

# MYSTERIOUS AFAN CUDD

## HORSES IN THE MIDDLE AGES

In the Middle Ages, horses were essential for transporting goods and people by land, as well as for warfare.

Horses were highly prized and required a lot of care and food.

In winter, horses were given half a bushel of oats (32lbs) every day, in addition to three loaves of horse bread.

Medieval Welsh poetry is full of references to horses. In poems of requests and thanks, a horse is the most popular animal to bequeath.

Riding a horse was the chief method of travelling; it was a far more efficient way of travelling than on foot, especially as there were fewer roads, and these were often muddy. Travelling was more difficult than it is today, especially river crossings.

We have Gerald of Wales' account of his horse getting stuck in the mud at the crossing of the River Nedd, and how he almost lost all his books, which were laden on the horse's back, as a result.



Medieval picture of a Palfrey

BritLibAddMS35166ApocalypseUnkFolio3SealBlackHorse.jpg

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A prize-winning Welsh horse today: Elevage de maika, CC BY-SA 4.0  
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It seems that horses had a special significance in Welsh tradition since the early Middle Ages in prose and in the poetry. Poets often refer frequently to famous horses of the past, associating them with saints or the mythical heroes.

Praising a patron for his supply of horses is also frequent in the poems. Some patrons bred horses. In the 1400s the poet Guto'r Glyn wrote a poem praising Abbot Dafydd ab Owain of Strata Marcella Abbey near Newtown in Powys.

It was once the largest Cistercian monastery in Wales, new Newtown (Y Trallwng), founded in 1170 by Owain Cyfeiliog.

The poet draws attention to the abbot's horses and praises the abbey lands where food of quality is grown for the horses:

*Ni bu dir yn y byd well,  
Bwyd meirch lle bu yd Marchell,  
Gwenithdir, gweirdir a gwýdd,  
A galw 'dd wyf Arglwydd Dafydd*

*Never was there better land in the world,  
horse-fodder where Marcella's corn used to grow,  
land for growing wheat, land for growing grass and trees,  
and I call Lord Dafydd*

Powys was famous for its horses: Gerald of Wales and other writers praised the horses of the princes of Powys in the twelfth century.



Royal bestiary, England, c. 1200 – c. 1210, [Royal MS 12 C XIX](https://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2014/04/page/2/), f. 34r  
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## Types of Medieval Horses

Breeds as we understand them didn't *really* exist at this time. Medieval horses were classified not by their breed but by their purpose. As today, they were also measured in hands and not in inches (one hand would be about 4 inches, and there are three hands in a foot). An average horse in the Middle Ages measured between 13 and 14 hands high.

A wealthy person brought an average of five horses to war with them. Usually, two palfreys for travelling, a Destrier for battle, and a pair of chargers for escaping swiftly.

## The different types of horses:

### Amblers or Palfrey Horses

These were elegant-looking, mild-mannered horses with a smooth gait. They were highly prized by the upper classes, in particular, because they were lightweight and comfortable for long journeys. They were also used in battle, though, because they could move quickly and easily even on uneven ground. Palfrey horses received special care if they were particularly pretty.



By Anonymous - Dalimilova kronika, Public Domain,  
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Horses in a joust. By Master of the Codex Manesse - <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpg848/0099>, modified by BeatrixBelibaste, Public Domain  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1625673>

## War Horses

A Destrier, or the Great Horse, was the biggest, strongest, and rarest type of warhorse. They were also expensive, so only a well-off knight would ride a destrier. The destrier was specifically bred for mounted combat and for the traits that would make him successful as a charger.

Great horses were large (by the day's standards, about 15.2 hands high) and hot-blooded, bred specially to be fearless in battle. They had to be large and strong in order to carry fully-armoured knights – plus their saddle, tack, barding, and weapons. Sometimes, destriers even pulled wagons, participated in tournaments, and... attacked other horses by kicking and biting.

The destrier was admired for its capabilities in war. It was well trained, strongly built, and was required to be strong, fast and agile. The destrier was described to as the "great horse" because of its size and reputation but the average horse of the time was not large, so it might appear small to us.

The destrier was highly prized by knights and men-at-arms, but was actually not very common, and appears to have been most suited to the joust.

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From the *Historia Major* of en:Matthew Paris, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College Library, vol 2, p. 85. Scanned from *Four Gothic Kings*, Elizabeth Hallam, ed.) Public domain.



A 12<sup>th</sup> C depiction of a knight on horseback; this might be a courser. Folio 8 recto from the Aberdeen Bestiary. Detail. Public domain.

## Chargers or Courser Horses

The courser was a slightly smaller, faster, and lighter horse that was still used commonly in battle. They were less expensive than a destrier and were generally more useful as an all-around horse. Charger horses were fast-running hot-blooded horses used mainly by medieval messengers and racers.



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Shire horses ploughing Hampshire

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/46/Shire\\_horses\\_ploughing.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/46/Shire_horses_ploughing.jpg)

## Dray, Draft or Shire Horses

Dray horses were cold-blooded and docile. They were mostly used in commerce for hauling, turning mills, and ploughing. In Northern England, where they originated, they were known as Shire Horses. Some of them measured 18 hands in height!

Shire horses are still bred in Wales, notably in studs in Tywyn, Meirionethshire, and Crymch, Pembrokeshire.

## Rouncey Horses

Rounceys were all-around service horses, ideal for travellers and squires. Rounceys were usually available for hire, as not everyone could own a horse. A poor knight or man-at-arms would ride him for all purposes, war or peace.

## Jennet Horses

These small horses or ponies were bred for walking and were favoured by ladies and pilgrims. Sometimes, Jennets were used as light cavalry horses.



Lady hawking on a jennet. Master of the Codex Manesse, held at Heidelberg University Library. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

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## Pack and Cart Horses

Along with mules and donkeys, Pack and Cart horses were docile and easy to handle. They were perfect for hauling goods in commercial travels.



A hay cart. Simon Bening's illumination in the 'Golf Book of Hours' (c. 1530), The British Library, Add MS 24098, fol. 25r.

## Medieval jobs with Horses

Medieval **Stable Masters** and **Grooms** (or stable boy, hand, or lad) were responsible for all aspects of managing horses and stables. While stable masters were usually in charge or owned larger establishments, grooms worked for private residences.

The grooms were the ones that cleaned the stables, fed the horses, and exercised them. They were usually "on call", ready to prepare the horses when a family member wished to ride.



Royal bestiary, England, c. 1200 – c. 1210, Royal MS 12 C XIX, f. 34r  
<https://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2014/04/page/2/>

Adapted from websites:

<http://www.gutorglyn.net/gutoswales/amaeth-anifeiliad-meirch.php>  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/2i2ut5/who\\_bred\\_and\\_trained\\_medieval\\_european\\_warhorses/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/2i2ut5/who_bred_and_trained_medieval_european_warhorses/)

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