

The Shire horse. A history of the breed,  
the Society and the men.

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[The Shire horse. A history of the breed, the Society and the men.](#)

Author(s) : [Chivers, K.](#)

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Abstract : Breeds serve their day and their generation. They come and the response to changing markets - yesterday the Shorthorn, today the Friesian into the past, their history is often recorded, and the recording is often excellent. This book is no exception - it is a magnificent history of one of the most useful and it has been done superbly, a true labour of love. The breed it describes, the Shire horse, was the core of England's short-distance heavy haulage and traction

was replaced by the lorry and the tractor. In the heyday of the Shire, interest in haulage capability, durability and diseases was as great as modern interest in the car. The book traces the Shire's evolution from medieval times. Apparently, heavy horses were desired for military purposes - and it certainly must have taken a big horse to support a knight in full armour - but legislation to increase the size of horses was unsuccessful, since the land of many English counties was too poor to support large animals. In breeding, a large step forward was taken when travelling stallions were introduced. Previously, stallions were run with local mares, but this system limited good animals to exercise more than a very local influence. A travelling stallion could extend his influence over a much larger district, although at a cost, since stallions were often not in heat when he arrived, and a semi-aroused stallion was an easy target to the heels of an unreceptive mare! The formation of the Breed Societies in the 19th century led to some characteristic Victorian features; breeding was done in the home and aristocratic breeders appeared on the scene, including Royalty and the nobility, all to breed cart horses! There was money, however, in the game. Associated with the horse was, inevitably, the mechanic - the veterinary surgeon. Much of his work was concerned with unsoundness, particularly of wind and limb. Many unsound horses were seen, from practical observation, to be of genetic origin, and continuous culling of affected animals was essential. There is perhaps a lesson here for modern selection, where an overemphasis on paper selection may perhaps have caused some of the leg weaknesses. As an economic breed, the Shire horse is now a thing of the past, but one might add a good thing too. The work was extremely heavy, and often shortened the horse's life markedly; the modern horse has a much better life. Let us hope that the breed is preserved. We have reason to be optimistic in this respect, thanks to the farms of enthusiasts and by the breweries. To British people, the idea of eating horses for meat is too repugnant even to mention, and only an out-and-out pessimist could visualise a major revival of the breed. This book is a classic, and can be read as social, technological or animal breeding history. One word of warning: it is a long book and should not be read at one go, rather dipped into as inclination dictates. G.B. Young

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