Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

RURAL LIFE H155A

Three-Bladed Fleam



For thousands of years, small knives were used by people to open veins in their arm to allow blood to flow, in the belief that it would heal various ailments. The Greek doctor Galen (AD 129 - 200) thought that blood could stagnate and that, at times, there could be too much blood. Both of these conditions were thought to lead to illness, which could be dealt with by cutting a vein and allowing a quantity of blood to be released. Bleeding was used to treat almost any serious illness.

The practice of blood letting (phlebotomy) continued throughout the Middle Ages and continued in use into the nineteenth century. Sometimes leeches were used to draw out blood. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, doctors came to realise their treatment did harm rather than good. Today blood is regularly taken for testing, but is seldom used as a treatment in itself.

Just as draining blood was thought to be beneficial for humans, it was also thought to be good for animals that were ill, especially horses. A fleam is the tool that was used to bleed horses. This example is typical, with three cutting blades of different sizes. The blades are at right angles to the shaft and can be neatly folded away and then slipped into a case, to prevent injury.



Quale & quante infermità nascono per ingiuria.

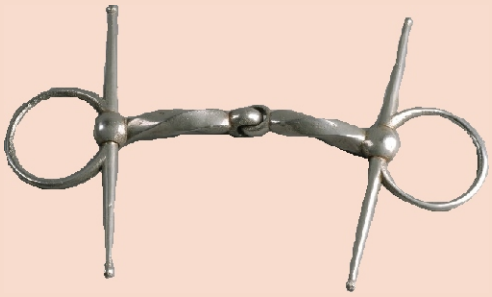
The illustration on the right is from Filippo Scaccho da Tagliacozzo's *Opera di Mescalzia* (1591) and shows various points at which it was thought a horse could be effectively bled. In nineteenth century England a horse was bled most often from the jugular vein in the neck. A small lancet was used for small veins, but a fleam was preferred for the large veins as it could be used rapidly before the horse could pull free. Except in expert hands, the lancet was slightly slower and caused considerable skin pain before the incision could be made. If this was allowed to happen then the horse would get out of control. The blade of the fleam was held against the long axis of the jugular vein and the fleam handle was struck with the bottom of the fist or with a small club of hardwood to drive it through the skin and vein wall. As in human beings, rapid bleeding to a state of faintness was thought to be the most effective and when this point was reached the bleeding was stopped.

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Horse Bit



Horses were still very much working animals on British farms up until the Second World War. They were used to plough, pull carts, turn mills and pumps and many other jobs. Some workers specialised in looking after the farm's horses. An extensive knowledge of folk-medicines and techniques for handling horses was handed on over generations of horsemen which has been lost since the coming of the tractor.

Whether a horse is part of a plough team or is to be ridden by an individual it will have to be fitted with a bridle if it is to be controlled. A bit is a piece of metal, attached to the bridle, which fits in the natural space between a horse's front cutting teeth and its back grinding teeth. Reins are attached to the outer ends of the bit and are held in the driver's hands. Reins are the means by which a horse rider or driver gives directional commands to the horse's head. Pulling on the reins can be used to steer or stop the horse. The sides of a horse's mouth are sensitive, so pulling on the reins pulls the bit, which then pulls the horse's head from side to side, which is how the horse is controlled. There are several different kinds of bit and if they are not fitted correctly they can damage the horse.

Headstall

A headstall - also called a headpiece - fits over the horse's head and is used to attach the bit and the reins. They are also often fitted with blinkers, as is the case here. Blinkers are used to prevent the horse from looking anywhere other than in front of it. This is done because it is believed that it will stop the horse being distracted or scared and therefore less liable to bolt.

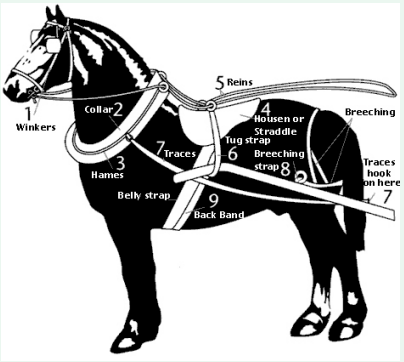


Cart Saddle



Horses were not usually used on farms as a means of personal transport, but in order to pull carts or ploughs. To attach a horse to such equipment elaborate harnesses were used. Harnesses were often made to fit individual horses and different kinds of harnesses would be used for each piece of equipment. This is a cart saddle which, as the name suggests, would have been used when the horse had to pull a cart.

The cart saddle sits on a horse's back and consists of a wooden frame surrounded by leather with a rigid channel in the centre. This was designed to take a chain running from the shafts of a cart on either side and over the back of the horse. In this way, a small part of the weight of the cart, perhaps a tenth, was supported and balanced by the horse. There would have been some kind of pad under the wooden frame to stop the cart saddle chafing the horse's skin.



While the cart saddle helped the horse to support the weight of the cart, it would also have worn a large padded collar around its neck to which traces were attached which enabled it to pull the cart forward. The diagram, above right, shows the arrangement used for attaching a horse to a gypsy cart and illustrates the general arrangement of this equipment. The photographs below (left) show two horses hitched to a cart; one of the horses is wearing a cart saddle and is supporting some of the cart's weight. The one to the right was taken in the 1930s at a farm in Oxfordshire. It shows a Shire horse that has just been unhitched from a cart being led away to be stabled for the night. The horse is wearing a blinkered bridle, a neck collar, a cart saddle and a breech band around the back legs.





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Horse Brasses



The earliest decorations on horses are believed to have been in the form of charms for the purpose of warding off evil spirits. The practice grew into a tradition which gathered pace during the nineteenth century with the introduction of brass ornaments. After 1850 they were available in large quantities and in many different designs from specialist manufacturers. Brasses were attached to the leather straps of the harness and were particularly evident on special occasions such as a parade or an agricultural show.

The brass which is attached to piece of leather is a face piece - that is, it would have been fastened to the headstall and would have hung down between the blinkers. The slit in the brow-band of the headstall would have been used to do this.

Stirrups



Stirrups are used when a horse is to be ridden. They increase a rider's ability to stay in the saddle and control the mount. This pair is made from nickel-plated forged steel by Holbrow's of London. They are marked for use on the left and right side of the horse. As the rider's whole weight must be carried at one side when mounting, one stirrup leather often becomes stretched longer than the other, usually the left one, because most mounting occurs on that side. Although the stirrup leathers can be adjusted to even them up, some riders switch stirrups to the opposite sides from time to time in order to preserve the leathers.

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Shot Flask



Muzzle-loading rifles work by pouring gunpowder down the barrel, then the shot. When the trigger is pulled a flash is made which ignites the gunpowder and blasts the shot out of the barrel.

When out hunting animals, either to eat or to kill those which were thought to destroy crops, the farmer would first pour a measured amount of gunpowder from a waterproof flask into the barrel. The powder was then wadded into place. This leather flask would have been filled with lead shot, which would have been added next. The amount of lead shot used depended on the power of the rifle being used. The plate at the front of the pivotted arm on this example would have originally have been moveable, so that two different quantities of shot could be measured out. When the flask is tipped forward shot would then flow in the nozzle. The pivotted arm could then be pressed back into place and the measured amount of shot poured into the barrel. This too would then be wadded into place. The gun could now be fired.

Shotguns which used manufactured cartridges began to be used in the mid-nineteenth century. Muzzle-loading rifles which depended on the more elaborate procedure described above continued to be used in some country districts into the twentieth century, as it was much cheaper than buying expensive cartridges.

Toy Mobile Laboratory



'You need this to complete your Farm Set' proclaims the box lid. This model may date from the 1950s. It was produced by the Animal Health Trust, presumably to raise funds for its work. The Animal Health Trust was founded in 1942 as the Veterinary Education Trust by a veterinary surgeon, Dr W R Wooldridge, who saw the human advances being made in human medicine and wanted to apply them for the benefit of animals. The Trust is actively involved in both research into animal diseases and the treatment of sick animals.

Sheep Shears

Shears like these have been used in Europe for centuries. The illustration below is from a fifteenth century manuscript from the Netherlands and shows them in use. Electric shears were introduced in the early twentieth century, but hand-shears continued to be used in many places. The photograph to the right shows them in use in the Cotswolds in the 1920s.



Shearing sheep using such hand-tools was a tough process. The animal needed to be restrained and the shears need a considerable amount of force to get them to cut. To make them work properly the triangular blades need to be flipped over each other so that they press against each other when in use.



