

Horse Power: The Trade of Working Horses in Late Medieval England

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Horse Power: The Trade of Working Horses in Late Medieval England illustrates, for the first time, how the medieval English economy was supplied with working horses. Alongside water and wind power, working animals were one of three essential sources of energy in the medieval economy. By understanding how England was furnished with this power, we unlock key insights into how the medieval economy was able to grow during the crucial period of England's, and indeed Europe's, demographic and economic development from ca. 1250 to ca. 1350. Furthermore, the book illustrates how peasants, rather than seigniorial landlords, dominated the medieval horse trade. This sheds new light on the flourishing economic activities of peasants as a social group, as they seized and quickly monopolised the breeding, raising and marketing of these animals. In sum, *Horse Power* tells the story of how the trade in agricultural horses facilitated the processes of commercialisation, market integration, and demographic and economic expansion in medieval England which laid the foundations for the trajectory of growth that led to the Industrial Revolution.

We know that, before 1200, oxen were the dominant work animals, and source of kinetic energy, on both farms and roads in England. By the sixteenth century, however, horses had achieved almost total ubiquity in the world of work animals. This raises an important question: Where, exactly, did these horses come from? Despite historians' understanding of the important contributions that horse power made to the late medieval economy,¹ we have very little understanding of *how* these horses were produced or distributed.²

It is well documented that the transition in animal power was very consequential for the medieval economy, as horses offered significant premiums over oxen in terms of both speed and power which, in turn, had critical implications for agricultural production, transport and market transactions. The introduction of working horses allowed goods to be transported with greater efficiency while also helping improve agricultural output through increasing the speed at which essential tasks such as ploughing and harrowing could be completed. Improvement across all of these areas, facilitated by the introduction of working horses, was a key ingredient of England's economic development.

What *Horse Power* critically adds to the literature is an illustration of exactly how medieval England was supplied with working horses. Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, my work demonstrates that working horses were produced exclusively within the British Isles, as the high cost of transporting these animals from the continent outweighed their modest value. Equally significant were the new opportunities that horses offered to peasants. The low price of these animals allowed lower classes of society to own and employ horses and thereby benefit from increased economic efficiencies and more productive agriculture. In addition, by breeding and selling work-horses, peasants also diversified their economic activities and increased their interaction with markets.

¹ For example, see: John Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation: The Use of Draught Animals in English Farming from 1066-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

² Indeed, Bruce Campbell commented in his authoritative work on seigniorial agriculture that "little is as yet known about the medieval horse trade." Bruce M.S. Campbell, *English Seigniorial Agriculture 1250-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126 n.45.

What also emerges from the book is a new understanding of the nature of economic development in the Middle Ages. While we often think of commercialisation as being inexorably linked to capitalism, the nature of the horse trade presents an alternative view. Through *Horse Power*, we understand that work-horses were supplied through a highly-commercialised network of small-scale peasant producers. It was, however, not a highly capitalized industry, and therefore suggests a re-evaluation of our current ideas about medieval economic development.

This raises a question central to our understanding of the medieval economy: when does commercialisation become capitalism? When did peasants begin farming for profit rather than survival? By shedding light on the peasant production of such a central commodity, the book proposes an alternative to traditional and teleological models of economic growth that emphasize capital investment, specialization and aggressive marketing strategies. Rather it argues that the horse trade was an 'economy of makeshift' and suited what we would call today 'hard-scrabble' agriculture, in that it allowed a diversification in activities that expanded peasants' opportunities for more productive agriculture and increased interaction with markets. The breeding, rearing and selling of horses also allowed peasants to augment diminishing returns to arable agriculture, especially before the Black Death in 1349, when population pressure on resources was at its height. However, a chronic lack of investment in working horses meant that there was little progress in terms of stock improvement, technology or marketing which increasingly placed a ceiling on productivity gains and eventually acted as a drag on levels of commercialisation. This is a cautionary tale of unintended consequences that has relevance not only for societies of the preindustrial past but also for many developing economies today.

Outline

Chapter 1: The Role of Demesnes in the Trade of Agricultural Horses

The first chapter explores the role of demesnes (the farms of medieval lords, as opposed to the lands of their peasant tenants) in the production and trade of working horses. Through an extensive exploration of a national sample of manorial accounts, the book demonstrates that, despite being heavily reliant on horse power, the demesne sector was not at all invested in producing the animals. This challenges the current paradigm which assumes that seigniorial farms were the source of working horses by proving that demesnes did not produce enough horses to meet their own demand, let alone a surplus that could have supplied the national market. These great agricultural institutions were therefore significant consumers of horses, but drew almost exclusively on the open market for their supply of working animals. Demesnes, did, however, have an important distributive role in the horse trade, perhaps even unwittingly. In actively managing their own stocks of working horses, demesne managers facilitated the circulation of animals through the practice of swapping out ageing horses for younger and fitter animals, and selling off older animals.

Chapter 2: The Role of the Peasantry in the Trade of Agricultural Horses

As Chapter 1 illustrates that the seigniorial sector could not have been medieval England's source of working horses, then an obvious question follows: if the large institutional farms of landlords were not producing work horses, who was? The second chapter considers the peasantry, the other sector of medieval English society, and its potential for supplying the country with working horses. As there are no extant sources on the peasantry that approach the scope or scale of the manorial accounts used in Chapter 1, accomplishing this requires the assemblage of an array of disparate sources. Beginning with an exploration of a range of anecdotal evidence concerning peasant livestock ownership and breeding, drawing on a range of sources from manorial accounts and court rolls to hundred rolls and sermons, the chapter establishes that peasants were regularly and actively engaged in the breeding, rearing and marketing of livestock generally and for horses in particular. The chapter then moves on to a highly detailed empirical study of taxation records to provide quantitative support for this argument. To accomplish this, the chapter examines lay subsidy returns, which are one of the few medieval English sources capable of sustaining quantifiable analysis of peasant agriculture. The 1283 lay subsidy return from Blackbourne hundred in Suffolk is employed as a case study here, not only for its rich and robust data, but also because this particular subsidy has benefitted from much previous interrogation by other historians. This allows the reader to be more certain of its limitations as a source, but also allows the chapter to be located within a robust historiography. Overall, the chapter illustrates that peasants owned significantly more female and young horses which allowed them, as a group, to supply the national economy with working horses. The chapter argues that medieval England was supplied with working horses by a network of small-scale peasants producers who bred and reared these animals without the benefits of significant specialization or economies of scale, which is contrary to conventional arguments about economic development.

Chapter 3: The Role of Markets

The third chapter considers the structure of the horse market and how both institutions and individuals interacted with it. It provides, for the first time, robust empirical evidence for horse prices from across England. This allows the chapter to illustrate how comparatively integrated the market for horses was compared to other commodities such as grain and wool, while also illustrating how the market for some specific types of working horses, and cart-horses in particular, was much more integrated than the markets for other types of animals. The chapter also explores, through a thorough examination of manorial accounts and court rolls, how market and non-market transactions were structured. The chapter also puts forward an argument for a symbiotic peasant-lord-peasant cycle in terms of how working horses circulated between the two sectors of medieval society. In this model, peasants bred horses surplus to their own needs and sold these animals either on the open market or, on a more informal basis, to their local landlord. Many landlords likely thought it was a practical ‘good business’ decision to patronize their peasants, in that they provided their tenants with cash which they could then use to pay the rents and feudal dues they owed their lords. The large institutional farms of landlords employed working horses for the most productive ‘heart’ of their working lives, and then sold the animals at the end of their ‘careers’ as their productivity began to wane. The value of horses markedly depreciated towards the end of their working lives. Unlike oxen, horses could not be fattened and sold for meat, due to the prevailing aversion to consumption of horse flesh at the time (a topic which the chapter also explores in detail). However, at this point, most working horses still had a number of years of ‘light-duty’ working life remaining, which could still be very useful for peasants’ needs. Therefore, the model argues that peasants sold the young horses they bred and raised to seigniorial farms and bought back older animals from landlords for their own use.

Conclusion

The concluding chapter brings together the substantive arguments of the previous sections and places them in the context of the broader economic and social developments of medieval England. The conclusion also considers how the insights of the previous chapters fit within the current historiography, and if some of the prevailing ideas need to be reconfigured based on the book’s contributions. One significant theme is the economic rationality of both lords (and their agents in reeves and bailiffs), and peasants. There are currently differing views on this, especially for historians examining grain production and marketing.³ *Horse Power* clearly lays out the decision-making processes of both lords and peasants in the production of working horses, and will therefore be a significant contribution to this debate. The other significant discussion in the conclusion surrounds the issue of economic development. The evidence put forth in the three substantive chapters suggests that the horse trade itself was highly commercialised and that peasants expanded their engagement with markets through their breeding, rearing and marketing of working horses. The conclusion revisits a question posed in the introduction: when does commercialisation become capitalism? It argues that the horse trade was highly commercialised, but under capitalised. A chronic lack of investment in working horses meant that there was little progress in terms of stock improvement, technology or marketing which increasingly placed a ceiling on productivity gains and eventually acted as a drag on levels of commercialisation.

³ See: David Stone *Decision Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Eric B. Schneider, “Prices and production: agricultural supply response in fourteenth-century England” *Economic History Review* Vol. 67, No. 1 (2014), 66-91.

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