

Horses

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*Hush a-bye
Don't you cry
Go to sleep little baby
When you awake
You shall have cake
And all the pretty little horses*

There were no cars parked in our street – no-one owned one. They were to be seen on the High Street and Sunderland Road, along with Trams and Lorries, but not very many. Most deliveries in and around where we lived were done by horse-drawn carts.

The men on the Ice-cream carts from Dragone's and Mark Tony's would announce their presence to children with a shrill whistle, and I would go outside and standing as near as I dared, stroke the horse's head. I loved their earthy smell, and in winter the breath from their nostrils would not be unlike the exhaust from the steam engines in Central Station.

Nearby, Ringtons had their tea depot and stables. Every weekday morning a magnificent procession of immaculately turned-out horses would emerge from the depot pulling 2-wheel hansoms, each with a driver perched high up, and the carriages full of tea parcels.

On the High Street, horses stilled pulled a lot of the carts delivering goods to the shops. A common sight also, was seeing a drover relieve himself at the kerbside, in full view of passers-by. Many years later, I discovered that this was indeed allowed by local bye-laws, as the drover was not permitted to leave his animal unattended.

Coal was delivered to each house from the narrow, scruffy, back-lanes that ran behind the houses, and this was another opportunity for me to make friends with the coalman's horse - usually by standing to the side of the animal's head and talking nonsense to it.

On one such occasion I got more than I bargained for, when the horse decided to urinate without any warning whatsoever. I recall standing, with my back pressed hard to the wall, gasping, with hands over my face, while scalding hot urine showered over me as it bounced up from the hard cobbles in the lane. I also recall that the coalman and his labourer thought this mightily funny and they were still roaring with laughter, as I walked away drenched to the skin in hot horse pee.

My Mum, on the other hand, was not so amused, and I was upbraided loudly and ordered into our backyard where the still warm, wet clothes were roughly pulled off me until I stood shocked, shaking, and naked. I was warned never to get that close to a horse again. You know what? - I never listened, and perversely, although I couldn't help but admire these animals, on almost every

occasion I've gotten close to one, it inevitably turns out to be a discomfoting experience.

A few years after the above, the whole family were on a camping holiday on a farm that overlooked the Iron Foundry in Alston.

The farmer's daughter had a small horse, which she and my sister insisted I had to ride around the field. She helped me up into the saddle, and barely had I got hold of the reins, when the animal took off – not a walk, nor even a sedate trot, but a full gallop. A few yards later – off I fell, but my left foot was tangled in the stirrup and consequently I was dragged around the field face down through cattle muck, thistles and worst of all – nettles.

Apparently this scene afforded the farmer's daughter, and my sister, with much merriment, and they were still crying with laughter as eventually they brought the horse under control and my foot was freed. I had tram-line scrapes down my face and my torso, and was covered in cow dung and nettle rash.

Nevertheless, later my father pronounced me 'lucky' that I hadn't been seriously injured.

This really didn't help because I felt that I had indeed been seriously injured – I had a few very uncomfortable days while the various bumps, scratches and stings mended. For the rest of the holiday, every time the farmer's daughter saw me she burst into uncontrollable laughter – I couldn't see the joke.

The next year saw us camping again – this time at Cresswell, next to the beautiful Druridge Bay on the Northumberland coast. It didn't take me long to make friends with the few local kids there were, and a special friendship with a girl called Michelene. She was very pretty, in an impish way, had a well-developed sense-of-humour for one so young, and clearly enjoyed my company as much as I did hers.

One favourite game – Relevé – was played in the semi-ruins of the local manor house. Michelene and I would go together and hide amongst hay that was stored above one of the old stables. There we would sit and talk, hold hands and kiss until we were found by 'the pack'.

Michelene had a pony and had asked me on several occasions if I wanted to ride it. Mostly I demurred – my recent experience in Alston still all-too-fresh in my memory, but inevitably I was drawn in, until one day, when I decided to triumph over my fears, and I was coaxed up onto the saddle.

Micheline was a slightly-built 13-year-old, but even though I was the same age, already my body was starting to take the shape – and weight, of a muscular youth. Whatever it was, either my weight or my smell, I don't know, but the pony refused point-blank to budge – until, that is, Michelene gave it a healthy whack on the backside with a thin stick. It moved – I didn't, and found myself lying on my back, on the ground, after it had bucked and then accelerated away. Once again this appeared to be a great source of amusement to Michelene and other assorted village kids, crippled with laughter at my discomfort. Fortunately my only injury this time was a bruised bum. I never attempted to ride a horse again, preferring to admire these beautiful animals with my feet on the ground, rather than in the stirrups.

Many years passed, and my youngest daughter was afforded Riding lessons. Her love of horses seemed to echo strongly that of mine of long before, and she became very proficient.

So it was then, that I booked a holiday in Wicklow, Southern Ireland, on what

purported to be a pleasant and peaceful 'Horse-drawn Gypsy Caravan' holiday. An extra horse was enquired about, for my daughter to ride, whilst my youngest son and I would ride on the caravan.

My then partner, mother of both, declined to accompany us.

So, after a pleasant flight to Dublin, and a somewhat tedious bus ride, we arrived at the 'farm'.

Introductions were made by a very friendly and kind woman, whose name I've forgotten, but certainly not her kindness.

There were several other holidaymakers present, and we were given instruction regarding care for the horses, and for ourselves. It was very thorough and reassuring. The first night was to be spent on the farm, so most of us, plus kids, wandered down to the local hostelry for supper and a drink.

I did notice that I was the only 'parent' on my own, the other's had the full complement of father and mother.

It became clear as things 'progressed' that the idyllic and peaceful holiday I had hoped for, was a naive 'pipe dream'.

There was one thing though, my love of the animals helped me enormously, in that their response to me was calm and co-operative.

Thankfully there was little or no traffic on the lovely little winding roads.

My daughter rode behind the caravan on a rather comely 'gray', and the caravan was drawn by a beautiful monster called 'Seamus'. I had dismissed as 'luck of the draw' that I had been given the largest of all the draught horses.

The first two days passed relatively calmly, with pre-arranged overnight 'stays' on the way.

The horses, generally were let loose in the same gated pasture as our caravans, and part of the 'fun' was re-harnessing the horses for the days ride. As it was, my fun was in watching the others who had taken the same route, trying to coax their charges close enough to be harnessed. The instructions had been to shake a metal bowl containing some oats, and call the horse's name. That worked for both my daughter and myself, but others unsuccessful, quite quickly became frustrated and angry. In thinking about these events a little later, I realised that both myself and daughter had 'bonded' with our respective animals. Some of the other's apparently had not.

The 'crunch' happened on the third day, as we made our way towards the coast. The final road we had to take was much larger than the winding little lane we were on. I had halted, got off the caravan and took hold of Seamus's neck halter. After making sure there was no traffic, spoke quietly to him and we began to turn left onto the bigger road. Just as the front wheels were entering the major road there was a loud 'bang'. I stopped, and still holding his halter looked up at him. His visible eye was rotating quickly and teeth were chattering. I ignored my son's shouting, and spoke softly to Seamus. "It's OK. Everything's fine." I patted his neck with my free hand while smiling reassuringly at him. He calmed, and I turned around and asked my son to be quiet.

My daughter had dismounted and stood holding her horse and looked at me, very worried. I asked her quietly, to tether her horse on the nearby fence, then come and join me. She did and I pointed to the front of the cart where it joined with a hinge. I had said softly "I believe the hinge pin is broken, because of the adverse camber of the two roads."

She had looked down and nodded. "What are we going to do Daddy?" I had said I would have to fix it, so we could get to our next stop, which wasn't far. I asked her to hold Seamus and talk softly to him, then had a look under at the hinge. Part of the pin was lying on the road, part of it was still in place. What was needed was to straighten the caravan up, pull further across the road, then turn left again. I picked up the broken half of the pin, and put it in the cabin.

There were strong ropes hanging on the rear of the cabin, so I 'jury-rigged' the whole hinge so it wouldn't come apart. I asked my son to get down and wait with his sister and I again took hold of Seamus's halter, on his other side, again talking softly to him.

I asked both of them to stand back, checked for traffic and said softly to Seamus "Go boy, and gently does it."

I had half-expected that the caravan would split in two, but it righted and I walked Seamus into the middle of the road, and turned left, then pulled over to the left and stopped.

I asked my daughter to hold Seamus again, and I tightened up the jury-rig. We all arrived safely at our next stopping place.

Both children were a little shaken. I unloosened Seamus and then led both horses to the water trough, then knocked on the farmhouse door.

A pretty woman opened the door and said "Hello". I told her my name, and also gave a short account of the 'incident.' She had shouted a name, and a young man joined her at the door, shook my hand, and we all walked over to the caravan.

I showed him the bottom half of the hinge pin, and he shook his head and swore softly, then had a look underneath, then at my rig.

He had nodded and smiled. "Good Job, well done."

His mum had looked at me. "I'll 'phone them Joe, and let them know what has happened.." She had paused, looked at my children, the two horses, then back at the caravan. "Would you like a cup of tea Joe?"

We had a pleasant day, both on the beach, and a pub for lunch and supper though it was quite clear that my daughter had been affected by the incident. Later in the day, I was given a choice. Another caravan would be brought, and we could make our own way back to the base farm the following morning, or stay the night in our broken caravan, and a car would take us back to the base for our last night.

I put it to my kids. I wasn't surprised, they both opted for the ride in the car the following day.

So it was then, and later the next morning, our host had invited me back to the farmhouse for a 'chat'.

Over a cup of tea she had asked me how I felt. I was honest, straight away I had said it was a mistake for me to be alone caring for two children and two horses.

She had smiled. "I had my doubts about that, immediately I realized you were on your own. In fact I was a little shocked, and more than prepared to suggest you take along another 'passenger' we would supply, for each journey.." She had paused "A little later, I saw the way you acted wit the animals, and also the way the they reacted to you, and changed my mind.." Another slight pause

"You have had experience with horses Joe?" I had nodded and said "Yes, at falling off."

She had burst out laughing. "And that rig you effected?" I smiled. "Yes, a better experience with ropes and rigging, than horses. I worked as a steel erector earlier in my life."

She had looked at me for quite a while, saying nothing, then "And this holiday?" I smiled. "I think you know. It's mostly been a pleasant experience for me, and I especially loved the horses, especially Seamus.." I had paused. "Why did you give me the biggest of all the horses?"

She had laughed. "You noticed! Because he is the most gentle, and also because he responded to you, rather than any of the others."