

For my week of practical experience, I was fortunate to work with James Coburn AWCF, based in Newmarket. As a keen racing fan, I was delighted to be placed with a farrier working at the home of British flat racing.

The forge was easy to find on the first morning, positioned right at the bottom of the legendary Warren Hill. We started early, meeting James and his apprentices before heading off to our first yard of the day.

The first yard was run by a dual-purpose trainer, who therefore still had plenty of horses in work despite the flat season coming to a close. The team immediately set to work; carefully examining the feet of the horses in the yard and identifying those that needed new shoes. The first thing that James taught me was how to pick up and assess a horse's foot in order to determine whether it needed re-shoeing. It was interesting to learn that racehorses are shod much more frequently than your average sports/hobby horse. Racehorses often wear through a new set of shoes every 2 weeks, especially if they have to travel to the gallops by road. This keeps James and his team busy! James shod some of the horses, explaining how to safely remove the old shoes and trim the feet, before fitting a new shoe and clenching up. We then made a list of horses that would need new shoes at the end of the week. James and I discussed the challenges of shoeing thoroughbreds. He touched upon how they typically have very flat feet with sunken heels and a long toe, placing more strain on the DDFT and navicular bone. This can predispose the horse to injury.

The afternoon was spent in the forge. Firstly James taught me about the importance of foot balance, how to assess the balance of a horse's foot and how poor foot balance is a major predisposing factor for lameness. He emphasised the importance of picking up the foot properly in order to see a true view of the foot. James also ran me through all of the different types of shoes available and their uses. I learned how the team prepare the factory-made shoes in the forge to ensure the nails are angled correctly. They also finish the heels, so they are less likely to catch when a horse works. We then lit the fires and set to work making shoes. This was a great experience, with James teaching me how to fashion a concave shoe from a section of pre-fullered steel. I grew to fully appreciate the craftsmanship that goes into making a shoe. In particular, I was struck by the attention to detail shown, soon becoming aware of the careful precision and expertise involved. This was far from my misunderstood pre-conceptions of a skill based purely on strength, hammer and tong. Forging the shoe also gave me a great insight into the importance of the positioning and angling of the nails when the shoe is attached.

I really enjoyed the opportunity to visit so many yards during my time with James. It was very interesting to see how they operated, as well as how they cared for their horses. One interesting comment James made was how he felt that recycled newspaper bedding was detrimental to the horses' feet, causing them to dry out. However, he acknowledged that some trainers prefer it due to it being less dusty, causing fewer issues with equine asthma.

During my week, we visited some studs to trim the feet of their mares and foals. James demonstrated how to trim and balance the feet, explaining how to correctly use the rasp and nippers. I learned how to visually assess the foot balance of foals when they are walked up. My eye started to become trained in looking for issues with foot placement and gait, whilst James explained what a farrier can do to improve foot balance through trimming and the effects this would have on conformation. I found the concept of being able to adjust a foal's foot balance and the long term

benefits this would have on conformation and predisposition to injury particularly interesting. This reinforced for me the importance of farrier involvement with foals from a young age.

Whilst working at the studs, it gave me a great insight into educating foals. Having their feet trimmed is a novel experience and I learned a lot from how James and his apprentices interacted with them. Clearly, a lot of patience is required. Throughout my week, I was very fortunate to work with a range of horses, from foals and yearling to brood mares. It was great to see the approach that James took with them, accommodating for their differing needs. However, foot balance was always considered as of utmost importance, regardless of age or use.

I was incredibly fortunate that James kindly organised a visit to Godophin's Dalham Hall stud. This was a brilliant experience, getting to meet their mighty roster of stallions. The highlights for me were seeing the great Dubawi, Cracksman and Golden Horn in the flesh. I was struck by how big and powerful they looked, all clearly loving their job and kept in tiptop shape. We were shown around the covering barns and learned about what happened during the season. I am hugely grateful for the opportunity to look around such an impressive outfit.

It was great to see some remedial cases during my week. These were a great example of the work farriers do alongside vets to achieve the best outcome for the horse, with importance placed on the two professions combining well together. One horse we saw had been diagnosed with proximal suspensory desmitis before undergoing bilateral neurectomy and fasciotomy. It also had concurrent hock osteoarthritis and sacro-iliac disease. James worked carefully with the vet to provide suitable shoes for the horse, in order to improve heel support. Given the nature of most of James' work with racehorses, this was also a great opportunity to see a horse hot shod. James explained the differences between the two methods and cases where one may be a better option. James was keen to stress the critical importance of the Vet-Farrier-Owner relationship.

On my last day, we travelled to a big national hunt yard to carry out some remedial work. One of the horses was suffering from seedy toe and had subsequently gone lame. A section of the dorsal wall had already been resected. James suspected that the lack of horn had caused the horse to become foot sore. We set about rebuilding the hoof wall with the use of a cast, once we established that infection was no longer present. James then applied a heart bar shoe to dissipate the weight and provide support around the entire foot. It was incredible to see the use of artificial materials to rebuild the hoof wall, to such a standard that you would not know that the hoof had been resected.

During my week I also became more informed about the different qualifications available to farriers and what is required to complete a diploma to practice as a farrier. As a vet student, I was previously unaware of this and left the forge with great respect for the level of training and hard work required.

I very much enjoyed my week with James and his apprentices. It was a thoroughly informative experience. It was great to get an insight into a profession that I will hopefully be working closely alongside in the future. I'm hugely grateful to both James for giving me a great experience and to the WCF for kindly supporting my week. I must also thank Lydia Brown for all of her efforts in organising the week.

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