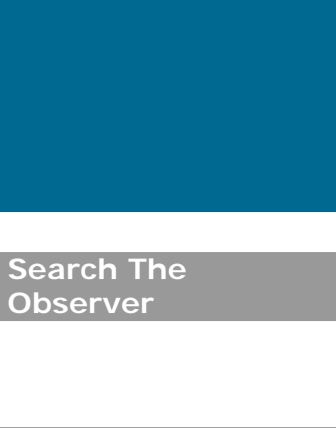




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The slaughtered horses that shame our racing

An undercover Observer investigation has revealed the shocking fate of thousands of British racehorses. Now campaigners want new laws to govern the sport

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[The Observer](#)

It is known as 'the sport of kings', full of glamour, effort and thrilling competition. But few of the thoroughbred racehorses that gallop their elegant way around the racecourses of Britain every week are left to see out their days grazing in golden pastures.

For thousands of British thoroughbreds that are too old, too slow or not good enough jumpers, the end is brutal: a bullet through the temple or a metal bolt into the side of the brain. Then their carcasses are loaded on to freezer lorries and driven to France, where their flesh is sold as gourmet meat.

This mass disposal of thoroughbreds is the side of the multi-billion-pound British racing industry that is rarely mentioned and even more rarely seen. It is not illegal. But animal welfare charities are demanding that more money be spent to provide sanctuaries where horses can live in retirement, and that the massive breeding programme that provides the sport with its horses be scaled back. Most of the animals, which could live on average more than 30 years, are killed before their fifth birthday.

This weekend an Observer investigation shines a light on this grisly underbelly of the sport. We reveal the two British slaughterhouses whose 'knackermen' kill more than 5,000 horses a year, many of which were bred to entertain punters and racegoers. We also reveal that a director of one of the horse abattoirs claims to have killed horses for leading names in the industry and that another is a judge at the Horse of the Year Show.

There has always been a mystery about what happens to the 4,000 British racehorses that are 'retired' each year from the sport or the hundreds of young thoroughbreds not good enough to make the starting post. Even the sport's official body, the Horseracing Regulatory Authority, admitted to The Observer that 'racing doesn't really know what definitely happens to the horses when they stop racing'. Some will be retrained for hunting or eventing; others will be used for breeding. But the physical make-up of racehorses means that many are not suitable for riders who want a gentle hack on a Sunday afternoon.

A study by the Equine Fertility Unit in Newmarket attempted to track 1,022 thoroughbred foals born in 1999. It discovered that only 347 were ever entered for a race in the UK and fewer than 200 remained in training as four-year-olds. More than 100 had been destroyed, died or were untraceable.

To discover the fate of these animals, an Observer reporter posed as a horse trainer from the Midlands who needed to dispose of four thoroughbreds that had not made the grade. Those in the horse world quickly directed us to two abattoirs that do the large proportion of the industry's work.

The first slaughterhouse is south of the historic Cheshire town of Nantwich. Those in the racing industry know the establishment as Turners, the surname of the family that has run it since 1972. But it is also called the Red Lion Abattoir or Cheshire Equine Services. The second abattoir is in a village on the outskirts of Taunton, Somerset, and is hired by Bristol-based firm Lawrence J Potter for a weekly horse cull on Wednesdays. These two operations take care of the vast bulk of the 6,000 to 10,000 horses the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs estimates are being killed annually for consumption abroad.

Phone calls to both places confirmed they were happy to take our fictional racehorses. Both confirmed they had good relationships with trainers, breeders, dealers and stud farms. They also both confirmed the horses' flesh would be sold as meat in France.

Valerie Turner, the owner of Cheshire Equine Services, told us its main time for killing horses was Friday, between 7am and 2pm, when it slaughtered between 50 and 100 animals. We asked if we could check out the facilities and she agreed.

Pitched in the midst of rolling Pennine hills, the slaughterhouse is invisible to rambblers out on a stroll. Hidden behind tall trees, the approach is via a long gravel lane that would be difficult to find without proper directions. At the end of this track is an ugly collection of grubby red buildings devoid of signs. In the courtyard are a collection of anonymous metal wagons that have brought the horses to be destroyed. A sickly smell permeates the place of blood, urine and dead flesh.

Inside, Valerie's husband Derek was happy to talk, unaware of the presence of a reporter. 'She knows everybody, does Val.... She's a judge at the Horse of the Year show,' he said. Asked if they slaughter thoroughbreds, he replied: 'Yeah, we get every sort of horse.' Asked how many, he said: 'We must do about 2-3,000 racehorses a year.'

On the office wall are photographs of a child riding a pony. 'We let the kid have a ride on it before it was turned into meat,' he said. Asked which trainers use the slaughterhouse, he named several, including Ginger McCain, the trainer of Red Rum. 'Ginge is very comical, he's down to earth. He doesn't bring us that many, a couple of year. Harvey Smith comes here quite a lot.' Smith is the former showjumping champion whose wife now trains racehorses.

Ginger's son, Donald McCain, denied they have ever taken a horse to be slaughtered. 'We find all our horses good homes,' he insisted. Harvey Smith's wife Sue also denied they take many horses to Turners. 'If we have one with a serious injury then we may have to have them destroyed, but we are lucky and that doesn't happen very often.'

Documents in the office reveal that one of the horses being slaughtered on our visit is Louis Laval, a nine-year-old chestnut racehorse originally bred in Ireland and once owned by Padge Berry, an Irish trainer who bought the horse in 2001 for nearly £17,000. There are no details of the new owner, who, five years on, has brought Louis Laval to be turned into horsemeat.

Valerie Turner took our reporter on a tour. In the butchering room, blood could be seen seeping through the plastic doors. Four men were dressed in white coats covered in blood. Up above, three horse carcasses were hanging upside down with metal shackles tied halfway up their hind legs. Their hooves had been cut off and the heads had been removed. One man was using knives to skin the dead animals. Our reporter was not allowed to see where the horses were shot 'because there are live bullets'. As we walked through the holding pen, a gunshot went off. Two young thoroughbreds jumped and began biting each other's necks, which were covered in red welts.

In a phone call to Valerie Turner later in which we explained we were from The Observer, she played down the numbers of horses they kill from the racing industry. She said: 'We don't do that many now, a lot prefer having them put down in their own place.' Asked why people bring thoroughbreds to be slaughtered, she said: 'We don't ask.'

Turner confirmed she dealt directly with raceyards and stud farms but declined to name any. She also rebutted the earlier statement that they kill 2,000 to 3,000 racehorses a year, claiming the figure was closer to 700.

The picturesque village of Staplegrave sits on the outskirts of Taunton. Sitting at the bottom of a sloping windy road is a large, drab warehouse. Like Turners, there are no signs to indicate what it is. Yet every Wednesday morning throughout the year, 50 to 60 horses are brought down this lane never to return.

The Taunton abattoir is rented out by Bristol-based Stephen Potter of Lawrence J Potter every Wednesday for the mass slaughtering of horses. Potter admits he kills some 3,000 a year, but denies that most are racehorses. He claims he sees only 100 a year from racing and those are ones with 'sustained injuries or with mental problems that mean they can't race or be retrained'. He said: 'There are more than a million horses in Britain with only about 20,000 in racing. Each year thousands will become ill or get injured and need to be put down. We offer the horse's owner an extremely humane way of doing that. It is a valuable service and without people like us, the welfare of horses in Britain would be much worse.'

There is no suggestion that Potter or the Turners are doing anything inhumane. Indeed, most animal welfare experts believe that shooting is the best way to end a horse's life. One campaigner said: 'The slaughterhouses are not doing anything wrong; they are simply clearing up the mess left over by the racing industry.'

Last week, pressure group Animal Aid published a report entitled 'Bred to Death'. It is a hard-hitting critique of the racing industry that argues the chase for glory and profit has led to a large over-production of thoroughbred foals. It claims that in Britain three times as many horses are being produced as there were 40 years ago and a decreasing proportion - currently about 35 per cent - are sufficiently robust to start racing.

Its conclusion does not mince words: 'These animals are designed to run over a specific race distance of a mile and a quarter. They are bred to be swift but pay a price in skeletal strength and general vigour. The result is that fewer foals make the commercial grade. Many of the "failures" are slaughtered for meat.'

The report's author, Dene Stansall, said: 'A kind of madness has taken possession of the horse racing industry. A hunger for profit and glory has resulted in the production of far more horses than racing can absorb.' Conservative MP James Gray, the president of the Association of British Riding Schools, gives partial support to the report: 'We know that between 6,000 and 7,000 horses are slaughtered each year and a significant number would have come from the racing industry one way or the other, although it hard to know exactly how many. The key question is not for the abattoirs but for the racing industry. Why are they producing so many foals and is it necessary?'

HRA spokesman Paul Struthers dismissed the Animal Aid report as no more than a 'provocative essay' and rebutted claims that thousands of racehorses are slaughtered every year for meat. 'There is absolutely no new evidence to support these claims,' he said, adding that most horses are found new homes. But he did admit: 'The truth is racing doesn't really know what definitely happens when horses stop racing.' This view is echoed by Louise Kemble, the chief executive of the Thoroughbred Breeders' Association. 'We do our best to keep our horses away from the knackermen, but unfortunately some end up there.'

There is another way. Nestled at the base of Brown Clew Hill in Shropshire, the Midland Racehorse Care Centre is a haven of tranquillity. It was set up last October by Serena Miller, who has worked in racing since she was 13 and rode for a host of trainers.

Miller set up the charity after becoming appalled by the treatment of discarded thoroughbreds: 'I was sick of hearing about racehorses going for slaughter and being in auction houses being pushed from place to place once their racing days were over.'

She now looks after eight ex-racehorses although it could be many times more than that. 'We get three to four calls a day asking if we can take in former racehorses... but it costs more than £4,000 a year to look after one and that doesn't include vet bills, which can be as much as £1,000 a time.'

Miller's charity gets no support from the multi-billion-pound racing industry and relies on donations from the public. The industry puts £250,000 a year into its official charity, Retraining of Racehorses, which helps 90 out of the 4,000 horses that retire annually. But, according to Miller, this is a 'pitiful amount' and the fact that the charity is part of the industry makes it difficult for it to speak out against the sport.

She said: 'So many people make so much money out of this sport they should be prepared to give a little bit more to look after these wonderful animals.... There has to be a better way.'

Racing in numbers

- Approximately 5,000 thoroughbred foals are bred every year for racing.
- Between 4,000 and 5,000 horses retire from racing every year.
- There are estimated to be more than one million horses in the UK, with 20,000 in horseracing.
- Between 6,000 and 10,000 horses are slaughtered every year in Britain for horsemeat.
- In 2004 the UK exported 1,576 tonnes of horsemeat, mainly to France.
- Of 1,022 thoroughbred foals tracked from birth, only 347 were ever entered for a race.
- British bookmakers now generate a combined annual profit of £1bn from horse racing.
- The English Derby offers a first-place cheque of £740,000.
- The owner of a leading stallion can charge \$500,000 (£265,000) for a single mating. That stallion might cover 200 mares in one year.
- The racing industry gives £250,000 a year to its official charity, which retrain 90 racehorses a year for other activities.
- It costs upwards of £4,000 a year to look after a retired racehorse.

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