

# Horses going to war in WW1 and the impact locally on those left behind

Vivienne Mugford for U3A Local History Group, September 2014

We have all seen the pictures of horses assembled on the quay waiting for inspection by the military in August 1914. I think we all imagined that most of them were taken and the country side was depleted of horses.

I am going to suggest, supported by my research so far, that farming in Devon carried on much as normal. Haulage might have been more affected.

It must have been heartbreaking, however, for those who lost their much loved equine friends/work mates.

Parliamentary discussions (Hansard transcripts) suggest that horses required for the harvest should be exempt. It would seem that, apart from some overzealous remount officers in Norfolk, this was largely adhered to. (Hansard and 'Theirs not to reason Why', Graham Witton).

A local reminiscence from Arthur Luscombe is that his Grandfather was able to keep his horses, and there is also a suggestion that a certain number of horses had to be left to farm a certain acreage.

Also 'The 1912/13 Horse census classified a total of 589,401 UK horses fit for military service. Of these 231,683 were heavy draught, of which only 16,670 were required' (Graham Witton). Horses working the land would be mostly heavy draught.

It was Light draught horses (vanners) which were in short supply (165,000 horses were raised from 6th to 22nd August and these were moved by railway to Southampton. (G. Witton)

After August 1914 the British army did not attempt to make further large-scale compulsory purchases and chose to rely on the market mechanism. Between 1914 and 1920 the army acquired a total of 469,000 horses within the United Kingdom. ('Britain's Military Use of Horses 1914–1918' by John Singleton (1993).

## Impressment of Horses

The Army Act of 1881 entitled the military to seize horses and carriages for use in emergencies in strict terms laid down in the Act. (The War Horses, Simon Butler) The War book stipulated that 120,000 horses would be needed in the first 2 weeks of the war (a quarter of the pre-war census). Policemen called on horse owners and served them with a notice to bring their animals to a stipulated location. (Devon in the Great War, Gerald Wasley)

On the 6th August 1914, only 36 hours after the declaration of war, 300 horses from the parishes of Stokefleming, Dartmouth, Slapton, East Allington, Cornworthy, Dittisham, Blackawton, Ashprington and Morley gathered in Blackawton. Of the 300, 40 were purchased by the army.

In Kingsbridge, 400 horses gathered and 30 were purchased on the first day.

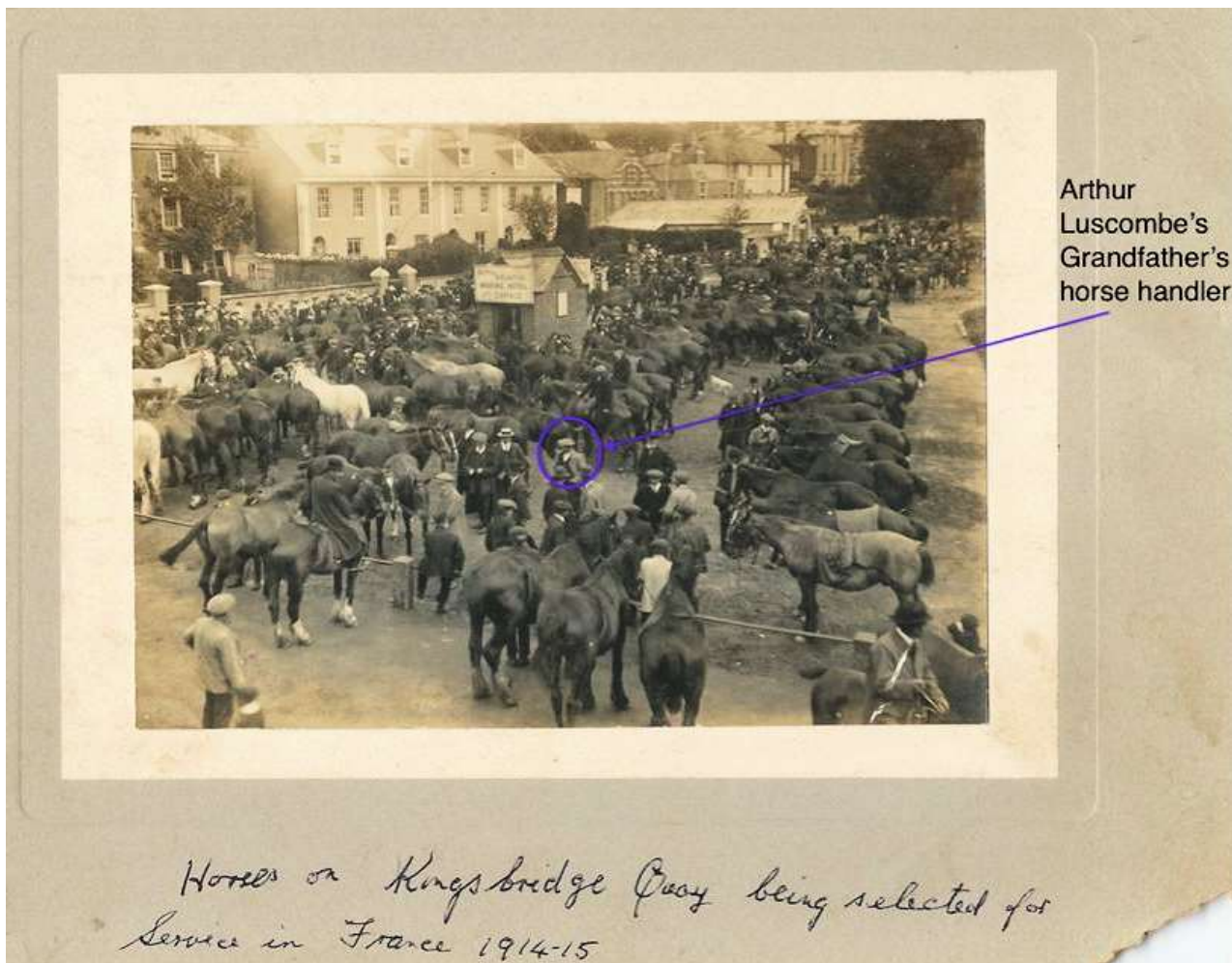
The Army vet and military advisors were late arriving in Kingsbridge as they had been been first to Blackawton, and more were to be examined the next day. (Kingsbridge Gazette, 07.08.14)

On 7th August 1914 further horses were selected at Kingsbridge and also at Aveton Gifford (Photo, page 4, Cookworthy Museum) but we don't know how many as the copy of Kingsbridge Gazette for the 14/8/1914 is missing. A Post Card written by J. Pearce, 8 Fore Street, Kingsbridge and recently given to the Cookworthy Museum, gives a wonderful description of the scene at Kingsbridge:

*"...Never were such a number of horses seen in Kingsbridge within living memory, extending double lines up to the end of Ilbert Road, down the quay, to the end of the promenade and up to the Market Place.*

*Horses of every description. Carriage horses, hunters, hacks, light and heavy. It being early closing day, shops shut and everybody turned out to see such a sight. I saw 56 splendid animals being entrained at Kingsbridge for Bulford Camp, Salisbury Plain, to be trained for heavy Field Artillery before being sent to the Continent".*

In Totnes, Jocelyn Ponting's father had to take some of his horses from his farm at Dartington, and had to walk home after they were purchased!! He was 14 at the time and running the farm for his invalid father. He said that farms were allowed to keep a set number of horses according to the acreage of the farm.



This photo of the Horses gathered on the Quay at Kingsbridge was kindly lent by Mr Arthur Luscombe. His Grandfather took his only 2 horses and pleaded that he be allowed to keep them as they were his only horses to work his 60 acre farm, Higher Holditch, Churchstow. His horseman, Mr Kirton, can be seen in the flat cap in the centre of the picture.

He was allowed to keep them.

Mr Luscombe recalls his grandfather saying that a baker or grocer he knew, had his horses taken so he could no longer make his deliveries.

The butchers, Lidstone, Warren and Pepperell also had at least some of their horses taken on the first day, as they announced in the Gazette on 7<sup>th</sup> August, that "their staffs of Men and Horses having been heavily reduced owing to the military requirements of the Government ... they could not guarantee regular deliveries as before" .



In Aveton Gifford, horses were inspected on 7th August, presumably after the 2nd day of inspection at Kingsbridge.

Dr Billie Steer, the local vet is 3rd from the left by the wall, with his grandfather, William Henry Steer, also a vet, on his left.

Other bystanders are Mr Saunders and his son, Mr Charlie Luckcraft, of Challoncombe, Walter Crimp of Tuffland, Mr Bowden of Titwell and George Tarring of Ashford. (Cookworthy Museum and Aveton Gifford sources)

### **An anecdote from Bill Burgoyne:**

At the same time as the sale of horses (perhaps 6th August 1914) equipment was also sold.

Dr Webb had a surgery up by the Police Station. He had a nice trap and was proud of it but felt he should hand it to the military. Bill's father owned Quay Garage and he and a friend grabbed the trap and hid it in Balkwill's coal yard and kept it 12 months. Dr Webb thought it had been stolen. The next year Bill's father got Webb and showed him the trap, much to his amusement or delight??

(Dr William Henry Webb, born 1853 in Llangollen, was the local GP. He delivered Bill Burgoyne in 1920 and was apparently around during the first world war but there is no record of when he died. Census 1911: he lived at 102 Fore St and had servants - Wills and Lambles. One son was a Rubber Planter!! and George Tudor (Fruit grower) was killed in the First World war in 1916 (Sec Lt) )

Kingsbridge Gazette 21<sup>st</sup> August 1914:

**BOGUS WAR OFFICE OFFICIALS.**—A message from Cardiff states that farmers in South Wales have been duped into selling horses to unauthorised persons representing themselves as War-office officials. In this way horses have been bought for £30 and sold afterwards to the Government for £50. The police have arrested a man on a charge of obtaining horses by fraud.

### **Bogus requisitioning was quickly alerted:**

*' Farmers are officially cautioned that all impressment of horses for the army is done by constables with a justice warrant. No sale should take place without the order and no commission should be paid at all'*

Over a million horses were taken to the First World War and only 60,000-100,000 were said to return.

Between 1914 and 1920 the Remount Department spent over £67 million on the purchase, training and delivery to the front of horses and mules. (Documents for the requisition of Army Remounts, 1914)

### Supply of horses and mules for the British Army:

Great Britain	467,973
United States and Canada	617,935
Australia and New Zealand	28,000
South America	6,150
Spain (mules)	2,889
Portugal (mules)	700

(Taken from the 'Statistics of the Military effort of the British Empire During the Great War 1914-1920', London 1922)

## Recruitment for the Army

Men did not rush to sign-up in Devon:

“...recruitment efforts in Devon during 1914 and 1915 did not produce the success that the Army recruiters and the county’s elite had hoped that Devon would achieve...

The great popularity of charities and philanthropic activities in Devon related to the war effort reveals that voluntary aid found more resonance with the humanitarian sensibilities of the county’s population.

...This meant that charitable forms of participation with the war effort were more successful than the recruitment efforts in Devon”. (Richard Batson)

This suggests that most farm workers remained on the farm at least until conscription in 1916.

## Impact of reduced numbers of horses on Life in South Hams

The milk man still had his pony (Alison) but the butchers had reduced numbers of delivery horses.

Kingsbridge  
Gazette  
07/08/1914

### **IMPORTANT NOTICE.**

The undersigned Butchers of Kingsbridge, their Staffs of Men and Horses having been heavily reduced owing to the military requirements of the Government, beg to announce that it will be impossible for them to guarantee regular deliveries as before.

They therefore appeal to their Customers to assist them by fetching their Goods from the Shops, and by paying Ready Money as far as possible.

All previous prices cancelled.

**T. M. LIDSTONE & SONS.**

**G. J. WARREN.**

**F. W. PEPPERELL.**

## **From talking to Arthur Luscombe:**

As we saw above, Arthur Luscombe's Grandfather still had his 2 horses and a colt to farm 60 acres at Higher Holditch, Churchstow. I suggest this was the norm and farming was preserved as much as possible to feed the nation and provide food and fodder for the military.

Arthur kindly lent the photo of the horses and his father's horseman, Mr Kirton at the inspection (see page 3).

Arthur's father (Garland) had one brother (William Andrew) who continued to help on the farm until he was called up in 1917, aged 18 years. He was, sadly, killed in on 3rd April 1918. In the same week, 2 sons of a farmer in South Allington were also killed. The third son, left at home, was desperate to avenge his brothers but his father managed to keep him at home saying his place was to run their farm.

Garland was then the main help on their farm. After his brother was killed, Garland was scared to go into Kingsbridge as people thought he should be at the war.

## **The Kingsbridge Agricultural Show was cancelled.**

Kingsbridge Gazette, 21/08/1914 - Kingsbridge Agricultural Association voted to abandon the annual Agricultural show because 'a great international crisis which was agitating the minds of people and making serious demands on them' . Also attendance at other shows was down. It was cancelled to applause from the members present.

There are plenty of mentions in the Gazette of austerity, Devon Patriotic fund, food economy etc – a community working together.

## **Farm labour**

There are suggestions that men used to handling horses were particularly pressurised to sign up and then perhaps to be called up. This certainly would have put pressures on the local work force – enter women!!

The Women's Land Army was formed in 1915/16 and became a vital supply of labour. Devon farmers were against employing women on the farm. To quote one Stoke Fleming farmer "they would not even be able to hoe potatoes for dinner, and to expect women to work a plough is ridiculous".

Dartmouth and District Farmers proposed that children be allowed to leave school at 12.

By 1916 they had accepted their fate and a Women's land army training centre was established in Devon. (Devon at War)

German prisoners of war were also used on Devon farms – 600 working and 80 billeted (Devon and the Great War).

Over a million horses were taken to the First World War and only 60,000-100,000 were said to return. A report (David Parker) gives at least 483 returning to Devon.



One of the 'lucky' ones was Bill, seen here ridden by a very young Derek Wotton on their farm at East Prawle in the 1930s (photo kindly supplied by East Prawle History Society).

Horses were used on Arthur Luscombe's family farms until 1942. They had a team of 3. It was about then that they bought a tractor.

Thus, the First World War did not advance the use of mechanisation to much extent in Devon, although Fordson tractors were available.

Horses were still the main power in agriculture until the Second World War when pressure on food production was even greater. The first mass-produced tractor, The Fergusson, manufactured in Coventry, did not start production until 1946.



Thus it was WW2 rather than WW1 that hastened mechanisation.

Post war celebration in Aveton Gifford:



## Vivienne Mugford

All sources are referenced:

Photo archive at the Cookworthy Museum;

The museum microfiches of the Kingsbridge Gazette;

The books: 'Devon in the Great War' Gerald Wasley; 'The War Horses' Simon Butler; The Kingsbridge Branch, Ken Williams and Dermot Reynolds; 'Theirs not to reason why' Graham Witton; Hansard transcripts; 'Britain's Military Use of Horses 1914–1918' by John Singleton (1993); 'Remembering the Home Front of the First World War' by Richard Batson; 'The People of Devon in the First World War' by David Parker

I am hugely grateful to Mr Arthur Luscombe, Bill Burgoyne, and Jocelyn Ponting for recounting their parents' and grand parents' stories.