

## 9. Horse Brass

*In this response Madison Johnson, a PhD student at the University of Reading, tells the story of a souvenir horse brass and shows how its creation for the Festival of Britain was bound up heavily with critical shifts in mid-twentieth century life and technology. Delving into this story provides insight into how Madison herself became interested in heavy horses past and present, and the part her research will hopefully play in finding a future for these animals and for trades interwoven with their upkeep and retention.*

### Armac Brassworks, Festival of Britain horse brass, 1951

In 1951, the British government hoped to raise the morale of a nation still scarred by the events of the Second World War. Large cities such as London, Liverpool, and Plymouth were still in ruins from German airstrikes. After more than a decade of rationing, austerity, and making-do, post-war Britain needed a boost. So, on the centenary anniversary of the 1851 Great Exhibition, a defining moment of the nineteenth century, the government created a new exhibition. The Festival of Britain was designed with the aim of promoting a feeling of recovery and demonstrating Britain's contribution to civilization past, present, and future in the arts, science and technology, and industrial design. It was a true validation of the resilience of British culture and a promise of its endearment for decades to come.



Festival of Britain souvenir horse brass, as shown on display in the Museum (MERL 2011/8/3).

For over a century, important events and moments like this, have been captured through the design and creation of horse brasses. These are small brass plaques of various sizes which decorate the harnesses of parade and heavy horses. Though the demand for heavy horse harness brass dwindled at the end of the Second World War, partly due to the drastic decline of heavy horse populations during

and after the conflict came to an end, there was a renewed demand for horse brasses to be sold as collectibles and souvenirs. Their value as collector items helped to contribute to their continued manufacture long after their original purpose and use entered heavy decline.

Commemorative brasses first began to be mass-produced in the mid-nineteenth century. Some of the earliest examples celebrated the Golden and Diamond Jubilees of Queen Victoria, or other significant events. The tradition of using horse brasses for tributes, memorials, and moments of celebration still exists today. In recent decades, horse brasses have been made to commemorate the anniversaries of important battles in the First and Second World Wars such as the Battle of the Somme and the Battle of Britain. The MERL houses an extensive collection, showcasing the long history and designs of these intriguing items. When taken as a whole, horse brasses have the ability to tell a story of change as well as of tradition – offering a window onto moments of popular significance.



A 'God save the King – George V' horse brass from the same collection at the Festival brass (MERL 2011/8/5).

The crafts, trades, and associated heritage surrounding heavy horses, brass making included, have been entwined with British history and culture since the earliest instances of the breeds. Heavy horses themselves have been fundamental to the development of Britain. They helped build our cities while also helping to feed the nation through their work in the fields. This story of change has, of course, continued since, and by 1951 many of the horses on the roads and in the fields had been replaced with engines. The heavy horse was, for some time, a symbol of human progress and the ability to tame nature, but the vehicles that replaced it were a symbol of modernity. With the mechanization of urban and rural life, the case was clear for heavy horses. No amount of breeding or nutritional improvement could alter the fact that the horse was still an animal with limits – a living machine operating in a rapidly growing built environment.

We have now entered a sixth mass extinction, an event driven by human expansion. The prevailing story implies that the animals being lost today are only those untamed in the wild, suggesting that that this human-induced extinction relates to events such as habitat destruction and poaching. However, this mass extinction is being experienced closer to home, in our own backyards and fields. In 2017, the Rare Breeds Survival Trust estimated that without action, the heavy horse breeds native to the UK,

including the Shire, Clydesdale, and the Suffolk Punch, would become extinct within a decade. Numbers are worryingly low; just 240 Shire, 199 Clydesdale, and 25 Suffolk pedigree foals were registered that year. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were approximately 1.4 million heavy horses working in the UK. After two World Wars and the mechanization of agriculture and transportation, there are approximately only 10,000 remaining today. In the 1970s and 1980s, due to resurgence of interest in the country's cultural heritage, people flocked to agricultural shows and breed shows to witness a way of life that many saw fading away. Despite this resurgence, heavy horses and their enthusiasts still face a daring task of creating a sustainable population in the twenty-first century.



Late-twentieth century team of heavy horses, as photographed by John Tarlton (MERL P TAR PH3/2/8/7/91).

The threat of loss facing heavy horses today has forced those who know them best to ask themselves what makes a Shire a Shire, or a Clydesdale a Clydesdale, or a Suffolk Punch a Suffolk Punch. These horses were created in Britain through a response that was driven by the land these horses needed work, but today these three horse breeds have spread across the globe, taking on small individualizations from these new places. Debates such as this, surrounding the purity of bloodlines and the importance of century old studbooks has come to the centre stage of saving Britain's heavy horses.

My own journey with heavy horses here in the UK began with objects like the horse brass that I saw during a trip to The MERL. The stories that unfolded of heavy horses of the past and my discovery of their modern plight led me to embark on my PhD at the University of Reading. Both shock and admiration inspired my research. Shock at the fact that we humans had allowed an animal we created to decline to extinction level numbers and admiration of the people working so hard to save these

gentle giants. The enthusiasts of heavy horses here in the UK work day in and day out to carve a future for these horses in a rapidly moving world. The challenges posed in trying to find a place for an animal from our past are vast. Where do these living machines belong in a world of ever-changing technology? The answer lies with those who know them best. Their knowledge and passion for these animals will help create new ideas and spur on communication of the heavy horse's continued importance to British heritage and culture.

The main objective of the project is to tell a story of heavy horse enthusiasts here in the UK. The cultures of enthusiasm surrounding these animals span far beyond those who own and breed them. They include spectators at heavy horse shows, visitors to agricultural museums, craftspeople such as harness makers or even brass companies, and even those who stop and admire the horses that work the meadows in Richmond Park, London. This is a culture of emotion and passion, and one driven by our responsibility as humans to safeguard our living heritage. We must also ask whether this living heritage has contemporary value and potential. Perhaps we can harness the unique ability of heavy horses to help anchor our identity within the changing landscape around us. The ties we have and experiences we share with these animals are irreplaceable, even through the pages of a book or within the walls of a museum.



Plough team with elaborate harness, photographed by J. Hardman for Farmers Weekly (MERL P FW PH2/P62/8).

Objects such as the Festival of Britain Horse brass help to reveal the powerful entanglement of how heavy horses became interwoven with ideas of national identity, culture, and life. The Shire, the

Clydesdale, and the Suffolk Punch helped build our past – our responsibility now lies with safeguarding and helping to create their future.

### **Further Information (online):**

**For more information on mass extinction see –**

**<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/>**

**For more information about saving heavy horses see – <https://www.rbst.org.uk/Appeal/heavy-horse>**

**For information about horse brasses in the UK see – <http://www.nationalhorsebrassociety.org.uk/>**

**For more information about the Festival of Britain horse brass – [MERL 2011/8/3](#)**

**For more information about other horse brasses in The MERL collection – [Horse brasses in The MERL](#)**