

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING ENGLISH HORSES IN THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

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Summary

During the two centuries that form the focus of this survey, concerted efforts were made to enhance the quality of English horses. Two distinct strategies were followed. On the one hand, legislative measures sought to improve native horses by controlling exports, by regulating the common pasturing of animals and by imposing on land-owners requirements that they maintain numbers of serviceable horses in proportion to their estates. On the other hand, breeding programmes dependent on superior animals imported from continental Europe and from the Mediterranean littoral were pursued. The effectiveness of these programmes is reviewed and their long-term legacy is assessed.

Résumé

Stratégies d'amélioration des chevaux anglais aux seizième et dix-septième siècles.

Durant les deux siècles pris en compte dans cet article, d'importants efforts ont été fournis pour accroître la qualité des chevaux anglais. Deux stratégies différentes ont été mises en œuvre. D'une part, des mesures législatives visaient à améliorer les animaux autochtones en contrôlant leur exportation, en réglementant les pacages collectifs et en imposant aux propriétaires terriens d'entretenir un nombre de chevaux en rapport avec l'importance de leurs propriétés. D'autre part, des programmes de croisements avec des animaux de qualité supérieure importés d'Europe continentale et des pourtours méditerranéens furent engagés. L'auteur examine l'efficacité de ces actions ainsi que les traces qu'elles ont laissées sur le long terme.

Key Words

Horses, Breeding, Legislation, England.

Mots clés

Cheval, Élevage, Législation, Angleterre.

With the advent of historical sources which may shed light on the progress of animal management and demography, archaeozoological researches enter a phase during which - up to the present time, at least - the body of available scientific data currently remains less extensive than for many more remote populations. Such is certainly the case for the study of horses in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period during which concerted efforts began to be made to manipulate the character of the population at large by the imposition of legally enforceable controls on the breeding of indigenous animals. During the same period, a new emphasis emerged on the improvement of high-quality bloodstock by means of imported breeding stock from the continental mainland and from the Mediterranean littoral. The advent of this stream of new blood, together with the gradual emergence of a more sophisti-

cated approach to management and breeding strategies, can be shown from historical sources eventually to have resulted in English horses joining the ranks of the most prized rather than the most despised in Europe. For all that this evidence may be oblique and at times anecdotal in character, it is none the less persuasive, even in the absence of a coherent body of statistical data.

The chronological focus of the present inquiry is a period dominated by two royal dynasties - the Tudors, who came to power with Henry VII in 1485, and the Stuarts, who replaced them in 1603. Too much emphasis on kings and queens is rightly unfashionable in present-day historical circles, but in the context in which this paper is set such a stress is necessary. Throughout much of the period to be examined the crown and its supporting nobility exerted a disproportionate influence on the developments to be out-

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lined, initiating and enforcing attempts to improve native stock (especially that which would form the cornerstone of the nation's strategic reserve in time of war) by imposing controls on the breeding of indigenous horses on a largely disinterested population. They also promoted the importation of foreign bloodstock with a view to raising the quality of horses in all areas of their own service, but with increasing emphasis in the later seventeenth century on those reserved for sporting purposes.

The medieval background

A recognition of the superior quality of the best animals from continental Europe and from the lands bordering the Mediterranean can be detected several centuries before my period (for surveys of horses in medieval England see Hewitt, 1983; Davis, 1989; Hyland, 1994, 1998). By the end of the eleventh century Spanish horses are said already to have been introduced by some Norman barons. No doubt these would have been acquired by way of France, while the Norman conquest of Sicily, begun in 1061 and completed in 1091, opened up an alternative channel through which Arab and North African blood could flow directly to the studs of northern Europe. It is also noteworthy that for three centuries, from 1152 to 1453, the English crown held the duchy of Aquitaine, which territory lay on the threshold of Spain and provided another means of access to its precious horse-flesh.

These were not the only sources scoured by the English for bloodstock. From the reign of King John (1199-1216) survives a record of 100 stallions of large stature being imported from the Low Countries (Gilbey, 1899, 16-17); by 1232 horses from Lombardy could be bought on the London market and in the course of the following two centuries repeated references are found to imports of prized heavy horses from northern Italy, Brabant and Germany.

From the closing decades of the thirteenth century the strategic necessity of a reliable supply of war-horses was recognized and a formalized breeding programme was implemented, based on a network of estates belonging to the royal castles that spanned the country. Among the primary duties of the Constable [originally the *Comes stabuli*] of each castle was the requirement that he should keep a number of brood mares (usually numbering about two dozen) on the estate, to be served by selected royal stal-

lions that were rotated at intervals from stud to stud. As a result of these measures, reserves of good-quality horses were built up, although they were always liable to be jeopardized by losses in military campaigns that might take years to make good.

Many of these gains were indeed definitively dissipated in the thirty-year carnage of the Wars of the Roses which racked the country between 1455 and 1485, devastating the stock of horses, with the result that when Henry VII, the first monarch of the Tudor dynasty, came to power in 1485, the quality of English mounts stood once again at a low ebb.

Breeding strategies of the Tudors and Stuarts

In order to give due attention to the manner in which these problems were tackled, the strategies adopted are considered here under two headings, one concerned with the manner in which local resources were mobilized and the other with measures that depended on the introduction of foreign blood.

Measures to improve native horses

Amongst the major administrative lessons quickly learned by the Tudors were the benefits of delegation. Throughout many branches of the royal administration responsibilities for goods and services were devolved from the court to the nobility and when a pressing need was recognized for the improvement of horses it was entirely in character for the crown to look to the privileged classes to fulfil it and for these requirements to be backed with the force of law.⁽¹⁾

First among these measures was "An Acte agaynst transportinge of Horses and Mares beyonde y^e Seas" of 1495 (11 Henry VII c. 13) which acknowledged the poor standards and high prices that had resulted from an unregulated export trade⁽²⁾ and which now prohibited the export of mares under three years of age or above the value of 6s 8d, and male horses of any value whatever. This new measure evidently was less than wholly effective, for under Henry VII's successor it had to be re-enacted in 1530-1, when it was recognized that due to the continuing and illicit conveyance of great numbers of animals out of the country "the good brede of Horses of this Realme is greatly decayed" (22 Henry VIII c.7). A further Act of 1531-2

⁽¹⁾References to legislative measures contained in the following section are to *Statutes of the Realm.*, 1819-24.

⁽²⁾Evidently there had always been a market for good English horses, whatever the shortcomings of the majority: on the irregular export of horses in the seventeenth century see Thirsk (1977: 27).

directed these measures more specifically against Scotland - still an independent and volatile neighbour: here the export of a "greate multitude" of mounts was recognized not only as having brought "strength and boldnesse to the Scottisshemen" but also as bringing about "a greate enfebling of the Kinges said subjectes" in the defence of the realm (23 Henry VIII c.16).

Right-minded citizens were encouraged to profit from seizures made in enforcing these measures, the normal formula being that "the moytie or one halff of the price of the said Horse Gelding or Mare shalbe to the use of the seysour and arrestour of the same ... and the other Moitie to the Kinges Highnes". Further re-enactments followed in 1540 (32 Henry VIII, c. 6), in 1547 (1 Edward VI, c. 5) and in 1558-9 (1 Elizabeth I, c. 7), while in 1562-3 new legislation (5 Elizabeth I, c. 19) repealed provisions that had allowed the export of certain horses for private use abroad provided they were not sold, since "... many evill disposed persons of a covetous and gredy desire doo daylie transporte out of this Realme verye greate nombres of Horses and Geldinges, and doo exchange and sell the same in parties beyond the Seas for their owne pryvate Lucre and Gayne".

Henry VIII had introduced further measures that sought both to increase the numbers and to improve the quality of serviceable horses throughout the land. His "Acte concerning the breade of Horsys" of 1535-6 (27 Henry VIII, c. 6) recalled the "swyfte and strong Horsis whiche here to fore have benne bredde in this Realme" but acknowledged that due to the fact that "commonly little Horses and Naggis of small stature and valeu be suffered to depasture & also to covour marys and felys of very small stature, by reason whereof the brede of good & strong Horsis of this Realme is nowe lately dymynshid alterid & decayed & farther is lyke to decaye if spedy remedye be not the soner providid in that behalfe". By way of response, the Act decreed that all owners of game parks "enclosid with hedge diche walle or pale" to the extent of one mile in compass, shall keep "two Mares being not spayed apte and able to beare foles, each of them of the altitude or height of xiiij handfulles at the lest". Owners of parks of four miles compass or above had to keep four such mares and no owner was to allow the said mares "to be coverod or lepte with any stonid horse under the stature of xiiij handfulles". Owners in the northern counties of Westmorland, Cumberland, Northumberland and Durham were exempt from these measures.

Also excluded from these controls were the vast majority of horses, pastured by their owners on common ground up and down the land. A new statute "For bryde of Horses" of 1540 (32 Henry VIII, c. 13) brought these animals under control by recognizing "that in forrestis chaces moores marrishes hethis Comons and Wasted groundis ... little stoned horses and naggis of small stature and of little value" were wont to "cover and leape mares feading there, whereof cometh in maner no profite nor commodity". Thereafter no stoned (i.e. ungelded) horse over the age of two years and under the height of fifteen hands (fourteen hands in some counties) was allowed to be so pastured. Subjects suspecting that certain horses might fail to meet these requirements could report them to the king's officers and, if found to be justified, could seize the horses for their own purposes. The provisions were to be further enforced by annual "drifts"⁽³⁾ of all such territories, during which any mares, fillies, foals or geldings thought "not able or like to growe to be able to beare fooles of reasonable stature or not hable or like to grow to be hable to doo profitable labours" were to be culled. Owning or putting out to pasture "any horse gelding or mare infect with scabbe or mange" was similarly prohibited.

In the preamble to the "Bill for greate Horses" of 1541-2 (33 Henry VIII, c. 5) the claim is made that as a consequence of the measures introduced in 1535-6 "ther is begon a good nombre of brede of horses whiche by contynuanse is like in shorte tyme muche to encrease for the suer defence of this Realme". Henceforward, to ensure the continuing generation of horses "hable for the Warres", every archbishop and duke was required to maintain seven "stoned trotting horses for the sadill" of at least fourteen hands; marquises, earls and bishops with bishoprics worth £1,000 a year had to maintain five such horses; bishops, viscounts and barons with estates worth 1,000 marks or more three horses and all those with estates of 500 marks or more two horses; those with estates worth £100 or more "and every other person temporall not afore mencyoned whos Wiff ... shall were any gown of sylke or ... any Frenche hood or bonnet of Velvett, w^l any habiliment past or egge of gold perle or Stone or any chayne of gold about ther necks or in their partletts or in any apparell of their bodie", had to endure the further expense of keeping one such horse. The Bill concludes by stressing that "cart horses or sumpter horses shall not be takyn reputed or

⁽³⁾These drifts were already part of the established practice of forest regulation, during which "The Officers of the Kings Forest do use to Drive the Waste soil of the Forest in every place where there is commoning with Beasts, to the intent to avoid the surcharging of the same with many Beasts by those that have right of common therein, and also to avoid the commoning of foreigners, that have no right of common at all within the Forest" (Manwood, 1665: 234-5).

reckned" for any of the horses specified in the regulations.

Perhaps as a result of the depredations made by Henry's foreign adventures (see below), little progress seems to have been detectable in the decade following his death - at least if we are to believe the testament of the Venetian ambassador. Writing of Britain to his Senate in 1557, Giovanni Michiel reported (*Calendar of State Papers Venetian*, 6, ii (1556-7): 1048) that:

... that island produces a greater number of horses than any other region in Europe; but the horses being weak and of bad wind, fed merely on grass, being like sheep and all other cattle kept in the field or pasture at all seasons, the mildness of the climate admitting of this, they cannot stand much work ... and they would do much better if they were fed.

Twenty years later the Neapolitan Prospero d'Osma, brought in to survey the royal studs maintained by Elizabeth I, found that even there the mares were woefully malnourished (Prior, 1935: 14, 23-9). Clearly there had not yet emerged in England - even within the royal stables - an appreciation that all the careful breeding in the world would fail to produce horses capable of reaching their full potential unless they received a well-balanced diet. In other ways too the English appeared backward in Continental eyes in their appreciation of the essentials of good management: in 1511, for example, Polydor Vergil had written to the Marquis of Mantua of the difficulties of finding good horses in England, due to their frequently being spoiled by being trained too early and worked too hard (*Calendar of State Papers Venetian*, 2 (1509-19): 51).

Although much of Henry's legislation remained in place for the next century or so, not all of his measures proved universally sustainable. In 1566, for example, a new Act (8 Elizabeth I, c. 8) recognized that some of his regulations had brought "great and manyfold Hurtes and Hinderances and Losses" to the inhabitants of the fens around the Isle of Ely, Cambridge and Huntingdon, "for that the saide Mores Maryshes and Fenne Groundes, because of their rottennesse infirmness moysture and wateryshnes, were never able ne yet are to breede beare or bringe foorth the suche greate breede of stoned Horses of such bignesse and heigh Stature as wth in thaforesayd Statute are expressed, wth out daunger and peryll of the

mireyng drowning and perishing of the same...". Accordingly, the measures were repealed for the said counties, although stoned horses pastured on open ground there had to be at least thirteen hands in stature.

In other ways the Elizabethan administration tightened its control on the equine population by instituting six-monthly musters of horses and geldings apt for war service and by appointing a Special Commission for the Increase and Breed of Horses to oversee its implementation (Thirsk, 1977: 15). Its operation depended on the appointment of a large number of sub-commissioners who, on a given day, were responsible for reviewing all the horses in every county.

These measures doubtless brought improvements, although under Charles I Colonel Sir Edward Harwood might still compare English cavalry unfavourably with that of France⁽⁴⁾. According to Sir Edward, a major factor contributing to the decline of horses and horsemanship which he perceived in contemporary England was the national obsession with hunting and racing to the exclusion of any exercise designed to promote military prowess. He suggested that the reform of this lamentable state of affairs was "a worke worthy of his Majesty" and claimed that the problem lay "chiefely in want of fit horses, and fit men to be horse-men..." By way of remedy, he suggested that steps should be taken to promote "a stronger breed of horses through the Kingdome", while at court the King should reform his bands of Pensioners into a professional troop of cuirassiers; the Lords and other officers and counsellors would be expected to follow his example, maintaining numbers of great horses and fighting staff (Harwood, 1642: C4). The Colonel's words evidently fell on deaf ears, however, for no new legislation was forthcoming and in any case the impending Civil War rudely overtook any such long-term designs.

The importation of bloodstock

As a parallel strategy for the improvement of stock (although more narrowly focused in nature), horses were imported in considerable numbers during our period and for a variety of purposes, although in reality there was always scope for animals to perform more than one function, or to migrate from one area of use to another.

The search for good horses was carried through the whole of western Europe as well as Turkey, Syria and the Barbary Coast. Turkey, for example, was visited in 1517 by

⁽⁴⁾ Sir Edward's statement that "... it is a question, whether or not, the whole Kingdome could make 2000 good Horse, that might equall 2000 French" strictly refers to horse-soldiers rather than (as some authors have suggested) to the horses themselves. His opinion of either, however, was equally scathing: see Harwood (1642 : C3).

Sir Griffith Donne in search of mares for the king (though in practice the Turks and Arabs were always reluctant to sell breeding mares: Dent, 1987: 80). Sixteenth-century opinion considered "Turkey horses" to be "indifferent fayre to the eie, though not very great nor strongly made, yet very light and swyfte in their running and of gret courage", while Barbary horses, perhaps the most sought-after of all, were esteemed "excellently well breathed, & thereby are bothe able to mayntayne a very long cariere, and also to abyde anye kind of labour & travayle" (Blundeville, 1565: fol. 6v). They could also make excellent cavalry horses.

The contribution of Barbary blood to two races of horses within the European mainland led to these strains being particularly esteemed. Coursers bred in the Kingdom of Naples enjoyed an almost unrivalled reputation, even though the race was considered by the sixteenth century to have passed its peak⁽⁵⁾. In his league-table of horses "mete to serve in the field", Thomas Blundeville (1565: fol. 12r) places the Neapolitan stallion in the first place.

As an alternative source, many of the most outstanding Italian horses reaching England during the reign of Henry VIII came from the Gonzaga stables at Mantua, which were also heavily penetrated by Barbary, Arab and Turkish blood. Two successive Gonzagas were involved in these exchanges: Marchese Francesco II (reigned 1484-1519), under whom the fame of the Mantuan stables was spread throughout Europe; and Marchese Federico II (reigned 1519-1540, elevated to the title of Duke by Emperor Charles V in 1530), whose protégé Giulio Romano erected a veritable shrine to the *scuderie gonzaghesche* in the form of the Sala Dei Cavalli at the Palazzo Te (Fig. 1). In 1514 alone we read in the English sources of a particularly valuable consignment of twelve Mantuan brood mares for Henry's stud (*Letters & Papers*, I: 930), while records for the same year in the Mantuan archives speak of four horses, individually named and described as "the flower of our stables", which received an ecstatic welcome from Henry VIII at Eltham Palace (Malacarne, 1995: 113-15). On that occasion the English officials accompanying the gift evidently had to be persuaded to abandon plans to drive their charges over the St. Gothard Pass and through Switzerland in favour of a gentler route northwards via Trento. In the following reign Henry was again making importunate demands for fresh blood, as when Federico II was approached by Gregory Casalis on

the King's behalf in search of mares and stallions with which to establish in England a breeding population of Barbary horses - seemingly for racing purposes (Malacarne, 1995: 126-9).

Rivalling the Italians in refinement and mettle were the Spanish horses known to the English as jennets (now called Andalusians), of which race the most esteemed specimens came from the royal stud at Cordova. English hostilities with Spain in the latter part of the sixteenth century placed a limit on the numbers of jennets that might then be obtained, but under the Stuarts these difficulties evaporated. In 1623 the future Charles I, then Prince of Wales, made an impetuous visit to the Spanish court with a view to winning the hand of the Infanta: although his marriage plans came to nought, the Prince returned with some sixty of the prized Spanish horses and his Master of the Horse with a further thirty (MacGregor, forthcoming).

Northern Europe produced two of the most sought-after heavier breeds, German horses known to the English as Almaines - "comonly a great horse, & thought not finely, yeat very strongly made, & therefore more meete for the shocke [of battle] then to passe a cariere" (Blundeville, 1565: fol. 9v) - and the Flanders horse which, "in his shape, disposition, and pace, differeth in a maner nothinge from the Almayne horse: saving that for the most parte he is of a greater stature and more puissant" (*ibid.*: fol. 9v-10r).

Within the narrow circle of the court the royal stud provided a focus for efforts at improvement by judicious breeding strategies involving horses from these varying origins. The stud system was thoroughly reformed by Henry VIII, who concentrated his resources at a few specialized centres, most notably Hampton Court (Middlesex), Eltham (Kent), Malmesbury (Wiltshire) and Tutbury (Staffordshire) (Prior, 1935: 3). It was here that these imported horses could make their most lasting impact on the native stock and concerted efforts were made to conserve and to perpetuate the benefits of their several blood-lines. A survey of the studs at Malmesbury and Tutbury carried out by Prospero d'Osma in 1576 (*ibid.*: 11-21) reveals a high proportion of horses with Neapolitan, Spanish, Barbary and Turkish blood in their veins amongst both the mares at stud and the stallions which served them. By 1620 French, Danish, Netherlandish and Polish mares were also present (*ibid.*: 66-8), testifying to a continuing search for beneficial combinations of strains that would produce perfect cross-breeds.

⁽⁵⁾ As early as 1519 the Duke of Ferrara apologised to Henry VIII for the quality of the horses recently supplied to him, commenting that "the breed of horses in Naples and Italy generally is very much degenerated" (*Letters & Papers*, 3, i: 63). Blundeville (1565: fol. 8r) was later to write of Neapolitan horses that "the Italians do both write and say, that these Coursers be nothing so strong now as they have bene in times past, partly perhaps for that like industry of late Daies hath not bene used in breeding them, as in tymes past".

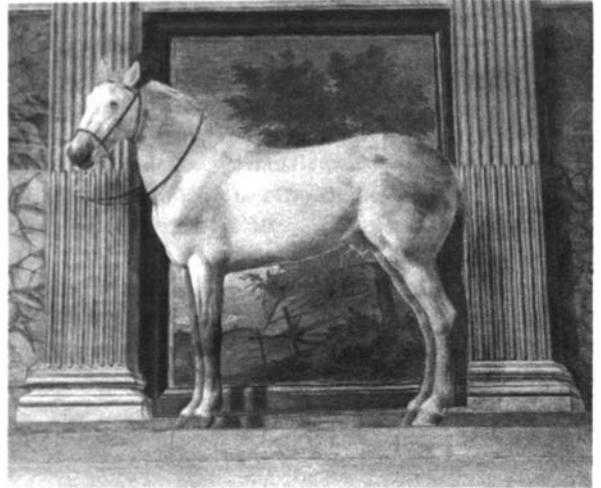
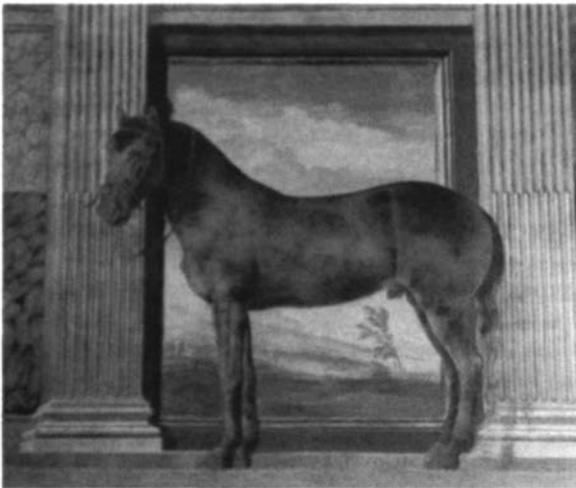
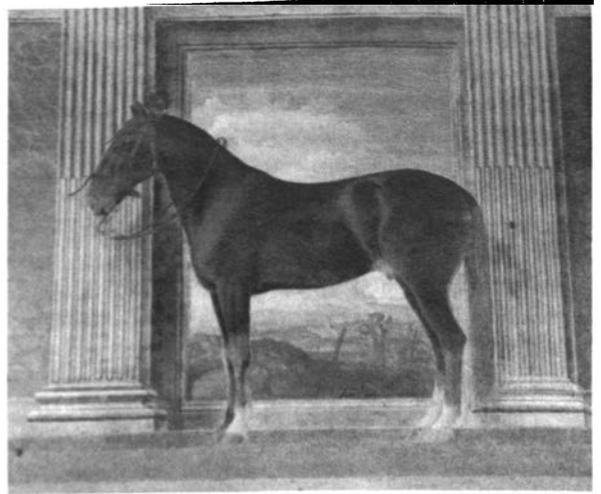
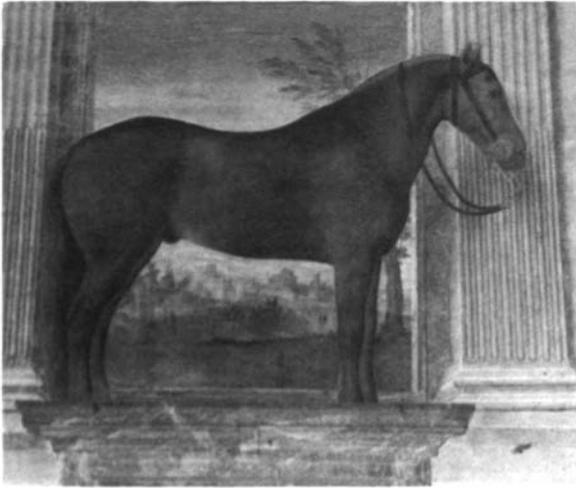


Fig. 1: Four of the Duke of Mantua's most celebrated stallions, painted in fresco by Rinaldo Mantovano under the direction of Giulio Romano, c.1530. Sala dei Cavalli, Palazzo Te, Mantua. Photos: A. MacGregor.

Not everyone was convinced of the wisdom of these strategies. Richard Holinshed in his *Chronicles* of 1586 took a dim view of "such outlandish horses as are daillie brought over unto us": Henry VIII's "noble studderie" had for a time "verie good successe with them", he tells us, "till the officers waxing wearie, procured a mixed brood of bastard races, whereby his good purpose came to little effect" (Holinshed, 1807, I: 371). D'Osmia, too, had no very high opinion of such "bastard horses" (Prior, 1935: 9). There remain, indeed, strong indications that the most prized horses bred in England at this time were of pure-bred oriental parentage rather than of mixed race (see Malacarne, 1995: 130).

The outbreak of Civil War in 1642 caused a break in this hitherto continuous line of development, but the ultimate defeat of the royalist forces and the consequent closure of the royal studs had the beneficial effect of dispersing the king's horses among privately owned studs up and down the country, spreading more widely the benefits of 150 years of royal enterprise (for the long-lasting benefits of these measures see Fitzgerald, 1990; Loch, 1986; MacGregor, forthcoming).

The principal test of Henry VIII's efforts to elevate the quality of the royal horses came not on the battlefield but in 1520 at the lavish, extended tournament between the English and French courts, staged in a splendid temporary

encampment between Guines and Ardres in the Pas-de-Calais, which has entered the history-books as the Field of Cloth of Gold. Here Henry VIII and his arch-rival François I measured themselves against each other over the space of eleven days, the two kings and their courtiers striving to out-do each other in feats of arms, courtly refinement and conspicuous consumption. Horses featured largely in these manoeuvres, matched against each other for refinement and performance, decked out in the most magnificent manner, displayed proudly at one moment and given away or exchanged the next in elaborate displays of largesse. In preparation for the event the Netherlands had again been scoured by English agents in search of outstanding mounts; Henry himself was well supplied for the occasion with Neapolitan and Mantuan horses, while François too was mounted on Mantuan stock. Any expression of admiration from one side tended to be met with the animal in question immediately being surrendered by the other (Russell, 1969: 118-20). However magnificent the mounts brought with them by the English on that occasion (and the royal party had over 3,000 horses in its train: see Edwards, 1998: 155), they can scarcely have returned any the worse for these encounters and every effort would have been made to capitalize on the new blood in the studs at home.

Within two years these short-lived fraternal relations between England and France were a thing of the past and the ensuing hostilities greatly inflated the demand for horses. The equine reserves of southern England were once again drained during Henry's reign and the north too was decimated, in the process nullifying much of what he had achieved. In this context continental Europe came increasingly to be viewed as an inexhaustible reservoir from which replacements could be purchased to compensate for the wastage of native beasts.

On one occasion in 1544 the Queen Regent of the Netherlands received a demand for 4,100 draught horses, which she was asked somewhat brusquely to deliver to Calais for shipment to England within six days. Within a month a further 7,200 draught horses were required from her by Henry, again to be delivered to Calais. In the end he received 9,600 horses from his hard-pressed ally, but only at the cost of catastrophically depleting the domestic resources of her own territory. Further requests made two years later were met with the response that there were simply no more horses to be had there (*Letters & Papers*, XIX, i: 201-3, 406, 519-20, 539).

Some of these animals may never have left the English garrison in France, but others were undoubtedly intended for shipment to England. Amongst the latter, some part would have been pressed into immediate service as working

horses but others were certainly destined for the stud. On one occasion a consignment of 200 mares destined for England got caught up in diplomatic wrangling (*Letters & Papers*, XIX, i: 518-21, 539): such a large number was clearly extraordinary, causing the Queen Regent to assert that their loss was likely to "strip the country, which partly depends upon the rearing of horses and would easily be deprived of them if they could be carried away which from all time has been strictly forbidden". The fact that the mares had already been assembled at Calais before knowledge of Henry's intentions reached her caused further irritation to the Queen Regent, as did intelligence that the ships she had sent to transport the King's army had already illicitly carried off some 700 mares, numbers of which were not yet even of serviceable age (*Letters & Papers*, XIX, i: 521). Other records of this period show horses being sought as far away as Speyer and Kassel (*ibid.*: 293, 517, 546).

The importance to the English of these fresh resources and the low ebb to which the protracted hostilities had brought the native stock are underlined in a report sent from France to the Council, dated 1544, in which the complaint was made that the draught horses sent from England were by then "so evil" that it took fourteen or fifteen of them to draw a single wagon (*Letters & Papers*, XIX, i: 465). This was where the Flanders horses in particular made such an outstanding contribution. The mares, according to Blundeville (1565: fol. 10r) were of "a great stature, stronge, longe, large, fayre and fruytfull, and besydes that, will endure great labour, as is wel scene, for that the Fleminges do use none other draught, but with those mares in their wagons, in whiche I have sene twoo or three Mares to go lyghtly away with suche a burthen, as is almost incredible". Small wonder that Henry was prepared to resort to deception in order to obtain them.

The evolving world of the horse

By the following century, new developments in the tactics of warfare had led to the replacement of the heavy horse as a cavalry mount by lighter, more manoeuvrable animals - the "middling-sized horses" so favoured by the Duke of Newcastle (Cavendish, 1667: 77-8). Arab and Barbary horses as well as Spanish jennets fitted these requirements perfectly, but naturally were largely reserved for the officers who owned them privately (see Edwards, 1995: 49-50, 54). At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642 the initial requirements of the two sides in terms of mounts is thought to have stood around 10,000 saddle horses but quickly escalated to the point where over twice that number (including those pulling guns and supply-wagons) might be fielded for a single set-piece battle (*ibid.*: 51). The vast

majority of these would have been native-bred, but the fact that in 1642 the Parliamentarians seized a Dutch ship carrying a consignment of forty-two Flemish horses “trayned up for warr” (*ibid.*: 56) shows that the Royalists at least looked abroad for mounts.

Other developments caused similar fluctuations in demand. Carts and wagons came into more widespread use in the course of the sixteenth century, exacerbating the need in peace as well as war for draught horses at the expense of pack-horses or sumpters⁽⁶⁾. The introduction of the coach from mid-century further contributed to these demands: by 1590 Elizabeth I had twenty-eight coach-horses in her stables (Edwards, 1998: 159); fifty-nine coach-horses are recorded in the inventories of Charles II in 1668 (MacGregor, 1996a: 187) while William and Mary between them had eighty-two by the end of the seventeenth century (Edwards, 1998: 159). The needs of the court in its periodic removals brought these problems into sharp focus in the later sixteenth century, although often they were solved by impressing horses from private owners⁽⁷⁾. Under the Stuarts an increasing tendency to sedentarism began to alleviate these problems and by the end of the seventeenth century the court had become largely static, although social use of the coach had become widespread. Amongst well-to-do private citizens a corresponding taste emerged for handsome teams of well-matched coach-horses - often geldings of suitably docile temperament.

It may be noted that it was in ambling horses that the British Isles were best provided, though the most esteemed - the hobby - came not from England but from Ireland. Blundeville (1565: fol. 10v) considered the hobby “a pretie fyne horse ... tender mouthed, nimble, light, pleasaunt & apt to be taught, and for the most part thei be amblers, & therefore very mete for the saddle, & to travel by the way”. The reputation of hobbies was such that they were even

sought-after on the Continent and were considered appropriate gifts for exchange between royalty⁽⁸⁾.

Displays of virtuoso horsemanship embodied in the *manège*, an early and rather demanding form of dressage, were highly popular on the Continent, particularly in Italy, France and Spain. Although the *manège* evidently had its adherents in England, and an increasing preoccupation with the art of horsemanship can be detected in the considerable numbers of Italian stablemen imported to accompany the mounts they tended, its practice seems never to have attracted there the dedicated following it had on the Continent, perhaps especially in France. Its greatest English exponent, in the person of the Duke of Newcastle (1592-1676), was not to emerge until well into the mature period of the art in the seventeenth century, but the requirements of the *manège* too exerted an influence on the choice of horses imported in the sixteenth century.

William III maintained the Stuart interest in horsemanship, instituting a riding academy and importing a French riding-master, Major Foubert, to direct it (Gilbey, 1899: 47). As late as 1699 the same monarch showed that Moorish horses held a continuing fascination for the English court, for in that year the royal stud-master brought fourteen horses and mares from Barbary for the king (*Calendar of State Papers Domestic*, (1699-1700): 349).

By contrast, the furious pace of the hunt under the Tudors and Stuarts demanded horses of a very different calibre. Barbary horses were again particularly favoured for this purpose by Blundeville (1565: fol. 12v), who comments on the “extreme exercise of galloping the buck or to follow the long-winged hawk ... eyther of whiche exeryces killeth yerely in thys Realme many a good gelding”. By the time of the Stuart kings hunting horses were being distinguished as a discrete type (MacGregor, 1996a) and were

⁽⁶⁾ Wheeled vehicles were, of course, much more efficient on appropriate terrain: Edwards (1988: 117) gives a figure of ten pack-horses to move a ton of goods, a load that could be moved by two horses with a cart. During preparations for the dispatch of forces to aid the “Recovery and protection of the Palatinate” in 1621, estimates submitted to the Privy council allowed eight horses per ton of goods (*Herbert Manuscripts*, 1886: 151).

⁽⁷⁾ William Harrison, a collaborator of Holinshed, observes this phenomenon in the latter’s *Chronicles*, compiled in the 1570s and 1580s, commenting that “... our princes and the nobilitie have their cariage commonlie made by carts, whereby it commeth to passe, that when the queenes maiestie dooth remooove from anie one place to another, there are usuallie 400 carewares, which amount to the summe of 2400 horses, appointed out of the countries adjoining, whereby hir cariage is conveyed safelie unto the appointed place. Hereby also the ancient use of somers and sumpter horses is in maner utterly relinquished, which causeth the traines of our princes in their progresses to shew far lesse than those of the kings of other nations” (Holinshed, 1807, I: 370).

⁽⁸⁾ In 1546, for example, Henry VIII sought to mollify Mary of Hungary following his earlier importunate demands on her by sending her a gift including hobbies and hackneys, for which the Queen declared herself “the gladdest woman in the world” (*Letters & Papers* 21, i: no. 628). Francesco II of Mantua commissioned Polydore Vergil to buy hobbies on his account: on 15 November 1511 Vergil wrote to him that he had acquired eight of them (*Calendar of State Papers Venetian*, 2 (1509-19): 51). Later in his reign he received as gifts from Henry VIII further hobbies and hacknies (*ubbini et achinee*), as well as sumpters (*cavalli gradarii*) and hunting dogs (Malacarne, 1995: 114-17, 125, 128, 199, 225).

being furnished with their own distinctive harness (MacGregor, 1996b).

The tradition of matching horses against one another in races goes back to remote antiquity, but by the mid sixteenth century indications of a more dedicated approach to horse-racing emerges and within fifty years the breeding of swift running horses was to become a major preoccupation of the English⁽⁹⁾. Again the nobles of the court were much involved in its early promotion. With the accession of James I the sport acquired a fanatical royal patron and under his patronage Newmarket gained the reputation it retains today as the epicentre of English horse-racing. By mid century the sport was still sufficiently closely identified with the court for it to be banned altogether for periods under Cromwell (when it was noted that “several Horse-Races are appointed in divers parts of this Commonwealth”): accordingly, under a series of Proclamations from 1654 onwards horse-racing was banned (see, for example, *A Proclamation prohibiting horse-races for six months*, 24 February 1654). Later, with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, racing found a dedicated supporter in the person of Charles II, who not only presided over the re-establishment of Newmarket as a social and sporting centre but on more than one occasion successfully competed there in the races on his own account. Amongst the mounts he particularly favoured were six Barbary horses, gifts delivered by the Moroccan ambassador in 1681 (MacGregor, forthcoming).

Attempts to trace the pedigrees of other early race-horses suggest that at the time of the Restoration the most successful stallions were almost invariably of unmixed eastern stock while the mares too had a high proportion of

Arab blood in their veins (Aleppo was considered the most fruitful source). The Duke of Newcastle, for example, was characteristically trenchant in his views on this matter: “Your *stallion*, by any means, must be a *Barb* ... for a *Barb* that is a *Jade*, will Get a better *Runing-Horse*, than the best *Running-Horse* in *England*” (Cavendish, 1667: 63)¹⁰. The Duke’s own stud, which he re-established at Welbeck near Worksop (Nottinghamshire) following the Restoration, was composed largely of Arabians, Barbs and Turkish horses.

Concluding remarks

At the end of two centuries of concerted efforts at improvement, England possessed at last a creditable population of horses. There would be no more internal conflict on a scale that would threaten to undo the hard-won benefits of programmes of improvement. From the later seventeenth century the demands of the military became more structured and less deleterious on the national reserves of horseflesh, so that even the Jacobite rebellions of the eighteenth century could be handled in an organized manner. The problems of uncontrolled interbreeding addressed in Henry VIII’s domestic legislation were largely resolved in those years by the progressive enclosure of land, measures which had the effect of reducing opportunities for unregulated sexual encounters, while later attempts at the further improvement of bloodstock by the addition of new Arab blood met with singular lack of success, suggesting that an optimum level of interbreeding had already been reached (Prior, 1924: 9-13). Henceforth, English horses could hold up their heads in any company in Europe.

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⁽⁹⁾ Blundeville (1565 : fol. 12v) advises that “if any man desyre to have swyft runners, let hym chouse a Horse of Barbary, or a Turke to be his stallion”.

⁽¹⁰⁾ In 1666 the Duke created a racecourse on his estate for the enjoyment of his friends and neighbours and drew up a set of rules for the good conduct of such races.

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