

Shakespeare and Horses:  
Facts and Findings  
by  
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*Sir Laurence Olivier (above) portrayed King Henry V in the 1944 film.*

During the years in which the Shakespeare Equestrian Collection was being assembled, I was repeatedly surprised when world-wise equestrians, highly literate scholars and knowledgeable citizens of many countries unanimously expressed wonderment when told that William Shakespeare and horses were inescapably intertwined.

*Shakespeare and Horses: Facts and Findings* is a special summary article designed to provide the average reader with an easy to understand but vitally important list of facts about how horses exerted such a strong influence on Shakespeare's personal and professional life.

## Shakespeare – Playwright and Horseman



### **Who was William Shakespeare?**

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's most famous dramatist. Born in the village of Stratford-upon-Avon in the United Kingdom, his actual birthday is not known although it is believed to be April 15, 1564. After a successful career writing and acting in plays produced in London, he returned to his home where he died in 1616 at the age of 52.

### **Is Shakespeare important?**

Known as *The Bard of Avon*, Shakespeare is second only to Jesus as a subject for writers.

### **Is Shakespeare still popular?**

Because of their universal appeal, Shakespeare's works have been translated into 80 languages.

### **Did Shakespeare know and write about horses?**

Horses were a pervasive part of sixteenth century England. Everyday lives were influenced by horse riding, breeding, feeding, travelling and equipment. Shakespeare's plays and sonnets contain so many equestrian references that you could exclaim like Portia, "He doth nothing but talk of his horse."

## The Elizabethan Horse World



*In August 1588 Queen Elizabeth I urged her troops to defend the country against an invasion by the Spanish Armada.*

### **Why was Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup> important?**

She ruled England during the time (1585-1592) when Shakespeare was writing plays in London. Yet the equestrian world inhabited by [Her Majesty, the Queen](#), and Shakespeare would have been largely unrecognisable to modern horse riders.

### **How so?**

To begin with, though 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century inhabitants both speak “English”, their understanding of words is vastly different. For example, you think of canter as being a fast gait of the modern horse but Shakespeare knew that canter was a derogatory term for a vagrant. It wasn't just the meaning of individual words that would have made it difficult to communicate with the Queen and Shakespeare. Although England was destined to become a great seafaring nation, the English language had not yet become heavily influenced by nautical terms. In Shakespeare's day equestrian metaphors were common because the use of horses was so large an experience in the lives of every English man, woman and child.

### **Did England look the same?**

Yes and no. Major geographic features such as London and the Thames are still located in the same place. Yet one of the major differences is the fact that the road system which modern inhabitants take for granted, did not exist in Shakespeare's day. The nation's roads had not had an effective system of maintenance since the Roman government had ground to a halt more than a thousand years before Shakespeare was born. No repairs, frequent rain, water obstacles, steep gradients, potholes, quagmires, and ruts left by ox carts resulted in ruinous roads that no one wanted to accept the responsibility to maintain. This is why the sixteenth century saw the lowest point in which the condition of English roads ever descended.

### **But surely Queen Elizabeth travelled in the luxury of her royal coach?**

There was no royal coach at the time of Queen Elizabeth's accession in 1558. Nor was long distance coach travel an option. The only bridge over the Thames could not accommodate coaches, which was just as well because before 1560 not a single coach was built in the country. By the end of the queen's reign a handful of nobility had imported coaches from Europe but due to the terrible condition of the roads, coach travel was unsuitable for matters of life and death. That was why in 1603 Sir Robert Carey rode 406 miles from Richmond to Edinburgh in sixty-six hours, an all time record, to announce the death of the Queen, to her successor, King James. This also explains why Shakespeare's plays do not depict the coach as a fit conveyance for heroes, who rode stallions instead. Litters were used for the old and sick, as seen in Lear and King John.

### **If England didn't have roads or coaches how did trade function?**

The wagon did not penetrate Warwickshire, Shakespeare's home county, until a century or more after his death. Commercial goods were transferred by well organised teams of pack horses, an ancient system that flourished until the onset of the railroads in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A team of ten pack horses carried a ton of goods and pack horses are mentioned in several of Shakespeare's plays.

### **Well at least horses were the same, weren't they?**

If you mean did they have four legs and carry people, then the answer is yes. But if you mean did the equestrian world of Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup> resemble ours, then the answer is no. Because Shakespeare died a century before the genesis of the Thoroughbred, England had no prestige as a horse breeding nation. In his day a lingering medieval attitude insisted that gentlemen rode stallions. Mares and geldings were employed in pack trains.

### **What about horse care?**

The proportion of Englishmen who could not ride a horse then was about the same as the proportion of Englishmen today who cannot ride a bicycle. But that doesn't mean that they share your views on equine biology or nutrition. For example, Elizabethan breeders believed that the sex of a horse could be arranged by allowing the mare to conceive under a female sign of the zodiac, (Virgo) if a filly was wanted or a male sign (Taurus) if a colt was desired. Once the required horse was obtained, he was never placed in a loose box, which had not yet been invented. All horses were tied in stalls or sheds. Hay was an expensive commodity, so horses were fed a large loaf of rough brown bread made from peas and beans. They were led to water several times a day.

## Horses in Shakespeare's Life



Victorian artist Charles Cattermole depicted William Shakespeare bidding adieu to his wife, Anne, and their children, who are seen standing on Clopton Bridge which spans the river Avon.

### **How extensive was the dramatist's equestrian knowledge?**

Commentators who know nothing about equine affairs are impressed by the hundreds of references to horses in Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. The author's knowledge was both vast and subtle. He knew horses from a practical point, as demonstrated in his poem, *Venus and Adonis*, when he describes the perfect horse. Likewise in his comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare compiled a long list of the worst equine defects and mounted his hero Petruchio on such an unworthy nag.

### **Where would Shakespeare have learned about horses?**

There were few middle class occupations that could be effectively accomplished without the use of at least one horse. As an agricultural merchant, glove maker, John Shakespeare, the author's father, would have constantly been on horseback. Mucking out, grooming, saddling and riding would have all been a normal part of William's life in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon. Such knowledge included learning about saddles and horse training, both of which were later mentioned in his plays.

### **Did this equestrian knowledge influence his later life?**

According to a noted scholar, Shakespeare's affinity with horses is how the young man made the transition from the theatre door on to the stage. In 1870 James Halliwell-Phillipps collected all available facts and documents connected to Shakespeare's life. In the SEC article entitled *From the Stable to the Stage*, Halliwell-Phillipps provides evidence revealing that in the days before coach travel men would ride across the Thames River to theatres located outside London. Because horse stealing was a common crime, a highly trusted man was employed to protect the valuable animal while the rider enjoyed the performance. "In this office he became so conspicuous for his care and readiness that every man who alighted called for Will Shakespeare."

## Horses in Shakespeare's Plays



*The Tragedy of Macbeth* recounts how a Scottish general receives a prophecy from a trio of witches. He will become king but it will lead to his destruction. This painting by Theodore Chasseriau shows Macbeth and his friend Banquo meeting the witches.

### **What did Shakespeare create?**

His works include 39 plays and 154 sonnets.

### **Do horses figure in these works?**

Horses or equestrian references appear in all of Shakespeare's plays!

### **Did horses actually appear on stage?**

Because of the physical constraints of the stage, real horses did not appear before the Elizabethan audience. However in the Soviet Union, which celebrated Shakespeare's 400<sup>th</sup> birthday, an adaptation of *Hamlet* did employ papier-mâché horses. Dramatic equine images have been identified for twenty-nine of Shakespeare's plays, in the article *Shakespeare's Horses - An Illustrated History of Equine Actors*.

### **Were Shakespeare's equestrian references accurate?**

His first published work, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) was not only a great hit, it contained line for line a greater density of equestrian allusions than any of his other creations. It also contains a spectacular description which represents the Elizabethan ideal of equine conformation. One line is almost the horse breeder's maxim. "Seeds spring from seeds, and beauty breedeth beauty."

### **Did horses have any importance to the audience beyond the obvious means of transportation?**

One mark of his genius is that Shakespeare moved beyond the physical world and repeatedly used the horse to comment on human life. Nobility, cowardice, courage and treachery were on display amidst the horses in Shakespeare's plays.

### **What are some examples of how Shakespeare used horses as metaphors?**

In *Julius Caesar* a “false horse” was a symbol of political treachery. In *Antony and Cleopatra* the horse represents lust. And he used a horse to express satire in *Much Ado about Nothing*, when he wrote, “I wish my horse had the speed of your tongue.”

## Shakespeare and Equestrian Travel



*English Long Rider Fynes Moryson, a contemporary of Shakespeare, lived, rode, and wrote in Elizabethan England.*

### **Was Shakespeare a Long Rider?**

Details about Shakespeare’s life, work, appearance, and even the spelling of his name, are the subject of intense debate. The publication of the *Shakespeare Equestrian Collection* presents evidence indicating that the famous author made equestrian journeys to and from Preston, Lancashire, to Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. Thus Shakespeare’s Long Rides represent a new field of equestrian research and this primary question is under active investigation.

### **Did people travel as frequently then as they do now?**

In Shakespeare’s time, the great majority of English people rarely travelled. When required to do so, they had two choices, walk or ride.

### **Were there any Long Riders in Shakespeare’s day?**

Absolutely! The indefatigable English Long Rider [Fynes Moryson](#) spent six years (1591-97) riding and roaming thousands of miles across Europe and the Middle East.

### **Did Moryson influence Shakespeare?**

That has not been established. What is known is that Moryson wrote five volumes recounting his numerous adventures. This giant work included his advice about what type of horses were to be found in each region and what dangers lay along each route. Such a treasure trove of equestrian travel knowledge would have been an invaluable asset to an aspiring playwright such as Shakespeare.

### **Why would Shakespeare have made equestrian journeys?**

For two reasons, money and love. In November 1582 William Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway. He was 18. She was 26 and three months pregnant. The Shakespeare family had fallen into financial trouble. Evidence indicates that William inherited money from a former employer in Lancashire. Because marriages were banned during the Christmas holiday, there was an urgent need for Shakespeare to swing into the saddle and obtain the financial legacy that would provide him with the means to marry in a hurry.

### **What kind of horse would he have ridden?**

Like the majority of his countrymen, Shakespeare was not interested in breeds, only in performance. Pacers and amblers provided a rapid smooth ride to travellers.

### **What about his journey?**

Sign posts were few and far between. Lodgings and food were placed one day's ride apart along the north-south route. Ordinary travellers seldom made more than 30 miles a day, no more than they had in Chaucer's time 200 years before. The normal day was fourteen hours, including two halts for "baiting" (feeding) the horses. Riding on Sunday was prohibited because all of the Queen's subjects were required by law to attend Protestant church service.

### **Would he have galloped like they do in the movies?**

Even though the stirrup had been invented, it was not customary to trot in Shakespeare's day. Horses were expensive and hard to obtain, so Shakespeare would have conserved his mount's energy during a journey by proceeding at a fast walk.

### **Have modern Long Riders travelled between these two locations?**

Mounted on his horse, Strider, in 2013 William Reddaway completed the first modern equestrian journey to thirty of Great Britain's historic cathedrals. The team covered 4,200 kilometres (2,600 miles). Though William's route is not an exact match to that believed to have been travelled by Shakespeare the topography retains similar features.

### **Does this Long Rider believe Shakespeare could have made the journey?**

In response William wrote to the Guild to say, "What a fascinating possibility! There are no significant topographical problems for a man and a horse travelling between Preston and Stratford upon Avon in 1581. There would have been a choice of routes but whichever way was chosen the distance would have been in the region of 160 miles."

### **Is there any literary evidence that hints that Shakespeare was a Long Rider?**

Sonnet 50 describes a rider journeying on his horse and feeling melancholy due to his separation from his lover. "The beast that bears me, tired with my woe, / Plods dully on, to bear that weight in me." Any Long Rider who has travelled at three-miles-an-hour can relate to the slow pace described by the author.

### **Where does this equestrian research stand at the moment?**

Anjali Saini and Mark Moran are the pioneers whose investigation *Shakespeare in the Saddle* has revealed exciting information that requires further study. They wrote, "The



long overdue lamentable void connecting Shakespeare and horse travel is on the cusp of change”

## Shakespeare and Equestrian Research



[Charles Edward Flower](#), the father of Shakespeare Equestrian Research, was painted by Philip Richard Morris in 1891.

### **Who first recognised the importance of horses in Shakespeare’s work?**

In 1887 Charles Flower, who helped create the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, became the father of Shakespeare equestrian research when he delivered a lecture entitled *Shakespeare on Horseback* to the Stratford-on-Avon Shakespeare Club. After a careful review of all of Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets, Flower stated that Shakespeare’s equestrian wisdom was so profound that “the knowledge he had of horses, their good and bad points and characteristics, was quite sufficient to have qualified him for a certificate from the College of Veterinary Surgeons.”

### **If horses were so important to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, why has this equine connection been forgotten?**

In an age where most have driven but few have ridden, the majority of modern people have no idea that Shakespeare and his plays have any connection to horses. This equestrian amnesia means that audiences do not comprehend Shakespeare’s abundant references to horses and horsemanship.

### **Are scholars aware of this equine oversight?**

In 2007 Monica Mattfield warned that because of a “minimal human interaction with horses, they have been demoted from a central aspect of society to the realm of sport and quant hobby.” In 2016 Jonathan W. Thurston cautioned scholars that they “were not fully engaged with the meaningful relationship between horses and humans in the late sixteenth century.” Despite these admonitions, horses are increasingly invisible to historians and humans.

## Shakespeare's Invitation



The Long Riders' Guild Academic Foundation was created in 2009 thanks to the inspiration provided by Prince Philip.

His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh, had long championed an alliance between lucid scientists and enthusiastic amateurs. He said, "Many of our pioneering engineers started without any formal training but had a passion, and a talent, for invention and development. The system does not seem to be able to cope with the 'hands-on' enthusiast, who has no immediate interest in academic qualifications."

Scientists and the equestrian public need not be strangers. The challenge, according to the Duke, is to entice the public to become enthused and involved.

The need to engage the public in equestrian research was articulated as far back as 1987 when Harold Barclay observed, "The horse journals and popular horse books are too full of gross historical and ethnographic error, and the historians and anthropologists who deal with the horse sometimes hardly know the difference between a crupper and a collar."

The *Shakespeare Equestrian Collection* has thrown open the barn door and reveals that Shakespeare's involvement with horses, be it as a Long Rider or as an author, is neglected by scholars, misunderstood by audiences, and warrants further examination. Yet Shakespeare and horses is not a topic restricted to a rarefied few.

This is an exciting new type of equestrian exploration, one that invites participation by all of those who love horses and the Bard's plays. For this reason, the creation of the *SEC* is intended to be a long term global project, one that welcomes contributions from established academics but also values the discoveries made by independent "citizen scientists."