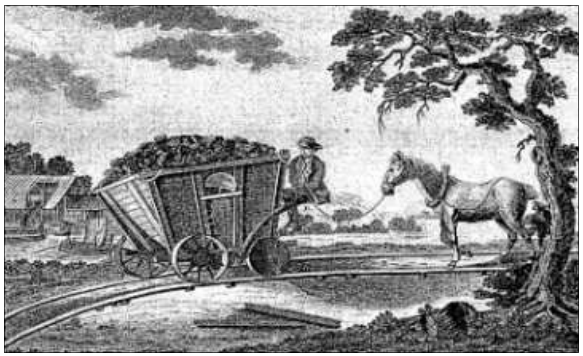
PIT PONIES

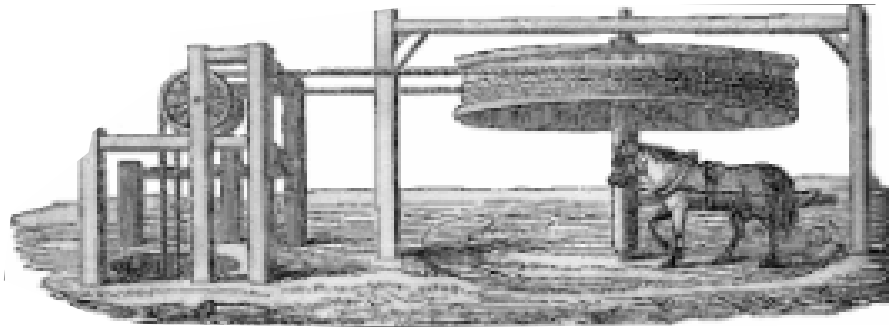
Horses were first used in the coal industry to deliver coal on the surface. Paths were too bumpy for carts so coal was carried on a horse's back in a 'pannier'. As the quality of pathways improved, horses were able to pull carts loaded with coal.



Coal wagonway, eighteenth century

In 1722 Scotland's first railway was laid between the mines at Tranent and the Port of Cockenzie on the Forth, and horses pulled the wagons. In the early 19th century locomotives were introduced. Locomotives were cheaper to run and moved more coal than a horse and wagon. Smaller pits, however, still relied on the power of horses.

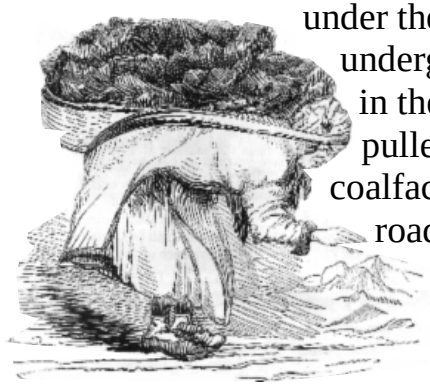
As coal was mined from deeper seams horses were put to work underground. They powered gins to wind coal and workers up and down the shaft. In Scotland the task of moving coal from the face to the shaft originally fell to women and children called bearers. They carried coal on their backs in wicker creels or baskets. The introduction of iron wagonways meant that hutches could be pulled by horses or ponies. More horses were used as distances from the face to the shaft increased.



Horse operating winding gin, c1840

Horses could pull more than men could, a fact that offset the higher cost of horses. In 1810 it cost 5s ½d (25p) per day to keep a horse, whilst a driver's wage was around 1s 2d (6p).

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 girls and boys under the age of ten, were forbidden to work underground. The number of ponies in use in the pits therefore increased. They pulled hutches and took supplies to the coalface. The height of the roof in some roadways had to be raised to accommodate the horses. This meant added expense and many mine owners kept roof heights to a minimum. Ponies often scraped



Woman hauling coal, c1840

PIT PONIES

their heads or backs as a result, something called ‘rooving’, ‘topping’, or ‘scrubbing’.

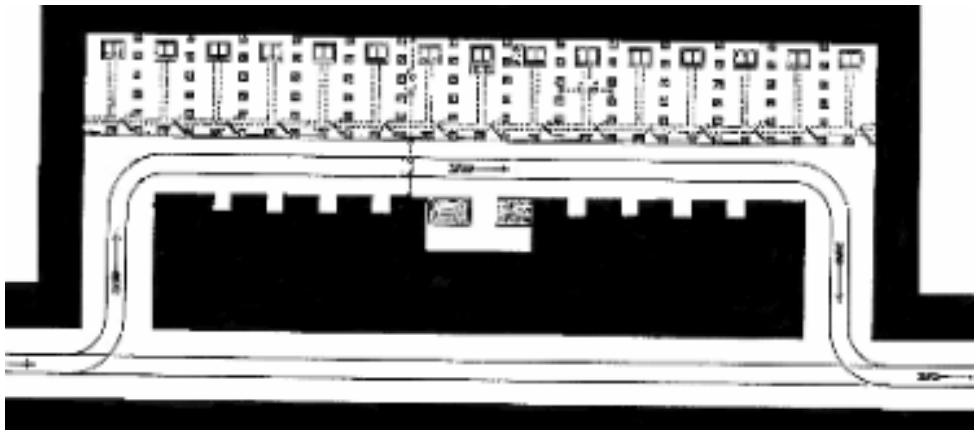
The conditions that a pony lived in underground depended very much on the mine manager. At the beginning of the twentieth century the guidelines for feeding and stabling pit horses and ponies were as follows:

FEEDING: ‘A good daily allowance for each horse is as follows: hay, 12 pounds; straw, which is not essential, 1 ½ pounds; oats, 8 pounds; maize, 3 pounds; bran, 3 pounds. If beans are used, the oats should be reduced. The cost of feeding horses per week, as above, taken from actual practice, works out at 9s 6d to 10s 6d per horse per week, according to the market prices of the foods.’

STABLING: ‘**The site should have a good fall for drainage. Stalls should be 6 foot wide separated by props which secure the roof and form a sufficient partition without being boarded up.’**

Not only were the siting and dimensions of the stables important, but colliery managers also had to consider the following when planning a stables: whitewashing the walls regularly, ventilation, bedding, water supply, mangers, shoeing, veterinary care, name plates, and dealing with pests like cockroaches and rats.

Several breeds of horse were used underground, depending on the task to be performed and the height of the roadways in the mine. Shetland Welsh ponies, ten to twelve hands high, were in common use, though horses of up to seventeen hands were used. Of the large breeds of horse, Percherons were preferred to the British Shire horses due to the lack of ‘feather’ on their legs. This hair could clog up with coal dust and mud and cause



Plan of underground stables, c1900

infection. The manes and tails of the horses were kept close cropped as this helped to keep them cool and clean.

The Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1887 was the first legislation relating to ponies underground. Inspectors investigated how the animals were treated and checked that

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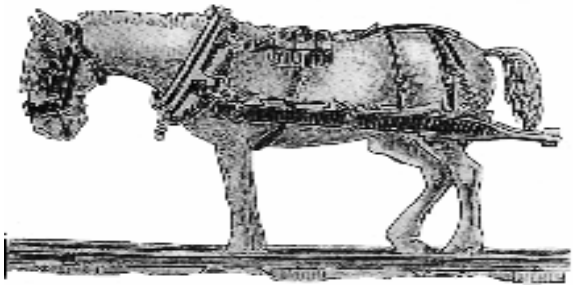
underground roadways were high enough. The Royal Commission of 1911 took evidence about the living conditions of pit ponies and horses. The resultant Coal Mines Act of 1911



Pony wearing bridle, bit, collar and limber harness. (Right) Pit pony eye guards, c. 1920

provided further legislation to regulate the condition of stables, the keeping of records and the appointment of competent horsemen. It also made the use of protective headgear and eye guards compulsory.

Legally pit ponies could only begin work at the age of four continuing for as long as they were able, perhaps into their twenties. Before going underground ponies were trained to pull weight behind them, and to get them used to the harness, headgear and limbers. A wrongly fitted collar could rub on the neck and cause sores.

Ponies were lowered into the pit in the cage, or, if the cage was too small, they were lowered under the cage. The ponies lived underground, only coming to the surface when the pit closed for a holiday or a strike. It could take up to twenty-four hours for the ponies' eyes to adjust to the light on the surface, because they were so used to the dark. This might have lead to the myth that all pit ponies went blind.

Pit pony being lowered down the shaft, 19th century.

During the 20th century mining became more mechanised in all areas including haulage, and the number of ponies working in pits declined. The last pit pony came out of Lady Victoria Colliery in 1925, but the last working pit ponies did not come out of the mines until 1994.

YEAR	No. OF PONIES
1913	70,000
1938	32,542
1951	15,858
1962	6,400
1967	2,900
1984	55