

Pit Ponies



Photograph of Waterhouses colliery pit ponies brought to the surface during the 1926 strike (DCRO D/Ph 82/78)

Pit Pony numbers

During the first half of the 19th century, women and children transported coal in seams too low for horses. After the Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1842 women, and children under the age of ten, were forbidden to work underground so the number of ponies used in the pits increased.

At the peak of British coal production in 1913 there were 70,000 ponies working in the mines. They pulled empty tubs and pit props to the coal face, and full tubs back to the mine shaft. By the end of the 1930s underground pony numbers had halved. The decline continued as mechanical haulage and coal-cutting systems became more efficient and pit ponies were replaced by locomotives and conveyors. However, significant numbers of ponies continued to be used in the Durham coalfield. In 1952 there were 5,788 (over a third of the national total of 15,500).



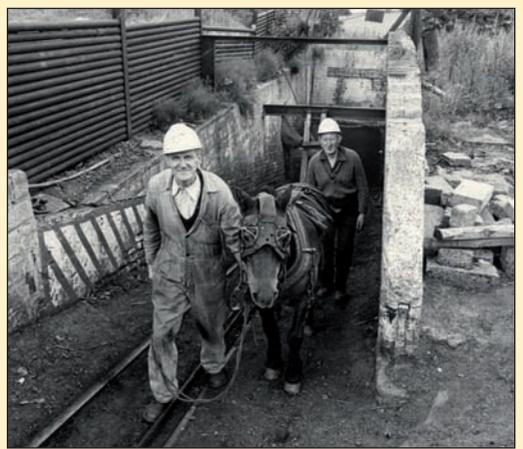
Underground stables, Newfield Colliery, 1984 (DCRO D/X 779/16/35)

Animal welfare

The Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1887 contained the first national legislation to protect horses working underground. It allowed mines inspectors to investigate the treatment of horses and consider whether haulageway roofs were high enough to prevent injury to the horses' backs. The 1911 Coal Mines Act gave more protection to pit ponies, ensuring regular medical inspections, better diets and cleaner stables. Further legislation in 1949 and 1956 regulated working hours and welfare.

In 1955 H.M. Inspector of Horses in Mines reported on the central heating of three surface stables in the Durham area to even out the difference between surface and underground temperatures and make the ponies more comfortable in winter'from about 55° to 57° F affords the best results.'

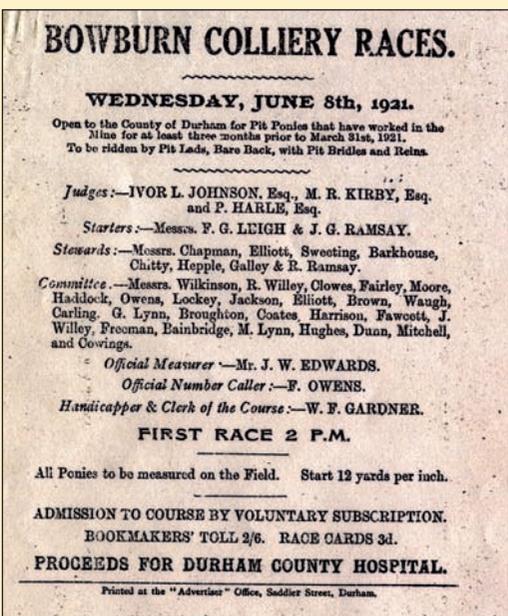
Many miners were saved from death or injury by the sixth sense that the ponies seemed to have for danger. They would suddenly stop and refuse to go on before the roof collapsed in front of them.



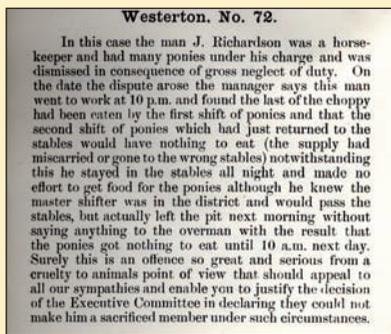
Bob Dixon bringing the last pit pony to the surface before the closure of Adventure Pit, Rainton Colliery, 21 July 1978 (DCRO D/CL 27/277/47)

The Last Pit Pony

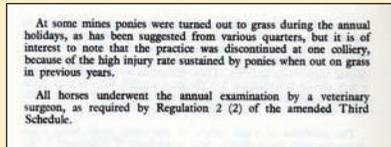
Pip, believed to be Britain's last surviving pit pony, died in 2009 at Beamish Open Air Museum, aged 35. He worked underground at Blackburn Drift, Marley Hill Colliery, until it closed in 1979 and was then moved to Sacriston. Pip worked at Sacriston Colliery until production ceased in 1985. He was kept on for another year to help with salvage work and then went to Beamish where he became a popular attraction with museum visitors.



Programme of Bowburn Colliery Races for pit ponies, 8 June 1921 (DCRO D/Ph 175/1)



DMA Committee and Council minutes, 5 July 1912 (DCRO D/DMA 12b)



Inspector of Mines Report, 1954 (DCRO D/DMA Sam Watson volume 31, p.440)



Underground at Bowburn Colliery, n.d. [c.1910] (DCRO D/CL 27/277/174)



Photographs of 'Pip' underground and overground, taken at the closure of Sacriston colliery, 1985 (DCRO NCB 25/23)

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