

# The medieval horse – an Introduction to terms used

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Information extracted from “The medieval horse and its equipment c.1150-c.1450” John Clark, 2004.

Most of the finds during the London excavations are of dumped horse equipment, or that which is easily lost, for example, horse shoes and curry combs feature predominantly, while items such as saddles or large harness were not found, it is not that they were not used more that they were not recovered.

Horse bones were also not often found during the London excavations as there had been a ban on dumping of horses within the city walls.

Terms used for the different horses during medieval times.

**Destrier** – horse which carried the knight in battle, expensive warhorses, predecessor of the 14<sup>th</sup> century “great horse”. Staturae honestae 'of noble size'.

**Stott or affer** – Pulled the harrow or took a sack of corn to the mill

**Coursers, corsours** – horse dealers

**Palfreys** -

**Rounceys** - a riding horse, cost approx 6 months to a years wages to purchase for a skilled London craftman.

**Hackneys** – everyday riding or road horse

**Cart, Carriage, Pack horses** – as the name suggests used to pull or carry different items.

Other terms using during the sale of horses

1. gradarii 'Amblers' – riding horses with that easy pace so odd to modern eyes (both legs on left move together, then both legs on right – as seen in modern standard breed pacers). Were a popular choice for the inexperienced rider seeking comfort on a long journey – the motion is rocking from side to side and easier to move with if you cannot rise to the trot.
2. 'horses which better suit esquires, moving more roughly but speedily' – refers to horses that trot.
3. young horses, 'colts not yet well used to the bridle'
4. summarii 'sumpters' or pack horses 'with stout and agile legs'
5. dextrarii 'destriers' – expensive warhorses, staturae honestae 'of noble size'
6. 'mares suitable for ploughs, sledges (trahis – Harrows?) and carts, were apparently shown with the cattle.

From the above descriptions we can see that colts and stallions were more highly prized than mares.

Horses of all sorts were common sight in the streets of medieval London, with a cavalcade or a noble attracting on-lookers in most cases. Locations near Westminster and nobles town houses in the Strand plus others meant that such events were not infrequent. Londoners actual ownership of horses was low, the city itself could be crossed by foot in 20 minutes, meaning few had regular need of a horse for personal transport, and could be hired (at considerable cost) if the need arose to make a longer journey.

The initial purchase of a horse was expensive, often equating to 6 months to a years wages for a skilled craftsman, but it was the up keep that was the real expense. It was not unheard of for stabling and feeding to cost more per day than a skilled craftsman could expect to earn in a day. In addition to this is of course, was shoeing.

Horse drawn carts appear to have been primarily used for transport of goods, and were taxed upon entry to town to go towards the upkeep of the roads. Carts could also be hired and came with horses for when needed by town's folk. Carts were often drawn by at least 2 horses even for light loads, it was not till latter (1614 – sketch by Dutch visitor and more common in illustrations of this period than earlier) that carts were only pulled by one horse, perhaps reflecting an increase in the horse's pulling power (possibly by breeding, or better welfare).

The size of the medieval horse

From London it would appear that most horses would be between 12 ½ and 15 hands. From measurements taken on the royal armouries of medieval horse armour, most would sit comfortably on a modern horse of between 15 and 16hh.

Henry VIII first defined horses in terms of handfulls, he refers to keeping broodmares of at least 13hh, stallions of at least 15hh, and required all men of any status to keep a certain number of saddle-horses of 14hh or more to be subject to military requisition if required. It would be expected to see similar horses being used as those used by the cavalry of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when cuirassiers and harquebusiers rode horses of 15 hands. Most portraits display horses with having the withers at a similar height to the shoulders of men.

Unfortunately you cannot assume a horses height from its shoe size or bit size, which added with the low numbers of bones being found during excavations, has meant a lot of assumptions on heights of horses have since been made on portraits.

Overall however, most medieval horses were in modern terms decidedly small.