

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 horses 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 still 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 very uncomfortable 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 farmers daughter had a small horse, which she 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 farmers 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 farmers 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 Emma. 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 – Relevo - was played in the semi-ruins of the local manor house. Emma 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'. Emma 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. Now Emma 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, Emma 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 as Emma and other assorted friends 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.