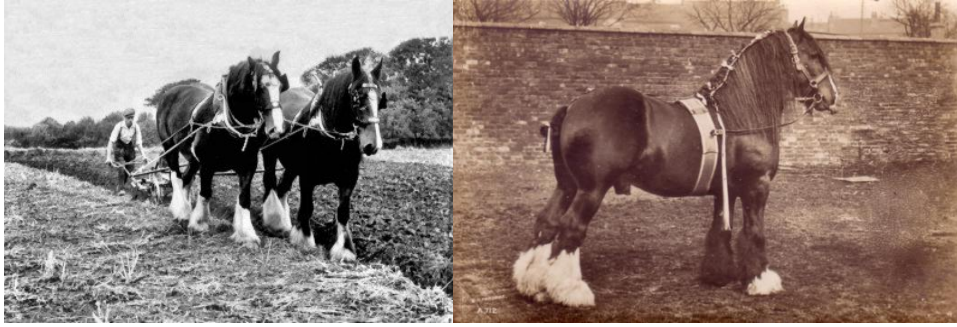


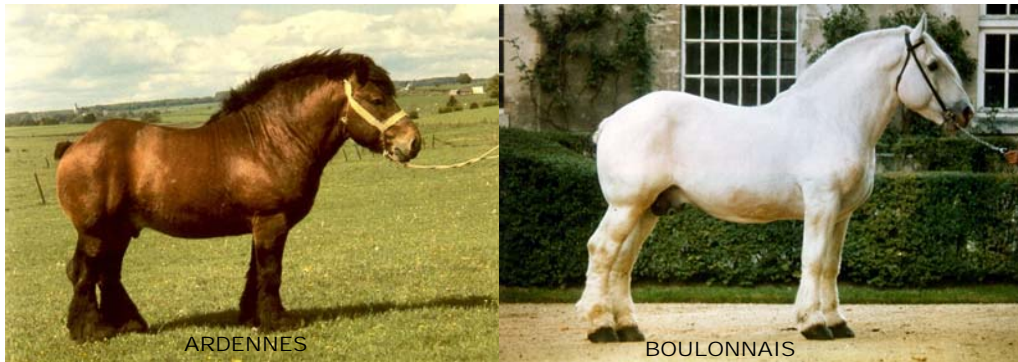
WHAT IS A HEAVY HORSE?

The term Heavy Horse describes breeds of horse adapted for hauling heavy loads and undertaking agricultural work. They are also called draught (UK) or draft (US) horses – the definition of draught being drawing or pulling. Other references are often made to them as cart, dray or work horses, depending on what purpose they are used for.



There are over 30 different breeds of Heavy Horses throughout the world, with varying characteristics but they all share the common traits of strength, endurance, patience and a docile temperament. They range in height from approximately 16 to 19 hands high with some of the more solid breeds weighing in at nearly 1,000 kg (1 tonne)! A Heavy Horse is usually recognisable by its heavy boned, muscular build and many breeds have distinctive hair growing around the lower legs referred to as feather (never the plural feathers).

Many of the heavy breeds originated in Europe and one of the oldest breeds from which it is thought all the other heavy breeds evolved, is the Ardennes. The horse came from the Ardennes area on the French Belgium border. Julius Caesar (100-44BC) is said to have praised the stamina and hardiness of the horses when visiting the area.



Heavy Horses have worked throughout the centuries in every aspect of heavy haulage and agriculture and have played their part in numerous wars. Some breeds such as the French Boulonnais did and still do (block your ears), supply horse meat for the population. As nations grew and industry developed, more and more horsepower was required. Horses were exported to many countries around the world and the late 1800's saw Clydesdales from Scotland, Shires and Suffolk Punches from England and Percherons from France (via Canada) imported into Australia to meet the work requirements of a fast progressing young nation. They took over the tasks of the plodding bullock teams and were used to haul timber, wool, wheat and sugar cane. They prepared the ground for planting and harvested the crops. They scooped dams, cleared bush, worked mines and were the strength behind the building of the roads and railways.



From that time, Australia developed its own hardy breed called the Australian Draught Horse suited to the harsh conditions. It is the result of a century of mixed breeding of the four main heavy breeds found in the country, the Clydesdale, Shire, Percheron, Suffolk Punch and more recently the Belgian Draught. Because the distances here were so huge and conditions sometimes challenging, if a farmer had a Clydesdale mare

for example, it might be a long time before a Clydesdale stallion came around so he would use whatever sire was in the area so it might have been a Percheron and so on, so the breeds were crossed.

The peak of the Heavy Horse era in Australia was reached in the mid 1930's. Then, after many decades as the horsepower of the country, post war mechanisation saw a dramatic decrease in their use. Many were sold for slaughter and numbers went into a significant decline worldwide. A small group of dedicated breeders kept things barely ticking over during the 1950' and 60's until the world-wide revival of interest in heavy horses saw a moderate increase in breed numbers.

Today, with the reduction of traditional work roles, heavy horses are mainly used for leisure activities. Enthusiasts show them in-hand and in harness classes at shows throughout the country. Various groups run field days and competitions to demonstrate traditional and modern agricultural tasks. The tourism and wedding markets have seen an increase in horse-drawn carriage enterprises and more people are realising that heavies and heavy crosses make good sturdy riding horses with a great temperament. Some companies such as breweries continue to use smartly turned out teams of horses for public relations purposes. A few small farmers and enthusiasts continue to use draught horses as an environmentally friendly way to work the land.

Even with these varied modern uses for Heavy Horses, numbers are seriously low and it is important that interest in the breeds is maintained and promoted. The Rare Breeds Survival Trust and similar organisations worldwide, continue to monitor numbers of the various breeds. Suffolk Punch numbers are critical, Clydesdales vulnerable and Shires at Risk along with many other breeds.

Currently in Australia, the Clydesdale is the most numerous of the heavy breeds followed by the Australian Draught, Percheron and Shire. There are a few Suffolk Punches and a handful of Belgian Draughts. At one stage there was one Russian Draught Horse (called Norman) who has since moved to England. If anyone knows of any other breed of Heavy Horse in the country or some interesting heavy crosses, please share it with us.



CLYDESDALE



AUSTRALIAN DRAUGHT HORSE



SHIRE HORSE



SUFFOLK PUNCH



BELGIAN DRAUGHT (AMERICAN)



PERCHERON

