

Worshipful Company of Farriers Equine Veterinary Studies Award 2021

I was awarded a placement with the Army School of Farriery at the Defence Animal Training Regiment. Throughout my placement I worked alongside farriers Alan Bould, Mark Neal and Nathan Healey-Potter. Because the regiment is a training facility, there was very much an environment of patience, encouragement, and continual learning.

Immediately, I was blown away by the facilities; from stunning arenas and cross-country courses to state-of-the-art technology which assessed the balance of a horse in different gaits. It was fascinating to assess the grounds through the perspective of a farrier. Farriery is very much linked to most aspects of husbandry; appropriate bedding ensured feet are kept clean and dry, to sward-length and feed impacting greatly on obesity and laminitis etc.

Alan helped me make a concave horseshoe, giving me a whole new appreciation for not only the physicality of the job but the skill required; needless to say, it was harder than it looked!

Whilst on placement, I was regularly around the farriery students who were there too. On the day of their shoeing exam, I found it incredibly beneficial to listen to Mark talk through common mistakes in shoeing and what to look for in the 'end product' to ensure the foot and shoe is symmetrical and balanced. For example, if you 'burn on' a shoe that is slightly uneven it will change the whole balance of the foot you've just trimmed, hence the importance to correct any mistakes early.



Figure i: Shoes I helped make in the forge.

Over the course of the week, I saw several horses with classic 'thoroughbred feet': flat feet with thin hoof wall. Some of these horses needed time to grow hoof wall back, however, they were foot sore from the pressure on their sole. Not only did these horses require remedial farriery to provide pain relief, left alone this conformation could predispose to navicular or tendon injury. One solution was to use plaster cast to form a false hoof wall; this alone helped remove sole pressure, thus, providing pain relief. Additionally, shoes could be nailed onto the cast (important since the hoof wall is too thin to safely put a nail through). The shoe then provided extra support. It was important to ensure that the pressure applied across the hoof was equal and didn't restrict the coronary band region. After watching a trot-up before and after the casting the immediate change to the horse's comfort levels was outstanding. It was important to consider owner management here. Whilst a relatively easy and cheap fix, the horse was required to be stabled in a very clean and dry environment for weeks; this may not always be possible among owners.



Figure ii: A Front foot with plaster cast. Note how clean and dry the surrounding stable is.

Mark also explained how horses with this type of foot conformation may require more careful management. Whilst much of the management can be done by farriers, such as the corrections mentioned as well as ensuring clenches are properly raised when removing shoes. We also discussed what can be done by owners and the careful communication required. Mark often recommends biotin supplementation and we weighed up the pros and cons of allowing these types of horses to be bare foot for short periods of time.

It was interesting to discuss how being a military farrier compares to a civilian one. I was really impressed by the close communication between the school of farriery, the yard staff and the veterinary department. One of the key points reiterated throughout the week was that from a farrier's perspective, they value a vet who opens up the discussion between all parties in regard to treatment. The army had the luxury of a team of dedicated grooms who were able to tend to the horses regularly throughout the day as well as being flexible with whether the horse was kept inside or out. I could appreciate how frustrating it could be for a farrier if a vet requested them to shoe in a certain way without a proper conversation. Fortunately, this wasn't the case here. The army vets tapped into the vast experience of the farriers and were always open to new suggestions. By filling the farriers in on the full picture of a horse, for example available radiographs or previous history, it made communication between departments more fluid and treatment more effective. I would love to carry forward this attitude of open discussions in my own work in the future.

One interesting case I saw was that of a horse who had been barefoot in the field. The bars of his feet had grown too long thus a lot of the weight bearing was now here instead of the hoof walls. Because of this, the hoof wall, no longer under the same pressure but still growing had begun to flare and crack. If uncorrected, the fissure can worsen by travelling proximally. Here, Nathan removed the flared wall and filed down the bars. Previously, I had been nervous about how much hoof wall can be removed at one time. Seeing this case made me realise that an area of hoof wall like this which is providing no weight bearing is only going to do damage if left.



Figure iiiii: Right hind with flaring and a fissure

Nathan gave me tutorials on the standard protocols farriers formulate in emergencies. It was helpful to discuss how he managed a laminitis case and the different aids he used, such as Styrofoam pads. We debated whether farriers should remove shoes in acutely painful cases and also the future of using foot casts in 'pre-laminitic' horses.

By the end of the week, I felt so much more comfortable handling horse's feet and more confident that I was doing it in a way that ensured both mine and the horse's safety. Handling young and green horses was valuable experience and helped me form better judgement as to when to sedate. It took some time to get my 'eye into' looking for solar and medio-lateral imbalances across the horse's hoof. Now that I know what to look for, I will keep practising this. I also learnt how material like dirt can really throw your eye's judgement off hence I will always be sure to examine well picked-out feet!

Before the week, I had been nervous about treating horses with abscesses but on the Friday, I was able to assist with a case. It was good to see how much of the sole you can remove when trying to dig out an abscess and how to use the equipment to do this safely. I was worried about what a vet could do if the abscess couldn't be dug out, so Mark discussed this with me but also how to look for signs of previous abscesses such as hoof wall abnormalities. This really felt like a 'day one' skill for a vet and I'm so pleased I got to see this. Moreover, seeing a horse's comfort levels improve so massively after the abscess had been treated really reminds you why we go into this job!

I would like to say a massive thank you to Nathan, Mark and Alan. They were so patient, willing to answer any questions and had such a huge wealth of knowledge. Furthermore, they went out of their way to be friendly and make the week really fun. Thank you to the University of Liverpool equine staff for facilitating this placement. Finally, thank you so much to Dr Lydia Brown and the Worshipful company of farriers for making this amazing placement possible.

