

October Holiday, 1943, a memoir by Henry A Brooks

I found this memoir of my Grandpa Brooks' wartime riding holiday among my mother, Norah's, papers when she died in 1991. My own memoir is at <https://livesretold.co.uk/andrew-rabeneck>



The wedding of my mother Norah and Leo Rabeneck, summer 1940, at St George's Hanover Square, London. Henry is laughing and holding his hat, next to my mother, Norah. Henry's wife Frances, Granny, is holding his arm.

In these days of restricted travelling facilities and holiday possibilities, I determined to spend my holiday this year visiting my relatives and travelling on horseback.¹

My horses have been at grass since the outbreak of war, and I was unable to do anything in the way of conditioning them. The meadow to which they have been reduced since most of my grazing was ploughed up last February

¹ From March 1942, motor fuel could be used only for official purposes. Horse travel was a practical alternative. Henry lived in a semi-detached house in Mill Hill, North London, so it's likely his horses were normally kept at a livery stable. He was always a keen horseman, and rode to hounds in his younger years.

is not good pasture, and during the dry weather in August and September the horses lost condition despite my putting out a little hay to supplement their ordinary diet. When the barley grown by the War Agricultural Executive Committee on the broken-up pasture had been carted off, I was able to turn the horses onto the stubble where a good deal of grain remained on the ground by reason of the shortage of rakes. The horses seemed to enjoy their gleaning, though I was disturbed to read in the Army Manual of Animal Management that great risk of injury is likely to result from feeding barley to horses in this country, unless the grain is fed to them either crushed or parched.

I had to rely on this food as preparation for the journey and, after eight days on the barley stubble, I started for the North, riding Jonathan, a nine-year-old hunter, 15.3 hands. I weigh 160 lbs and so ride at about 12 ½ stone.

According to Animal Management, 45 miles a day for conditioned horses and men is a good pace, allowing one to spot any weaknesses within a few days, so I advised my sisters, 110 miles away, that they were not to be alarmed if I failed to arrive after three days on the journey, as I should take a fourth day if it seemed desirable.

On 30th September we got away by about 9.30, and the grass verges of the Barnet By-Pass provided admirable going for 10 miles or so. This was followed by a similar distance on the road, to bring us to Stevenage.

I had made no arrangements for accommodation, but enquiries of bystanders soon produced an offer of a good feed for the horse, which unfortunately did not materialise, because a planned delivery of hay had failed to arrive on time. All I could get for Jonathan was a drink of water and a recommendation to put him up for the night at Charlie Ferguson's riding stables at Biggleswade.

Having lunched at the Cromwell, we resumed the journey and found a welcome feed for Jonathan at the farm of Mr Redhouse at Baldock, and an equally welcome cup of tea for me at the adjacent Studio Café. Here I sat in solitary splendour in a charming room with a gallery at one side, at first floor level, and nothing overhead but the oak timbers and the roof they supported.

This refreshment helped us on our way, and in due course we arrived at Biggleswade, where Jonathan was soon installed in a loose box at Charlie Ferguson's. The man who fetched the hay and a sieve or two of chop from the loft, and who performed the usual ministrations with trained efficiency,

informed me that he “wasn’t used to horses”. He had been, he said, an attendant at a menagerie, and used to look after the zebras.

Having seen Jonathan duly made comfortable for the night, I found accommodation for myself at the Crown nearby, where a customer who had seen me ride into the town was soon telling me about his 18 years in the Bedfordshire Yeomanry, during 12 of which I had been in the Royal Bucks Hussars.²

I intended next day to reach Market Deeping, and to do so thought I ought to get to Stilton for lunch. We didn’t make progress as rapidly as I had hoped and by 12.30 had only got to Buckden. It seemed a suitable time for a break. I tied Jonathan up in a hotel yard and enquired within for a feed for a horse. The landlord assumed I was referring to my own healthy appetite and said they were just going to serve lunch. “Where was the horse?” “Tied up in your yard,” I said, and he had to confess he had misunderstood me, as he had neither fodder nor stall available. I let his lunch wait and presently learned from a bystander that at a farm on a side road I was likely to find a welcome for Jonathan.

I soon got to the farm and I was told that Mr. Park was out on his hunter, due back any minute. It would no doubt be all right if I put Jonathan into that loose box, so I took off his saddle and bridle.

While I was doing so, Mr. Park returned and extended a hearty welcome to us. He would feed Jonathan as soon as he had put his horse in the yard, and I could return to the hotel for my lunch and be quite satisfied Jonathan would be well looked after. When I returned and accepted his invitation to come in and rest a while, I was soon in a deep armchair in his dining room, admiring the silver cups on his sideboard which he had won at point-to-point races. He apologised for being unable to ask me to lunch, being unaware of the provision his housekeeper had made, but was it really necessary for me to go further that day? Why not stay the night? I explained that I was attempting to reach Wilsford by the following night and must cover more ground before nightfall if this programme was to be carried out. On the return journey, however, I should be delighted to spend a night with him, and on this understanding, I was allowed to depart.

² Royal Bucks Hussars was a mounted regiment of the Territorial Army, manned by volunteers like Henry. During the Second World War the regiment was sent to the Far East, but Henry, born before 1890 would have been too old to go.

Our progress continued to be behind schedule and tea-time found us by a roadside café across from a patch of nice grass by the side of the road, where Jonathan was soon nibbling industriously. My attempts to induce small boys in the vicinity to look after my horse while I had a cup of tea were unsuccessful, but I appeared to be the object of considerable interest to occupants of a nearby cottage. Presently a buxom woman of 50 or so emerged with a large jug of tea and a cup. She was sorry she couldn't look after the horse, but she was just having her tea after a day's potato picking, and I was welcome to a cup. This kindness supplied my requirements and payment in cash or cigarettes was firmly refused – I was welcome to the cup of tea.

By the time we reached Stilton evening was approaching and it was clear that we wouldn't reach Market Deeping that night. Indeed, it seemed sensible to seek accommodation soon after I got past Norman Cross if I didn't want to be get stuck in the streets of Peterborough. A man feeding cattle in a yard suggested I would find a stable for the horse at a farm on the roadside just at the entrance to Yaxley. The farmer surveyed us without a word for a moment or two and said, "Yes, I can do you." He pointed to a roomy stable and showed me where to get water. I could help myself to hay from the stack and some short stuff from the barn and he would return and finish his tea.

I soon made the horse comfortable for the night and set off light-heartedly to find a bed for myself. I visited most of the inns in the place without success and even the kindly assistance of a woman in the street was not effective in finding the necessary resting-place. If I went back to the AA hotel at Norman Cross, I thought, I should certainly be all right there, but when I arrived the last rooms had just been booked. The Garden Hotel opposite was full of Irishmen, and I was told my best chance was to return to Stilton.

It was just getting dark when I set off with my haversack on my back when a soldier on a motorbike stopped and said, "Going far, chum?" "Only to Stilton" I said, and he replied, "Jump on behind," and we shot into Stilton at a great pace.

At the "Cheese" a small girl went to her mother for an answer to my enquiry, and I was relieved when it was in the affirmative. The landlady was busy serving in the bar and explained that her husband had been suffering all day from a nosebleed and nothing seemed to stop it. However, with a damp cloth held over his face, he had blacked out. The young girl showed me

where I could wash, in the lavatory at the foot of the stairs marked “Ladies Only”.

I duly washed and returned to the bar, making enquiries for supper, but the landlord still hadn't got his nose under control and couldn't even get his own supper and the landlady was too busy serving in the bar. It was no hardship to wait a while and consume the excellent bitter until, mercifully, the nose-bleeding ceased, and the landlord appeared behind the bar freeing his wife to prepare a meal. I could have cold beef or cheese but not both as it was illegal to supply two rationed foods at one meal, and beef duly appeared with potatoes and tomatoes and a large pot of tea.

A cup of tea at 7 and breakfast of egg and bacon at 7.30 set me off in good time for my walk to Yaxley where Jonathan hadn't been able to consume the liberal supply of fodder I had set in front of him.

My bill at the “Cheese” for supper, bed and breakfast was 7/-.

It was a lovely fresh morning, and to reach Wilsford that day it was clear I needed to get as far as Bourne for lunch. We were soon in Peterborough, where the view of the Cathedral from horseback in the middle of the bridge over the Nene is surely the best one of this magnificent church.



Peterborough Cathedral from the South as it might appear when crossing the Nene River

The streets of Peterborough are not well adapted for horse riding and, with the signposts down, I missed the left-hand turn of the Lincoln Road and went a mile or so towards Wisbech before I discovered my mistake, involving an irritating retracing of steps. We pressed on as fast as we could and passed Market Deeping well within schedule but began to flag on the final stretch to Bourne. A nice patch of grass in front of a cottage standing back from the road suggested a halt and, having knee-haltered Jonathan, I went to the cottage for water. A dog on a chain barked at me, but I could see no other sign of life. There was a well at the back of the cottage and a bucket attached to a length of rope. After a little dangling, I succeeded in drawing a bucket of water, which Jonathan and I shared, and I was returning with the bucket when a tiny window under the eaves opened, and a little girl's face appeared. "Your horse must be tired," she said. "He did enjoy his drink." With that she withdrew and shut the window, and after Jonathan had grazed for 20 minutes, we resumed our journey, all the better for the break.

By 12.30 we were at the approaches to Bourne. No one seemed to know where a horse could be put in a stall for an hour with a feed. I might perhaps be lucky at the Red Lion. I tied Jonathan up in the yard, entered the bar and

enquired if the landlord had any stabling. “No,” he said, “I haven’t”. I said, “I’m on the road on horseback and want a feed for a tired horse.” “What! A real horse?” he said. “Where is he?” “In your yard,” I said. “Boy,” said he, “I used to be a cowboy in Arizona. I’m a horseman same as you and anything I’ve got you can have.”

He unlocked the door and revealed a stable and a bag of feed. He produced a bucket and showed me a tap and we soon had the horse watered and fed with his back eased of the saddle.

A pint of bitter has an excellent flavour after one has ridden hard all morning and we had covered a good 20 miles.

My cowboy friend knew I could get a good meal at the pastry cook’s around the corner and, when we left, he besought me not to pass his house without calling if I returned that way.

18 miles to go seemed to be well within our compass. Jonathan was trotting steadily and well, but the miles seemed longer than they had in the morning. About teatime we entered the village of Folkingham and my enquiry for tea at a shop with a Hovis sign met with a rather stony refusal. I should try the Greyhound. This old coaching inn seemed almost derelict. Its large yard and buildings were empty except for a few hens, and the door bore a notice “Open from 6 to 10”. I gave Jonathan a drink at a rainwater butt and tied him up while I made further enquiries for tea. A bystander told me I might try at the stationery shop, and as I entered I heard the rattle of tea things. The shop lady said they didn’t supply teas, but she weakened rapidly when I said I was travelling on horseback.

I was soon in the back room, where the kettle was singing on the hob. Her Mother was finishing laying the tea and was soon telling me how she used to enjoy driving with her husband in years gone by. The Belvoir hunt used to meet in the village in pre-war days and they had seen the King there when he was in the Air Force at Cranwell Aerodrome. Several varieties of home-made cake graced the table, and the tea was excellent. They had been to Wilsford and it wasn’t far. I should easily make it before dark.

Considerably refreshed and pleased with our progress, I left these hospitable people, who refused my proffered payment, assuring me it had been a pleasure to give me tea.

My directions were to leave the Sleaford Road by the turning to Swarby and approach Wilsford through Kelby. After covering what I estimated to be the appropriate distance, I enquired of a man carrying a rake on a bicycle. Yes! Swarby was just down the avenue to the left, and had I come far? Not so far as he once drove a mare, he told me. 76 miles without coming out of harness. “We tried to get her a feed at half a dozen places without any luck and went on and on till we finished the journey”, he said. “She must have been a good sort”, I said. “Yes, she was, and she dropped dead in that field just over there at the age of 32, while she was still in work”.

While Jonathan refreshed himself with some grass, my acquaintance told me incidents in his life, which had been largely connected with horses. His master used to have a stud farm and once sent him to fetch a horse which had arrived late in the day at the station in a box. He took an ordinary riding bridle and rode home bareback. He was astonished in the morning to be asked where the stallion tackle was, which had been with the horse. The horse was an *entire* who had cost £2,300, and was so vicious that often no-one could get into his box to feed him.³ He used to come at them open-mouthed, and how did I think they cured him? They thrust a red-hot poker into his open mouth and he bit it. A drastic remedy, but it cured him completely, he said.

Our pleasant chat ended with mutual wishes of good luck, and Jonathan’s grazing had refreshed him a lot. As my friend said, a drink of water and a nibble of grass is better than all your corn for helping a horse along the road. So it proved, for we were at Wilsford before 6.30 and Jonathan was soon rolling with evident enjoyment in a nice green pasture with no other animal to disturb his rest. He had done 110 miles in three days and showed no sign of over tiredness. I had put a *numnah* under his saddle in case he fell away with fatigue, but his withers hadn’t sunk and his legs weren’t puffy.⁴ The strange roads had puzzled him a bit and he had needed urging along at times, but he had always responded, and his last spell of trotting before we eased to a walk for the final mile was as vigorous and as regular as his first. Good horse!

We had travelled on the verges of the road as much as possible except where the transverse channels for drainage were too frequent. These disturbed the rhythm of the trot and Jonathan preferred the smooth road to the uneven surface they presented.

³ Entire - an ungelded male horse.

⁴ Numnah, from the Urdu for a felt or sheepskin pad placed between horse and saddle for comfort

A welcome relief from the “hard highroad” was afforded by long stretches north of Buckden, where reconstruction of the road had been interrupted. At the outbreak of the war, work there was abandoned at the stage when new levels had been reached. Surfaces had weathered until they are now delightful for riding, and the frequent turns and steeper gradients of the old road are avoided by the straight and level new road that so far remained unpaved.

We saw in Bedfordshire the long clamps containing London’s winter supply of potatoes already covered with straw and enough earth to prevent the straw from blowing away. Later the earthing up would be completed before the frost came. Further north the potato harvest was still in progress and in Lincolnshire it had hardly commenced. Flourishing fields of “brussels” promised an ample supply of sprouts. Sugar beet was everywhere. Many fields had still to be ploughed out, but already frequent heaps of the trimmed roots were to be seen by the roadside awaiting transport, and lorries full of beet were constantly met, no doubt keeping the factories busy to the full extent of their capacity. Most of the stubbles had been ploughed and the vigorous prosecution of agriculture’s unending round was visible throughout the journey. It was apparent, too, that the rewards of husbandry are at last adequate to keep the land properly cultivated. The poverty-stricken appearance of the years preceding the war has happily disappeared except insofar as a shortage of imported timber has delayed the replacement of broken field gates.

The tractor was everywhere in evidence and is clearly the basic cause of the improvement in cultivation. The speed and efficiency of modern agricultural implements open up possibilities not available to the preceding generation, which had to rely on the horse for traction.

Despite the greater speed of the tractor, the horse is still preferred by some farmers for the lighter work. Drilling is an example. A horse-drilled field does not show the intersecting lines of sprouting seed so frequently to be seen where the tractor has pulled the drill, and cultivation between the rows results in the destruction of the plant where the intersections occur. The ideal equipment may well be found in a combination of tractor and horse, the former for the heavier tasks and the latter for those requiring the greater degree of accuracy. It is pleasing to the horse lover to find that the horse can still outdo the petrol engine in those agricultural arts which require the highest workmanship, just as he can in providing man with the pleasantest and most healthful means of progression.

We stayed a week at Wilsford, where my sisters' house stands well above the village.⁵ From the windows of both the dining room and the sitting room one looks across the garden to where the disused quarry from which the stone for the house was hewn occupies the view to the right. A pleasant country road sweeps up the hill diagonally from left to right, and to the left is the meadow in which Jonathan is grazing. No human habitation is in sight. The edge of the quarry glows with the rich colour in the mellow October sunshine and the trees and hedges are bright with autumn foliage. On the rounded skyline of the meadow Jonathan can be seen, with his head down to the bright green turf, evidently enjoying his day of rest. A pleasant picture indeed.



St Mary, Wilsford, 11-15C, in Ancaster limestone. Restored 1860 by Kirk and Parry of Sleaford, then one of the largest British design and contracting firms, made rich by railway construction.

I had been awakened by the chatter of a covey of partridges in the garden, their insistent calling being suddenly replaced by the whir of their wings as they were disturbed.

⁵ As of 2023 I have done no genealogical research into Henry Brooks' relatives or antecedents.

The country around is good riding country. The wide verges along Ermine Street and the transverse roads are clothed with springy turf. From Ancaster northward to Bayard's Leap, right-handed along the southern boundary of Cranwell Aerodrome as far as the turning to North Rauceby, through North and South Rauceby and back to Wilsford by the Sleaford to Grantham Road makes as nice a morning ride as a man can wish, with fine galloping turf nearly all the way. Southward along Ermine Street one skirts the new Barkston Aerodrome, with short, cropped turf ideal for a canter.

Encouraged by these conditions, one morning we overshot the end of a smooth stretch into a rough patch, where Jonathan put a foot in a hole and turned a somersault. As I hit the turf a yard or two in front of him, I could view over my shoulder his quarters high in the air and was relieved to see them fall over to my left instead of on top of me. He scrambled up and stood looking rather ashamed of his mistake and, as I remounted, I thought the fault was more mine than his for pushing him at that pace into long grass. The exhilaration of the moment had overcome my discretion.

On the northward journey, Jonathan had worn his shoes very thin. A smith visits the local forge twice a week, and we were waiting one morning when he arrived and lit the fire. Yes, he was used to shoeing hunters and after carefully measuring the old shoes which he had removed, he cut two lengths from a round bar of mild steel for the hind shoes and two from a rectangular bar with a groove in the face for the fore shoes. The round bars were flattened a little on the anvil before being fashioned and fitted. The frogs of Jonathan's hind feet had been worn a little on the journey, particularly on the outsides, so a *caulkin* was made to keep the hoof level.⁶ I explained that I liked the frog to touch the ground, but the rather heavy shoe and the caulkin would be better, according to the smith. The shoes lasted the fortnight we were away and the homeward journey too, new caulkins being needed to the shoes on the eve of our return. When the caulkins were worn away, we slipped occasionally on the shiny roads, and a firmer hold was obtained when the caulkins were still present. It was not until we were nearly home again that the shoes became thin enough to allow the frogs to touch the ground. Until they were again performing their natural function of absorbing the shock of the hoof's contact with the tarmac, a day's work on the road produced a certain puffiness of the fetlocks and pasterns, which had been absent on the outward journey. It seems evident, therefore, that Colonel MacTaggart's insistence in his books on the necessity for the frog always to

⁶ *Caulkin*, a stud projecting below the horseshoe to improve grip, particularly in winter.

touch the ground is right.⁷ When a caulkin keeps it off the ground, the fetlock and pastern must absorb the shock that should be taken by the frog, and the horse's leg becomes tired and loses resilience.

There is a produce market in Sleaford on Mondays. Hundreds of pens containing live poultry are arranged along one side of the market and pens with live rabbits along another. The auctioneer, on a moveable rostrum, passes slowly along, auctioning the fur or feather immediately in front of him. On a third side is arranged garden produce and fruit and other local products, including game, shot no doubt during the previous weekend. I thought I saw here an opportunity of alleviating the difficulties of my sisters in satisfying my hunger. The game is put up for sale in lots comprising the whole of the sending of a single seller. One pigeon was the first lot, the second was 17 partridges. These were knocked down to me and promptly bundled into a sack I had brought in anticipation. After making suitable disposition of my purchase for consumption by my relatives and myself, there remained a few brace which I forwarded to London for the mess where I eat my daily lunch when at business.⁸ In a few days I was advised that, by unanimous decision of the mess, my leave had been indefinitely extended so long as I forwarded a weekly parcel of game. The epicure of the party added a rider that my horse's head should continue to point to the north until I was able to vary the menu by forwarding grouse.

On another occasion I rode Jonathan to Sleaford, and as we trotted quietly along, a boy of 12 or so kept pace with us on his bicycle. Presently his admiration for Jonathan overcame his shyness. "That's a nice horse you have", he said. "Yes, and you have a nice bicycle", I replied, "and my horse needs to be fed and your bicycle doesn't". "I have to pedal all the time and you don't", said the boy, which seemed to put the game 15 love in the boy's favour. He was evidently a keen observer of horses and told me that the hoofmarks on the turf by the roadside were made by the horses of Mr. Tales of Rauceby. I learned that his riding school is visited by pupils from all over the country and is apparently still flourishing in the fifth year of the war. Corroboration reached me from other sources I encountered in the locality, and when we passed his stables on my southward journey some ten days later, a friendly whinny greeted us.

The purpose of my ride to Sleaford had not been fulfilled, and while the boy accompanied me back to Wilsford, I thought he might accomplish the

⁷ Maxwell MacTaggart, 1874-1936, was author of 19 books on horses and horsemanship, most notably: The Art of Riding: a Textbook for Beginners and others, 1931, Methuen, London.

⁸ Henry Brooks worked at N.M.Rothschild's bank in the City.

following day the errand I had failed to complete. If I asked him to call for a note to deliver on the morrow, my sister would be able to identify him and perhaps vouch for his trustworthiness. He turned out to be a boy with a reputation for mischief, who had been excluded from Sunday School for unseemly behavior, but my sister was sure he would be a trusty messenger. I clinched the matter by hoisting him onto Jonathan's back to ride the pasture, and his intensely appreciative demeanour convinced me I had won a faithful adherent. So it turned out.

We decided to lunch one day in Grantham, my sisters having the offer of a lift in a car. I would ride there, and a pleasant journey it turned out to be. South along Ermine Street past Belton Ashes to the turning to Londonthorpe and round the outskirts of Belton Park, brought me through a smiling countryside to Grantham. There were no stables at the Angel and Royal, those at the George being occupied by the military, and the best I could do for Jonathan was a bucket of water in the yard of the White Hart.



The Angel and Royal Hotel, Grantham, Lincolnshire, Where Henry lunched with his sisters.

Hotels in Grantham and elsewhere are no longer able to provide food for horses and Jonathan had to take his midday meal from the grass at the roadside on the return journey. The Angel still provides a good lunch and hock and burgundy were obtainable at reasonable prices.

Starting the return journey about the same time, my sisters by bus and I on horseback, we arrived home together.

After my week in Wilsford, I resumed my northward journey to my native Skellingthorpe. Following Ermine Street to Bayard's Leap, we turned left-handed along the Newark Road almost to Leadenham, then right-handed to the back of Wellingore, thus holding to the high ground until we struck the Grantham – Lincoln Road. Down the hill at Waddington and through the outskirts of Lincoln at Boultham, we reached the familiar road I used as a boy cycling to and from school at Lincoln. Soon we were being welcomed at my father's house.

As the ride was only some 25 miles, we started after lunch, and tea was indicated about the neighbourhood of Waddington. My enquiries met with no success in the village, and the last chance seemed to be at a house at the crossroads at the foot of the hill. Jonathan had started grazing opposite the house and the housewife, on learning our situation, said she would make me some tea although they had just finished their own meal. She presently brought out a jug of tea and a cup, and we chatted pleasantly while I consumed the tea. She was often asked for tea, she said, by soldiers training in the vicinity and liked to supply them when she could, although it had to come out of her family's tea ration.

On my return journey I was happy to be able to put into her hands a few ounces of tea I had been able to obtain, and to do the same for the kindly dame who supplied my wants at tea-time on the second day of our trip. To my kind friends at Folkingham I sent a similar offering, with the suggestion that I might call about tea-time on the return journey.

The roads around Lincoln were the worst for horses of any that we covered. Their surfaces seemed more suitable for skating rinks than for horse traffic, and they must be a great handicap to those people who use horses to draw heavy loads. Since my Father is a member of the Highways Committee of the Lincolnshire County Council, I hope some improvement may result from my experience.

It is more than 40 years since I left my home in Skellingthorpe, and few of my boyhood's companions remain there. My arrival on horseback was to them an item of great interest, far exceeding that of the visits I have made by car. My daily rides now took me to old haunts associated with half-forgotten memories brought back vividly to remembrance by some turn in the road or a glimpse of the great Lincoln Cathedral away there on the hill.



The weather remained kind until the eve of my departure and on the morning of Thursday, 14th October, we set out for London in driving rain. I had made the outward journey with a haversack over my shoulder and a rolled mackintosh in front of the saddle. Now the mackintosh was on my back and the haversack, inside a nosebag I had acquired in Sleaford, strapped to the front of the saddle. When the rain ceased temporarily, I tied the mackintosh in front of the nosebag, where it was available in a moment when the rain started. This is quite the best arrangement. One's shoulders carry the mac when it rains and nothing when it is fine.

Riding all morning in a mackintosh made me sweat profusely, and I was ready for a drink when I ate my sandwiches at an inn at South Rauceby. I felt sure of a welcome for tea 10 miles further on at Folkingham and Jonathan too seemed to expect a welcome, for he whinnied repeatedly as we approached. He seemed to know his head was turned towards home, though he was puzzled when the journey continued day after day.

Again, I had an excellent tea at Folkingham, and again all I could get for Jonathan was a drink of water. We were to spend the night at Bourne, and I had advised my cowboy friend that Jonathan hoped to renew his acquaintance. Jonathan gave another resounding whinny as we rode in the dusk into the streets of Bourne, having covered 40 miles during the day.

We received the expected welcome at the Red Lion and my friend first plied Jonathan with all the comforts the stable afforded and later plied me with a

few pints of excellent beer. After riding 40 miles mostly in a heavy mackintosh, a single pint seems to make but little replacement of the moisture lost by perspiration.

I had learned on this trip that a change of underclothing was a most desirable thing in such circumstances and was happy to know that in my haversack was a clean shirt as well as clean pants and vest.

The Red Lion could accommodate Jonathan only, and I was able to put up at the Angel in time to wash and change just as dinner was ready. A good dinner it turned out to be, followed by a quiet hour or two writing letters in the lounge before turning in to sleep soundly in a comfortable bed.

We had found on this day's ride an alternative route from Wellingore to Bayard's Leap along High Dyke, a portion of Ermine Street which is unpaved, and which affords a splendid riding surface for 3 or 4 miles through a very peaceful countryside. I thought of the Romans who had driven the road so straight and true to bring their conquering legions to ancient Lindum, and I saw in the adjoining fields Italian prisoners performing agricultural labour. Was it in their veins that the blood of the conquerors flowed, or was I perhaps the descendant of some forgotten Roman legionary who passed that way 2,000 years ago? I wonder.

The next day's ride was to end at Buckden, where I had advised Mr. Park of my acceptance of his kind offer of hospitality. I lunched at the A.A. Hotel at Norman Cross and grazed Jonathan at the roadside a little further on. During the sunny afternoon we travelled comfortably along the future course of the Great North Road and were welcomed at Low Farm about 5.30. Jonathan's apartment was a magnificent loose box and he was soon watered and munching some fragrant hay preparatory to tackling more sustaining foods. I was shown to a comfortable bedroom and, after a wash, was installed in a deep armchair with a tray of tea and a paper while Mr. Park attended to duties at the local observation post.⁹ Following his return we settled down to a most enjoyable evening, our discussions being interrupted only by the serving of dinner.

⁹ Observation posts, supervised by the Royal Observer Corps, but often manned by civilian volunteers, watched for aircraft.



Low Farm, Buckden, Cambridgeshire. Grade II listed early 19C farmhouse.

Next morning I arose soon after 7, after a good night's sleep, so as to be able to have a look at Jonathan before breakfast at 8, but as I approached his box I found I had been forestalled. Mr. Park was just finishing grooming him. "It refreshes a horse a lot", he said.

My next day's journey was to be comparatively short, so I could spare the time to accompany Mr. Park on his morning inspection of stock before I resumed my journey.

His is a farm where sufficient stock is raised to tread all the straw his arable land produces, so that the misgiving felt so strongly throughout the land that the fertility of the soil must be reduced by the failure to return to it the straw which reduced herds are no longer able to turn into farmyard manure does not apply to his land. The pasture with the stock on it, rather than the arable land, was our objective and very beautiful it looked. The river Ouse, with its bountiful supply of good water, flowed along the boundary, giving delightful glimpses of tree-shaded pools reflecting the bright colours of the autumn foliage.

Here at grass was the hunter which had carried him for eight seasons without a fall. She looked the part all right. Short in the back and deep in the chest, so that she hardly looked her height of 15.2, she was a model of compactness. She belonged to a strain with a natural aptitude for jumping, so that an examination of her hoof prints on the takeoff side of a jump would not reveal the slightest variation as between toe and heel. She never dug in her toes or diminished her pace as she approached the jump. As she was not likely to be required for hunting this season, she had been put to the stud in the early summer. What a trouble they had had to mate her! The advances of

the stallion had terrified her, and nothing would induce her to stand still, although she was rank in season. Eventually they built around her a pen of bales of straw. She jumped out when it was two bales high, so they made it three bales high and leaned heavily upon her from all sides. Only thus was the stallion able to mount her, whereupon she at once became quiet and was now obviously in foal. With half her time accomplished, she was inclined to regard me with hostility, but came readily to take an apple from the hand of her master. May her colt in due course display the virtues of his dam.

In another pasture we saw the old mare who had won the point-to-points. She had not been saddled for some years and was enjoying a well-earned retirement.

Mr. Park keeps his horses in open yards instead of stables when they are “up”, and here was the hunter he had been conditioning. Of the same strain as the mares we had seen, he looked capable of acquitting himself with distinction in the best company. To have bred, broken and trained the horses we had seen was ample testimony that here was a horse master of no small attainments as well as a kind and generous host.

Our next resting place was to be Baldock, an easy ride to the south. It was lunch-time when we were at Tempsford and I found a pleasant lunch at the comfortable Anchor Hotel. Since Jonathan had been eating dry foods at night, he was happy to graze when opportunity offered during the day. Usually I could get a drink for him at the place where I lunched and afterwards I could smoke a pipe for half an hour or so with great contentment while he made a meal from the grass at the roadside.

Proceeding in due course, we arrived at Black Horse Farm in good time. A disused millrace with a trickle of water and an expanse of rushes upstream in what had once been the millpool showed clearly enough that a watermill once stood where the farmhouse now stands. We talked of the place’s history. Black Horse Farm! Could the black horse after which it was named be a mare, by any chance, called Bonny Black Bess? Mr Redhouse thought so. Likely enough we were at an old haunt of that great horseman of the North Road, Dick Turpin himself.



Black Horse Farm, North Road, Baldock

Whether this was so or not did not trouble Jonathan, whose accommodation was evidently to his liking. I could leave him for half an hour while I got a cup of tea at the Studio Café hard by and fixed up my bed for the night. Then I would return to remove the travel stains from his coat and see him comfortable for the night.

When my tea was brought, I asked if they could put me up for the night. “Very sorry, no!” the lady said, “I’m afraid you’ll find it very difficult to get a bed in Baldock tonight. I know they have no room at the George as they phoned me earlier today to see if I could take some people for whom they had no room”.

I was glad I had not arrived later and finished my tea quickly so as to be able to find a bed before dark. I would try the George anyhow, so I went in and rang the bell marked “Reception”. The lady receptionist was very sorry but they had no room. My appearance doubtless indicated I had been riding. Had I come far? She said she had been brought up on a farm and was very interested in horses. What a pity the place was so full! She had no idea where I should find a bed. “Never mind”, I said, “my horse is comfortably fixed up, and that is the main thing. If I find bed and breakfast, can I dine here?” “Yes, if you order it now”, she replied, “And we can’t keep you a place if you are not there within ten minutes of dinner being served”. I said I would certainly be there between 7 and 7.15, so my dinner was secure.

I was about to set off on the search for a bed when she remembered that they almost always let the ladies’ cloakroom as a bedroom. The settee there was a put-you-up bed, and there were of course hot and cold water and a lavatory. “Could I see the room?” I said. “Certainly”, she replied and, on inspection, I

decided it would do. I couldn't use it until after the dining room closed at 10 but it would be all ready for me soon after.



*The George and Dragon hotel and restaurant, Baldock, Hertfordshire, Early 19C.
Now a restaurant only, The George.*

The dining room at the George & Dragon looked bright and cosy in the subdued light. Across one end ran a ladies' gallery behind which I would presumably find my bedroom, and across the other end ran a musician's gallery with figures clad in hunting pink and holding dummy instruments in their lifeless hands. The tables bore white linen and shining silver and every table had a vase of freshly gathered chrysanthemums. Roast partridge was on the menu, and soon all the tables were occupied mainly by men in uniform and their ladies. An excellent dinner for my last one on the journey. No wonder they wouldn't keep a table for more than 10 minutes. They would have no vacant places if they offered the same fare in the west end of London.

Presently the diners and their ladies departed, the lounges emptied, and I was free to take possession of my strange resting place. It made a good enough bedroom, and my only disturbance was from the clock in the church tower, which surely might be silenced at midnight for a few hours.

During the night I heard heavy rain and thought of Mr. Park's stubbles with the muck already spread but too hard to be ploughed up with any tackle he possessed. They would soon be turned now that the rain had come.

I returned to Black Horse Farm after a bath and an excellent breakfast and soon had Jonathan ready for the road. He was still munching the generous feed Mr. Redhouse had given him for breakfast, and when he had finished I saddled him in a cart shed, as it was still raining. With no sign of the rain stopping and with our final friendly chat ended by the necessity for the day's work to be done, we bade each other farewell and I mounted and rode out into the rain.

The wind was in our teeth and the rain was finding a way past the collar of my mac, but why worry? If it stopped, so much the better; if it didn't, home with its comforts was at the end of the road.

It rained hard for a couple of hours before any break appeared in the clouds, but after that a patch of blue suggested better things. Soon the rain ceased, and I was able to dismount and give Jonathan a breather without getting a wet saddle. I spread out my wet mackintosh and hat and wrung the water out of my gloves. My hands were like ice with the rain and the wind. How nice the sunshine seemed; we should soon be warm and dry again.

Digswell Hill looked lovely with the road winding between the brightly clad trees shining in the sun. The air had that rare freshness which often follows rain.

Jonathan had a long drink at a horse trough by the roadside and I began to be conscious that I was leaving lunch rather late. I tied up outside the Bull just before the Barnet bypass leaves the old road, but they didn't serve lunch on Sunday and recommended the Stonehouse Hotel at Hatfield, 10 miles further on.¹⁰

¹⁰ The Stonehouse hotel, owned by Charrington's was demolished in 1986 for the construction of the Hatfield tunnel, that carries the A1 motorway beneath the centre of the town.



Here I had a satisfactory lunch, while Jonathan rested outside, and now it was turf all the way home. We would ride a mile or so and then Jonathan should have his last feed of grass on the roadside at the bend, where the turf was particularly green and where the trees broke the wind without keeping off the sun. A pipe for me and half an hour's grazing for him would be well enough, and after that we should soon be among scenes that he couldn't fail to remember. From time to time, he had seemed to recollect particular spots or turnings, but at other times his surroundings seemed to awaken no remembrance. His ears were well forward, but he showed no eagerness such as he often did when we turned for home on a Sunday morning ride. We'd be able to tell when we reached the Middlesex Arms, which was the farthest turning point of our usual excursions.

Yes! He recognised it right enough. Here were the trees we were accustomed to use for our bending exercises and now by the roadside the big pipe we usually jumped with the landing up the little bank. Oh yes! He was going to jump it today even though it was the fourth day of our journey.

Without hurrying, but without stopping, we covered the last familiar stretch of country and off saddled in the paddock. The old mare was not there.

Someone had put her back on the barley stubbles, and as Jonathan rolled back and forth on the turf, as he was accustomed to do as soon as his saddle was off, he seemed to miss his old companion, so I took him to join her.



They whinnied each other a greeting and walked steadily away together towards the stream. In this favourite corner, where the grass is sweetest, Jonathan no doubt related the incidents which I could now go and tell my wife over a cup of tea. We were home again.

The outstanding impression I received from the whole experience was that there is still an abiding love for the horse throughout the country. Jonathan was my best introduction wherever I went and the welcome we received was primarily his. All the children loved him and most of the grown-ups too. Soldiers we met on the road seemed to have derived their ideas about horses mainly from the pictures. They usually greeted us with shouts of “Yippy”, and “Ride him, Cowboy”, with imitations of the motions which at the pictures are usually associated with horsemanship. Their reactions reminded me of the story of the two Americans from one of the U.S.A.’s most highly mechanised areas who were comparing impressions of England, when by chance they met over here. “Say, Buddy”, said one, “there is a burg near here called Coventry where they say a naked woman rides a horse around the streets once a year. We ought to go and see the show”. “Gee”, said the other, “we sure must. I ain’t seen a horse in years”.

Our holiday had been a great success. Besides visiting my people, we had had some very interesting experiences and we had met a lot of very charming people on the way. Jonathan had shown himself to be a good horse

and had returned in better condition than when he started, and I was feeling fighting fit.

What more can one expect from a holiday!



