



working horses



what are they?

They are heavy (or draught) horses used for transport, managing agricultural land, and for the extraction of timber from woodlands. They can be used in agriculture for anything from land preparation to harvesting, including ploughing, sowing and haymaking. They represent a form of renewable energy that can be used directly, e.g. ploughing or pulling a cart, or indirectly in the form of a 'land drive' - the horse pulls equipment on wheels that turn and transfer energy to revolving parts via a system of gears and cogs - for example hayturners, muckspreaders, elevators or binders.

Horses are thought to have been domesticated as long ago as 4000 BCE and have been used for hunting, transport, warfare and agriculture throughout human history. Horses are extremely social animals, naturally living in large herds with a dominance hierarchy, and can often form strong bonds with humans, or other animals, as well as their herd mates.

British breeds of heavy horse include the Shire, Clydesdale and Suffolk Punch. The Percheron is French, the Haflinger Austrian, and each European country has its specific breeds. The Belgian Ardennes horse is the root of all heavy horses. In the Middle Ages, native horses were bred with larger Belgian / Flemish stock for warfare and to carry knights in heavy armour. They became very useful in peace time too, on farms, and after the Industrial Revolution, for pulling barges on the new canals.

Cob is the generic term for pony-sized working horses such as the Fell or the Dales. Cobs are not as powerful as Shires or the other bigger breeds, but they are cheaper to keep.

In the States, the Amish people do all their farm work using horse power.



The muscular Ardennes horse, from which all heavy horse breeds originate.



Horse logging.

what are the benefits?

Environmental

- Horses impact less on the land than heavy machinery, which causes compaction and damage to soil and organisms. So they can be used in sites that have valuable flora and fauna.
- They provide renewable energy using plants as fuel, rather than polluting fossil fuels.
- They reproduce themselves without requiring polluting factories.
- They don't emit pollutants in use, but they do produce manure, an excellent fertiliser.

Other

- Because of their lower impact on the land, horses can be used in wet and boggy areas, and work with horses can start earlier in the year, when the land is wetter.
- Because of their manoeuvrability, horses can be used on steeper sites than tractors.
- Horses can't compete with tractors in terms of speed, but can be used in combination with tractors, in areas where tractors would struggle.
- Working with horses - especially horse logging - keeps you very fit.
- You'll make friends, as people tend to love the concept, and will often come and talk to you.

A hectare of grain can provide bioethanol to cultivate 10 hectares using a tractor. The same hectare can feed 2 horses that can also cultivate 10 hectares, but without the pollution or the embodied energy of machinery or factories, and they'll provide manure to produce more grain. Farmers prefer tractors because of speed - time is at a premium because of the need to earn money due to rising land prices and large supermarkets squeezing their incomes. Economic and planning change is required if farmers can live and work at a slower pace, more in harmony with nature, without being bankrupted.



Horse pulling a narrowboat on a UK canal.

what can I do?

If you don't have friends or family with horses, you could attend a course to get to work with a horse. By the end of the day, you'll know if it's for you or not. A course is only a taster. There is a lot of knowledge to build up, but it means that it will keep your interest, as you'll never stop learning. Experience of riding may be an advantage, but it's not essential. If you decide to do it, you'll need some land - a few acres plus stabling for your horses, and a few acres for hay / feed for winter.

Getting horses

Consider the space you have and the work you need your horse, or pony, to do. Larger breeds are more expensive to buy and keep than smaller ones, and it makes little sense to buy a Shire horse when a Highland pony could easily do the work. If possible, find someone who keeps the breed you think you might want, spend some time with them and see the sort of work their horses can manage. You need to keep at least 2 horses. If you only need one expensive working horse, your second horse could be a retired pony or a horse unsuitable for work for some reason, but otherwise healthy. Talk to experienced horse owners about where to purchase horses. Also, look in your local papers, or in the classified section of *Heavy Horse World*. You'll need an experienced person to go with you to look at a horse. You need to see them trot, and check their eyes, mouth etc. If you don't have the background, there are lots of things that can go wrong. Spend some time handling the horse, see it at work, observe how it behaves around traffic and strangers. It makes sense to ensure your first horse is an experienced working horse - it will then

teach you. If you are planning to take on a young horse and train it yourself it is important you have the help of an experienced person.

Caring for horses

For 2 horses you will need at least an acre of grazing; a big horse can eat a bale of hay per day in winter, plus dry feed such as oats. Horses should always have access to clean drinking water and a mineral lick. Most working breeds can live out all year round, however they should always have a field shelter. You will need a grooming kit, and to groom your horse regularly. Find a good vet who has experience with horses and check your horses over everyday. There are a number of vaccinations recommended for horses, e.g. tetanus and equine influenza.

Working with horses

Get the basics right - getting the horse to stand still, walk forward and stop on a verbal command. Then start putting implements or machinery to them. Working with horses can be dangerous, but experience will help you remove the danger element. You can't remove the risk completely though - you'll need to be fit and strong yourself, and have lots of common sense. The secret is to build layers of experience over time, and not try to do too much in one go. A basic harness can be very simple, depending on the job. For horse logging you'll need a collar, a simple pulling harness, chains and spreader bar which will come to around £350. This can rise to £1200-1500 for kit for more complicated jobs, or for pairs of horses. If you're doing work off-site for other people, you'll need insurance and risk assessments, plus safety gear such as steel-toecap boots and a hard hat, and if you're a novice, you'll need someone working with you. For horse logging, you'll need chainsaw certification and a felling licence from the Forestry Commission - even on your own land.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/working-horses for information, courses, links and books, including:
- Diana Zeuner, *the Working Horse Manual*
- Edward Hart, *Horse-Drawn Farm Implements*
- britishhorseloggers.org, low-impact extraction
- heavyhorsesonline.co.uk, for heavy horse fans
- fectu.org, European Draught Horse Federation
- britishfestivaloftheworkinghorse.co.uk, festival
- heavyhorseworld.co.uk – Heavy Horse World magazine

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