'young men were encouraged to learn how to ride and handle the "great horse," an imposing animal of strength and stature,' mastery of which 'provided a justification for aristocratic power and influence' (p. 27-8). Likewise, the growing 'popularity of equestrian portraits among the upper classes ... reflected their absorbed interest in self-promotion' (p. 29). And by a kind of metonymic transfer, the horses themselves came to stand for their owners; hence the growing trend for horses to be painted without their masters, and hence too the increasing cultural cathexis that developed around prized Middle Eastern racehorses. Indeed, 'so great was the impact that these oriental horses had on English society that it may provide an illustration of animal agency at work' (p. 31).

But the costly, exotic steeds of aristocratic portraiture represented only a fraction of the nation's horseflesh. Far more numerous were the nags and jades, hackneys and draught-horses that powered the English economy on humbler levels. And while life for these beasts may not have been solitary, on the whole it was indeed poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Although writers on horse-care increasingly urged their audiences not to overwork or maltreat their beasts, the evidence suggests that such advice was often ignored. Contrary to the manuals' insistence that 'horses, if handled carefully in the first few years, might be able to work until they reached the age of twenty-four or twenty-five' (p. 57), surviving toll-books seldom record sales of horses over ten years of age. Reasons for this lapse are not far to seek; early modern letters, journals, and court records abound in complaints about horses that have been overladen, beaten bloody, starved, neglected, and abused. Even the gentry - who should have known better if anyone did - regularly over-taxed their mounts. Indeed, it stands as a signal, if predictable, irony that the enlightened methods of horse-care advocated by early modern husbandry manuals seem to have had their earliest major impact not in the stable but in the classroom, where they provided an argument by analogy for new, enlightened methods of education.

In the meantime, the English only became more and more reliant upon their horses. 'In 1558 the Venetian ambassador reported that English peasants were accustomed to ride on horseback and concluded that the country could be called the land of comforts' (p. 74). Dedicated riding mounts may have been relatively scarce, but millers and yeomen sat astride their work-horses; servants rode their masters' stock; and ladies rode (sometimes, scandalously, in men's attire) or more demurely sat in the new sprung coaches that began appearing in the land from the late 1500s on. In the late Tudor period, hackneymen had already become so numerous in certain parts of the realm that they required regulation, and in general, horse-related misbehaviour proliferated. Men injured themselves - and their mounts - when ambling home in the dark after an evening of drink; for their part, coachmen neglected their charges, consorted with whores, and in at least one case drank until they fell off their boxes.

But it was in the theoretically-related areas of sport and warfare that the horse underwent perhaps its most signal change of status during the early modern period. As an instrument of combat, it had already begun its slow and inexorable slide into obsolescence during the Hundred Years War, with the slaughter of heavy French cavalry by English bowmen at Crécy (1346), Poitiers (1356), and Agincourt (1415). With the introduction of gunpowder weapons into European combat in the 15th and 16th centuries, the vulnerability of medieval heavy cavalry to projectile weapons only increased. This is not to say that the horse immediately became a military anachronism; the development of field artillery actually made horses more important than ever for logistical purposes, as they hauled arms and ammunition to and from the field of battle. Cavalry, too, remained tactically relevant by shedding their heavy armour plate, adding pistols and carbines to their weaponry, and working in concert with artillery and musketeers. But this change of tactics removed the mounted warrior from his pre-eminent position on the battlefield. After the Battle of Pavia in 1525, which ended with 'the humiliating defeat of François I and his mounted knights by a detachment of imperial arquebusiers,' according to Edwards 'the proportion of cavalymen in armies steadily declined' (p. 146).

This decline, in turn, was bound to affect the nature of equestrian sports, which were understood in the 15th and 16th centuries largely as analogues for warfare, instilling in their practitioners the skills required of them on the battlefield. In this capacity, the foremost pastimes were hunting and the joust; however, the latter, which was specifically designed to simulate the conditions of horse-mounted combat, quickly fell victim to changes in military tactics and equipment. 'Jousting ... had its adherents, especially at the beginning of the

[early modern] period' (p. 126), but it became more and more a coterie anachronism, limited to those who could afford it and who had a vested interest in the ideology and social distinctions it implied. Thus '[t]he sport, increasingly focused on the court, became highly exclusive and symbolic' (p. 126) and eventually vanished altogether, 'apart from occasional Gothic revivalist events such as the Eglinton Tournament of 1839' (p. 121). Hunting, on the other hand, survived, but in radically altered ways that reflected the changing ecology of the English countryside. Most notably, hunting *par force*, with horse and hounds, changed its object. Whereas the medieval and early modern hunt favoured noble and dangerous game such as the hart and the boar, whose mettle was deemed appropriate to members of the warrior class, enclosure and the decline of habitat made these beasts less and less available for sport. The way was thus clear for them to be supplanted by game once despised as vermin - specifically, of course, the fox.

As martial pastimes, the joust thus dwindles into quaint irrelevance, while the hunt is translated into Wilde's pursuit of the inedible by the insufferable. In their place emerges an entirely new elite equestrian sport, one which attests increasingly to the transformation of the gentry from a warrior to a leisure class: horse-racing. Edwards dates the earliest references to English horse-racing to 1512, while noting that the new sport's 'progress was slow until the second half of the sixteenth century'; by 1625, on the other hand, 'punters could choose from about three dozen venues' in their quest for such entertainment (p. 89). But it was in the Restoration that horse-racing really established itself as the sport of English kings, with Charles II directing his enthusiastic patronage to the races at Newmarket. Lesser meets flourished as well, so that by 1740 there were so many as to require government regulation. At the same time, whatever character horse-racing may once have had as a test of manly or martial qualities began to decline; gentlemen rode their own horses less and less at the races, ceding that privilege instead to hired jockeys. And the racecourse itself steadily metamorphosed from an all-male preserve into 'an integral part of the fashionable social scene' (p. 116).

Alongside these trends, horses drove yet another development which speaks to changes in the nature of the English social elite: the growing fashion for vehicular transportation. 'Until the mid sixteenth century personal conveyances were used largely by women, the old and the infirm'; moreover, their general form was 'rather basic ... and very uncomfortable for passengers' (p. 211). This state of affairs began to change during the reign of Mary Tudor, when sprung coaches of a sort originally engineered in Hungary were first imported for the queen and select peers. However, the innovation was not without its opponents: 'At first, traditionally minded gentlemen were reluctant to travel in a coach ... The image of a rider on his horse had become so deeply engrained in their psyche that they felt it was "unmanly" to ride in a conveyance' (p. 214). Thomas Tyndale, for one, complained that 'In Sir Philip Sidney's time 'twas as much disgrace for a cavalier to be seen riding in London in a coach as now [in the 17th century] 'twould be to be seen in a petticoate and waistcoate' (p. 214). But such prejudices faded as the wealthy succumbed to the twin temptations of comfort and a new opportunity to advertise their privileged status. Likewise, the middling sort came to appreciate the convenience of horse-drawn conveyances as England developed a well-articulated system of stage coaches in the 18th century.

In surveying this capacious field of subject-matter, Edwards draws on three general bodies of historical information: 'the views of intellectuals ... writing [on horses] in philosophical terms'; 'handbooks on horse management, ... breeding, training, discipline, and the treatment of injuries and diseases'; and 'information on actual practice' (p. 242). As is usually the case with early modern historical data, documents of the third sort have been less consistently and coherently preserved than those of the first two; moreover, the accounts of 'actual practice' that do survive tend to be weighted heavily in favour of the privileged ranks of society, which kept better records and preserved those records longer. Edwards himself is probably the foremost current authority on horses in early modern England, and his treatment of the subject exhibits a masterful command both of scope and detail. He is particularly conversant with issues of military history and the horse trade, both topics upon which he has published extensively in the past.

On the other hand - and this view may well reflect my own bigotry as a literary scholar - like many social historians, Edwards doesn't always seem to know how to write an English sentence. It would be too much to say that in this book no modifier goes unmisplaced. However, Edwards does regale his readers with such barbarisms as 'Returned to local fairs, metropolitan dealers bought them [i.e., pre-owned horses] as fully-

trained cart and coach horses' (p. 199); 'eight regiments ... defended the city, all but one of which consisted of infantry units' (p. 178); and 'Because of their value and social significance, rulers obtained coaches and horses as diplomatic gifts' (p. 218). Nor does Edwards fare much better in his relationship with the troublesome tribe of pronouns. We learn, for instance, that 'carriers could buy a draught horse for about £3, but to obtain particularly powerful specimens they had to . . . go to a specialist fair to find it' (p. 198), and that "[T]he authorities viewed meetings of its political opponents with suspicion' (p. 142). In general, Edwards's writing could have benefited a good deal from one more round of serious editing.

On the level of content, however, *Horse and Man in Early Modern England* offers scholarly readers the best available overview of the ways in which its title species interacted during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries to produce English society as we have come to know it. Indeed, Edwards's book chronicles an inter-species relationship whose importance can scarcely be overestimated, one that produced major changes in the history of transportation, trade, sport, warfare, agriculture, art, diplomacy, and much more besides. In a sense, one could say that *Horse and Man in Early Modern England* gives us the familiar tale of Britain's rise to politico-economic supremacy, but retold this time from the perspective of the animals that made it possible. If historical writing is as much about the present as about the past, then Edwards's book should lead us to reflect further upon the nature of inter-species relations in our own moment as well, and given the nature of that moment, such reflection seems particularly timely.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further

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