

“Thy Kingdom Come” thoughts from an equestrian establishment

by Noël Lovatt



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The importance to the UK economy of horse businesses, and small riding schools in particular, is underestimated, as is their contribution to social renewal. A Christian perspective brings deeper respect for horses, and a duty to help them glorify God. The article ends with a theological section on the inclusion of animals in the *parousia*.

Riding - an important industry

According to Defra, the UK's equestrian industry's gross output is worth approximately £4 billion a year and employs up to a quarter of a million people, either directly or indirectly. This compares favourably with the UK farming industry, a separate industry defined as food-producing, which contributed £5.8 billion to our economy in 2007 and employs over half a million people, in farming itself or in ancillary services.¹

At the latest count, there were about four and a half million British riders and it has been estimated that there are now more horses in this country than there were in Victorian times. The ancillary services for horses include farriery (shoeing), equine medicine, saddlery, equine and human clothing, feed and bedding. Further, conserved grass is vital to get animals through the winter in a healthy state and provides welcome income to farmers who have the necessary machinery, whereas most horse owners do not.²

The industry is highly diverse. At the top there are large-scale and highly lucrative commercial activities such as racing and breeding. Next come yards for competition horses; large riding schools with 40 or 50 horses and livery yards³ for privately-owned horses ridden for recreation. The latter are often on the fringes of conurbations.

The bottom layer in size and probably income is comprised of small local riding schools, of which we are one. However,

For most people, the riding school is their introduction to the horse industry. If this experience is good, a life-long involvement is born. If it is not, then a potential participant (and advocate) may be lost forever. Moreover, a significant proportion of riders do not own horses, and rely on riding schools to continue in equestrianism. Riding schools can offer a wide range of activities, not just teaching. Often hacking and/or livery are offered from the same premises: 'riding centres' could perhaps be a more

accurate description, and be one that is more attractive to adults.

All equestrians, and all parts of the horse industry, need to recognise and support the integral role of riding schools, as the bedrock of the industry, in creating and maintaining mass participation. Reinforcing their role is a vital accompaniment to the other measures proposed in this chapter to help increase participation.

The Henley Centre report found that riding schools are sidelined within the industry, to the detriment of social inclusion and potential sporting excellence. Riding schools offer everyone the chance to ride. They should be promoted as an asset for the local community, like sports clubs or leisure centres. They should act as a feeder into top sport, in the same way as, say, local gymnastics or athletics clubs. They can also be a focus for the entire local equestrian community and its activities, including equine education, welfare promotion and career

recruitment. They might link positively with the thriving riding clubs which exist in many areas.⁴

So riding schools are as much a part of an industry as are farms, factories or retail outlets; they are a vital but under-estimated sector, relying very much on personal entrepreneurial and business skills.

Background to our business

What difference does being a Christian make? Fundamentally, my husband and I believe that the reason for us coming to this ancient and beautiful farm was to



■ *'This ancient and beautiful farm' looking typically untidy. The three windows near the ground bottom right are mediaeval* ■

share it and over the years, God has sent a wide range of both people and animals here.

I had ridden as a child, and when my daughter Mary starting riding in 1980, I took it up again. When we gave up dairy farming in 1987, I ran the farm as a livery yard until 1994 when Mary, already a BHSAI⁵ set up a riding school on a very small scale, that is, using just the two horses we owned plus a working livery⁶. For horse care courses, clients sat

on straw bales in the tackroom⁷. Mary started off with a friend as a partner but it didn't work out and so I became an unofficial partner, secretary, dogsbody, etc.

This is perhaps the moment to describe our farm, since it is the third element in our enterprise, as important as the people and horses, and indeed essential to the whole enterprise. In character, it is a small moorland farm, 39 acres in total including buildings, riding arenas, paths, woods and streams. It lies on a south-facing slope of the valley which goes down to the

infant river Trent, sheltered on the north and east, with abundant stone for building and its own never-failing well. The present house was built in the late 16th or early 17th century, with additions and farm buildings dating from succeeding centuries. There are records of a

house here in the 14th century, but given the situation and resources, it may well date much further back. The ambience and atmosphere of the farm are quite special in their own right and are often remarked upon. "When you come down the lane, you feel you're entering a different world" was a recent remark from a friend. At the same time, it is not isolated but firmly part of a village with a church, primary school, shops, two pubs and a post office.

The stability of the farm is, we like to think, mirrored in our own lives. John and I have been married for forty-five years. Our daughter and her husband, who occupy the more modern part of the house with their two children, have been married for fifteen years. There is a good relationship between the three generations, all of which contribute to the farm and business in their various ways.

Renewal and development of people

Throughout the years, most people coming here as visitors, livery owners, students or employees have or had difficult home backgrounds. Our staff are a mixture of students, instructors and grooms⁸. Some are single parents or live with a partner who may or may not be the parent of any children in their household. Our students tend to be young people who leave school with few qualifications or any expectation of achievement in life. Due to the small numbers, much of their training is in ones and twos, resulting in the development of confidence and skills. This leads to some surprising results as these young people discover talents and abilities which neither they nor we suspected when they first arrived. Our farrier remarked some years ago, "You know what this place is, it is a haven" and we feel that people working here do feel safe. At the same time, while working to achieve qualifications, staff need to learn to work within commercial parameters, such as timekeeping, dealing with clients, money, and so on.

However, life doesn't always run smoothly: we lose workers because they can't stand up to the hard physical work or need to go elsewhere to earn more money; because of the diversity of personalities, there are periodic clashes between members of staff. These can be quite painful for all concerned particularly if you are dealing with the more damaged members of the team. Then there are the financial pressures and in the current situation, Mary has had to take a pay cut herself and ask members of staff to do the same - more ructions! Now it looks as though there is going to have to be a complete restructure - what will that produce?

To return to the original question: what difference does being a Christian make? The stability and fidelity in our personal lives means that staff, livery owners and clients can come on to the yard without dreading that the current personal drama will be played out in public. Secondly they are accepted for who they are. This springs from our Christian belief that it is essential "to love yourself as you love your neighbour", as part of the commandment to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul and all our strength and our neighbour as ourselves". Without that acceptance of who you are and the belief that God has made you so, and loves you so (unlikely as it may seem), how can you love other people unconditionally for who they are and without using them for your own needs? This doesn't mean overlooking faults

but trying to see what lies behind them, or finding a different management style for that particular person.

However, at times this acceptance of people results in conflict rather than improvement. In place of mutual acceptance, a person may live behind a façade and refuse to reveal who they really are. Any attempt to help, any remark which might be construed as criticism, is met with attack. In one case, the employee seemed incapable of change and her way of riding was also very different from, indeed in some ways opposed, to our own⁹. This



■ *Royal Air Force Equestrian team competing at the Army school of Equitation, Melton Mowbray, where Mary's first instructor qualified in the Classical riding tradition* ■

impacted painfully on me last year when time constraints made it necessary for me to let her ride a horse I had bought as a remedial case. While the extra work benefitted the horse, she regressed in other ways.

However we follow a Saviour who fulfilled his great work by allowing himself to become completely at the mercy of those who were against him. This is brought out very clearly and helpfully in the book by W. H. Vanstone, *The Stature of*

*Waiting*¹⁰. I believe that through my faithful waiting, through my prayer, through a miniscule but real Christ-like "passion", the façade has cracked, a real person is starting to emerge and she is learning slowly, very slowly, both to reveal her own needs and to ride my horse in a more sympathetic way.

Renewal and development of horses

And this brings me at last to the horses. From the time that we bought Mary her first pony, we have been involved not only with riding but also with training

horses. Our first instructor had qualified at the Army School of Equitation in Melton Mowbray¹¹. The pony in question had been showjumped by an adult and while very quiet to handle and sit on, was far too strong for an eleven-year-old child to take over jumps. I could just about manage to get him round a course but that wasn't much of a consolation for Mary who usually came home in tears from a show. The answer, we learnt, was to give the pony exercises to develop different muscles so that he stopped pulling so hard and teach him to respond to what the rider wanted.

As a result our pony changed so that Mary could compete quite successfully. When he moved on to a different home, because Mary needed to graduate from a pony to a horse, the new owner competed in all disciplines and won everything! Little did we know then that this sort of experience would become crucial in the years ahead!

The next horse to arrive was the first horse I'd ever owned personally, a 12 year old ex-racehorse and ex-hunter, sold as needing a more gentle owner and bought as being 'quiet to handle and 100% safe on the roads'. Nothing fazed him but what I didn't know at the beginning was that due to his past life of changing homes nearly every year, he lived completely in his own world, not responding to people, almost like an autistic child. The incidents on the roads began to mount up: sometimes he would refuse to stand still; sometimes he would plant himself and refuse to move. After a particularly dramatic incident, when fortunately no-one got hurt, it was decision time. The choice was stark - a bullet or complete retraining. This is not the place to go into details. Suffice it to say that five years later we had an affectionate, happy horse who was a great confidence-giver to all who rode him. He died peacefully at twenty-five.

Since then the majority of horses and ponies coming into our care have been crocks or rejects, either mentally scarred or physically damaged or indeed both.

Inclusive theology

Returning again to our Christian viewpoint, it can be seen that in an urbanised and industrialised world, it is easy for our religion to become anthropocentric so that God is seen as only caring for the human race. However, if God in creating the world allowed the development of so many varied life forms, is it not also likely that he finds as much delight in them as he does in us?

Further, we can say that all parts of creation are called upon to worship and glorify him as much as we should¹². The writer of Genesis chapters 6-9¹³ saw God's covenant as being made with the whole of the creation and not just with the human race. The vision in other parts of the Old Testament is as inclusive¹⁴.

St. Paul also took a wide view in his Letter to the Christians in Colossae, 1:19: "God was pleased to reconcile to

himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" and of course we have the famous passage in the Letter to the Christians in Rome¹⁵ where the whole creation is seen by him as sharing in the frustration of the human race and waiting for 'the glorious freedom of the children of God'. In Ephesians 1:10, there is no division in Christ between humans and all other things in heaven and on earth, but all are summed up in him.

The whole creation should glorify God

Some parts of the creation will glorify God of their own accord but others, in particular domesticated animals, need the help of human beings. Let us take dogs as an example: dog-owners should rejoice in the differences between dogs and humans, the very dogginess of each dog; they

should respect dogs for what they are and not treat them as children, status symbols or canine toys in clothing.



■ *The Elvis Dog. This costume is sold commercially in the USA. 'We should respect dogs for what they are and not treat them as children, status symbols or toys in canine clothing.'* ■

Giving dogs the lifestyle they need enhances them. That in my view is helping dogs to glorify God as they are designed to do.

The relationship with a horse is just as intimate and the horse is affected as much or perhaps

more by people than a dog because of its sensitivity, arising chiefly out of the fact of its being a prey animal¹⁶. Too many horses and ponies in this country are unable to glorify God as they should, being owned by riders who are ignorant or coercive, and so suffer from neglect or abuse. In some cases horses have a nervous breakdown¹⁷.

There are a number of trainers and instructors who understand horses, so once again, what is different about us as Christians? Since we believe that these creatures are loved by God, we never give up on them. We believe that as unlikely as it may seem, with love and the correct training a horse or pony will change, as our pony did and as my ex-racehorse did. In every case we have a vision of how this animal should be, although he or she may not always attain it. They say you can't make a silk

purse out of a sow's ear; they say that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. In our experience in our own field, both these sayings are wrong!

How horses are helped to glorify God

The training that horses receive is very similar to that for human athletes - warming up, then basic work before anything more demanding (cantering, jumping, etc.) In this way horses build up suppleness, strength and stamina. Because most of the riding lessons here are one to one, horses can be looked at as individuals and signs of physical or mental distress picked up. They can also be asked to perform different movements which helps to stimulate their brains (not to mention the brains of the riders). In good weather instructors can take children on ponies round the roads which gives them a change of scene. There are other types of exercise which stop riding school horses and ponies from going stale and keep them interested in what they are doing.

Our horses and ponies do fewer hours than in most riding schools. Signs of illness or lameness are taken seriously. We ourselves can give a wide range of treatments and also call on nearly as many specialists as human beings can. This all costs money of course but it will be found from somewhere: a visit from an equine dentist or chiropractor is £40.00 and a vet's visit considerably more. Horses shouldn't be made to work with a sore back from a saddle that doesn't fit, so another

few hundred pounds must be found for a new one.

Mental distress is often much harder to deal with but an unhappy horse cannot work well and certainly is not capable of glorifying God, so time is given to working out the cause and finding some remedy. Here herbal or homeopathic remedies can be helpful (just a placebo effect? I personally don't think so from our experience). Otherwise extra attention, not allowing certain people to ride them, or changing stables so that they can be next to a friend, all can help. Above all awareness and time are needed.

Our view of horses is something that we try to communicate to our staff - that they're not dealing with worthless or stupid creatures. They must treat them with respect, while being aware of safety and not allowing bad behaviour. The attitude of our instructors is of even more importance. How are we to pass on our own dedication to a wider world if not through the people who are teaching clients? So again it is vital that time is found to give lessons to the instructors.

The future glory

But what happens if horses fall ill and can't work again? Then they are given a painless death here - not medicated and taken to a market, or just turned out in a field. And what about after death? Jesus tells the penitent thief¹⁸ "Today you will be with me

in Paradise" (a Persian word for a pleasure garden, depicted in mediaeval paintings with trees, plants, water and a variety of animals). The writer of Revelation says "I saw a new heaven and a new earth"¹⁹. He envisages the new creation very much in terms of a city. Some of us would probably prefer to

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■ *The garden of Eden by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1528. The (hunting) dog and horse are prominent* ■

recover the garden of Eden or think about the vision of Isaiah already referred to. If animals and the rest of creation are so intimately entwined with our own lives, is it not also clear that life beyond death, this new heaven and earth, will include these as well? Those of us who believe this are in good company. For example it was Martin Luther who said to his dog "Be thou comforted, little dog, Thou too in Resurrection shall have a little *golden tail*"²⁰. John Wesley was even more explicit when writing after the death of his favourite horse.²¹ So we believe that when we die, our faithful friends and

companions, equine, canine, feline or other, will be with us so that we can all “glorify God and enjoy him forever”²².

That is in the future. In the present, part of my ministry is that I daily undergird the farm and all its denizens by prayer. And this can be summed up in the words “**Let your kingdom come, let your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven**”.²³
Amen. ■

Noël Lovatt read classics at Oxford and worked for the United Nations in refugee camps in Austria and Germany, where she met John. She worked as wife and mother, bringing up two sons as well as Mary. She was the principal author of Seasonal Worship from the Countryside (SPCK, 2003), is a local councillor and a Franciscan, belonging to The Third Order of the Society of St. Francis.

Notes

1. <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/index.htm>
2. <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/horses/responsibilities.htm>
3. ‘Livery’ in this context means an arrangement whereby a yard provides horses belonging to its clients with stabling, grass and perhaps other services such as bedding and winter feed.
4. British Horse Industry Confederation, *Strategy for the Horse Industry in England and Wales*, December 2005, p.34, sections 2.3 and 2.4.
5. The British Horse Society is the main examining body for the equestrian industry in this country. A BHS ‘AI’ (Assistant Instructor) has gained certificates in Horse Care and Riding, Teaching, Safe Riding on the Roads, Safeguarding Children and First Aid.
6. A working livery is a livery (see note 3 above) where the owner of the horse agrees that the riding school can use the horse for teaching other clients.

7. The tackroom is the place where the ‘tack’ - saddles, bridles, etc - is stored.
8. A groom in this context is someone who is employed to do the daily care of the horses, cleaning them, feeding them, mucking out stables, etc..
9. We follow the so-called Classical System of Training - this has been built up through many centuries of experience and emphasises the needs of the individual animal and rider; it promotes harmony and ‘willing obedience’. This is difficult to combine with the British Horse Society system, within which the rider in question had always worked. All training for the exams takes place in riding schools so students have to be able to teach within prescribed parameters and through exercises suitable for groups of riders. This can result in narrowness and conformity which extends to the horses.

10. W. H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, New Edition 2004.
11. Army School of Equitation or Remount Centre: the place where all the young horses for the Household Cavalry are brought for their basic training. The Army’s traditions are part of the Classical system referred to above.
12. See, for example, St. Francis’ *Canticle of the Creatures*: “May you be praised my Lord, with all your creatures”.
13. The Covenant with Noah: “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark”. (Gen. 9:9-10)
14. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them”. (Is. 11:6)
“You crown the year with your bounty; the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy”. (Ps. 65:11-13)
“They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid”. (Mic. 4:4)

“Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God”. (Ps. 84:3)

Psalm 104, esp. vv:27-31, where God is directly involved in animals’ life and death, concluding, “May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; may the Lord rejoice in his works”.

15. Romans 8:19-23.
16. As a result, a horse’s basic instincts are ‘flight or fight’. Often the horse can do neither and if it tries to fight, is punished for ‘being naughty’ - a human term that is not usually appropriate to a horse. A dog on the other hand is a predator and so has a different nature. But the two species share the attribute of being happiest in a group and obeying a leader - usually with wild horses an alpha female.
17. One of Mary’s horses in a case in point. Brought over from Holland as a young horse for a teenage dressage rider, it seems he did not perform up to standard. When we bought him, we deduced from his reactions to being tacked up with saddle and bridle and then taken to a riding arena on his own, that he had been beaten up but only with no-one around, hence his fear which eventually overcome him.
18. Luke 23:43.
19. Revelation 21:1.
20. Quoted in an article in *The Independent* entitled “Yap yap yapping at heaven’s door”, 19 June 2000.
21. The whole brute creation will then, undoubtedly, be restored, not only to the vigour, strength, and swiftness which they had at their creation, but to a far higher degree of each than they ever enjoyed.’ *The General Deliverance*, John Wesley, Sermon 60 (text from the 1872 edition - Thomas Jackson, editor), Part III, Section 3.
22. *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 1648, Question 1.
23. In the original Greek version of the Lord’s Prayer, the three commands ring out like a clarion call: a literal translation might be: **let it be hallowed**, your name; **let it come**, your kingdom; **let it be done**, your will; and that’s why I prefer it to the rather (in my view) subdued English translation.