

Scottish Farm Horsemen's Society

Bob Powell



Abstract

This paper, presented as part of the 'DRAFT ANIMALS in the Past, Present and Future' 2021 virtual conference is an overview of the Scottish Horsemen's Society. Primarily associated with Scotland's principal arable areas, especially the north-east, this was a secretive, protectionist movement founded by the early 1800s. It was also associated with the cult of the Horseman's 'Word'.

Kurzfassung

Dieser Beitrag, der im Rahmen der virtuellen Konferenz 'DRAFT ANIMALS in the Past, Present and Future' 2021 präsentiert wurde, gibt einen Überblick über die Scottish Horsemen's Society. Es handelte sich dabei um eine geheime, protektionistische Bewegung, die Anfang des 19. Jahrhunderts gegründet wurde und in erster Linie mit den wichtigsten schottischen Ackerbauregionen, insbesondere dem Nordosten, verbunden war. Sie war auch mit dem Kult des "Horseman's Word" assoziiert.

Résumé

Cet article, présenté dans le cadre de la conférence virtuelle „Les animaux de trait, passé, présent et futur“ 'DRAFT ANIMALS in the Past, Present and Future' en 2021, donne un aperçu de la „Société cavalière écossaise“ („Scottish Horsemen's Society“). Initialement associée aux principales régions arables d'Écosse, notamment dans le nord-est du pays, il s'agissait d'un mouvement secret et protectionniste fondé au début des années 1800. Il était également associé au culte de la "parole du cavalier" (Horseman's Word).

Resumen

Esta ponencia, presentada en el marco de la conferencia virtual 'DRAFT ANIMALS in the Past, Present and Future' 2021, muestra una visión general de la Scottish Horsemen's Society. Establecida principalmente en las principales zonas de cultivo de Escocia, sobre todo del noreste, esta sociedad comenzó como un movimiento clandestino y proteccionista fundado a principios del siglo XIX. También es asociada con el culto del término „jinete“.





Figure 1 – Past member of the Scottish Horsemen's Society and holder of 'The Word', the late 'Jock' Hepburn of Aberlour, Banffshire in circa 1930

This paper, presented as part of the 'DRAFT ANIMALS in the Past, Present and Future' 2021 virtual conference is an overview of the Scottish Horsemen's Society. Primarily associated with Scotland's principal arable areas, especially the north-east, this was a secretive, protectionist movement founded by the early 1800s. It was also associated with the cult of the Horseman's 'Word'.

I, the author, was born in Ireland in 1953 and from the outset was obsessed with working horses. Both my maternal great-grandfather, who bred and showed Clydesdale horses, and my grandfather were horsemen, who my mother was convinced it was where my "in the blood" interest came from. As a young man, relocated to the English, East Anglian, Cambridgeshire "Fenlands", many of my friends and mentors were some of the best farm horsemen. It was by then that I had heard about the East Anglian farm horsemen's "magic" tradition of the toad's bone ritual that ostensibly gave the participant the means to have power over horses to ensure that they did their bidding. However, that is another subject.

By 1983 I had moved to Scotland for the first time, where my work as an agricultural curator gave me the opportunity to further develop my research on working horse culture. The material and non-material culture of Scotland was significantly different to that which I had been used to. One aspect, for which I was aware of, was that of the "secret" Scottish Horsemen's Society and the associated "Horseman's Word."

It was not until 1984 that I had a first-hand encounter with someone who had participated in the Horsemen's Society. I had gone to visit a retired farm horseman called John 'Jock' Hepburn (**Figure 1**), from Aberlour, Banffshire. We sat talking at Jock's fireplace, where the mantle had sitting on it, and favoured by Society farm horsemen, folk art cut out figures of harnessed "Clydesdale" horses.

After a good time talking, Jock turned to me and said: "Aye lad, ye've bin thro the chaff hoose door!" As I will explain, this was an acknowledgement from a past member of the Horsemen's Society that I had some knowledge about farm horses, a comment for which I still feel honoured many years later.

The Horsemen's Society came about through major agricultural change and improvement in Scotland from the 1700s. The latter was primarily driven from 1784 by the establishment of the Highland and Agricultural Society, later the Royal Highland & Agricultural Society. There were numerous aspects that required improvement. For example, in the north-eastern county of Aberdeenshire, until the 1790s the inefficient and cumbersome "Twa/Owsen" or twelve oxen plough predominated, requiring both a ploughman and an oxen "goatsman" to drive the beasts. Although published in 1877, the latter was well-illustrated (**Figure 2**) in William Alexander's 'Northern Rural Life in the Eighteenth Century'. Even where horses were used for agricultural work, they were invariably worked at length by two men as if they were oxen (**Figure 3**).

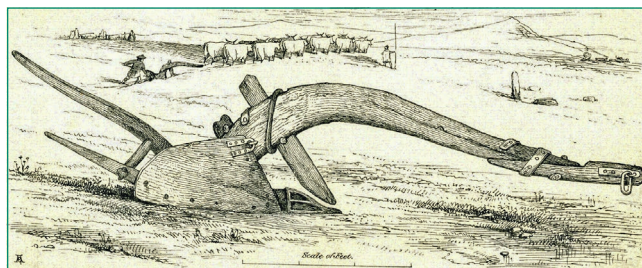


Figure 2 – The cumbersome old Scots 'Twa/Owsen' plough as illustrated in 1877 in William Alexander's 'Northern Rural Life in the Eighteenth Century'



Figure 3 – Driving horses at length as illustrated in a 1733 Scottish vignette from Hamilton's *'The Interest of Scotland Considered'*

Of the various factors affecting Scottish agricultural change that influenced the creation of the Horsemen's Society, two may be briefly considered. Firstly, and significantly in circa 1760 when Scots "plough-wright" James Small developed his improved plough with a true mouldboard that turned furrows. Initially Small's successful and influential plough was primarily wooden but by 1800 his all "iron plough" (**Figure 4**) was in production. With influences far beyond Scotland, Small's plough was a catalyst for one person simultaneously ploughing and driving a "pair", a team of horses (**Figure 5**) and subsequently the creation of the 'Farm Horseman' or "Plooman".

Secondly, by the end of the 1700s, land was increasingly being enclosed by landowners to create farms. Where there had been tenanted communities living in such as 'Townships' practising subsistence agriculture, they declined. Opportunities were consequently created for community dwellers to be formally employed as "Farm Servants." Thereby, as farms increasingly changed from oxen to horses, a new class of specialist farm servant, the 'Horseman' with different livestock management and working skills was created and sought. As such there was a new dawn, for the experienced horsemen realised that possessing these specialist skills and combining as a "Brotherhood" would give them a level of negotiation power with employers and selected approval over prospective horsemen.

However the brotherhood movement came about, and who the initial, unknown farm servant instigators were,

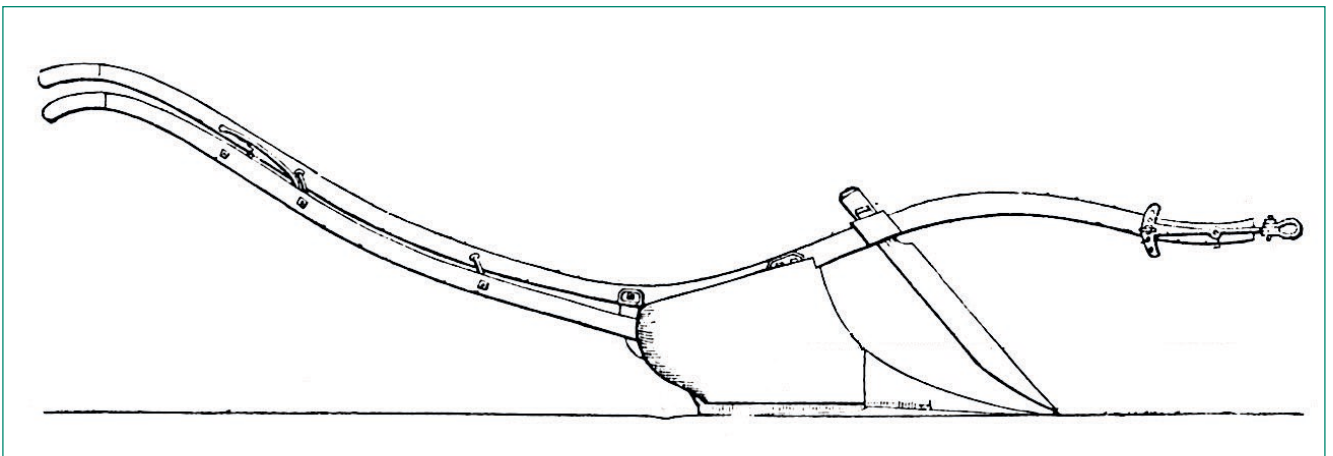


Figure 4 – James Small's "Iron Plough" from Henry Stephen's *'Book of the Farm'*, 1842

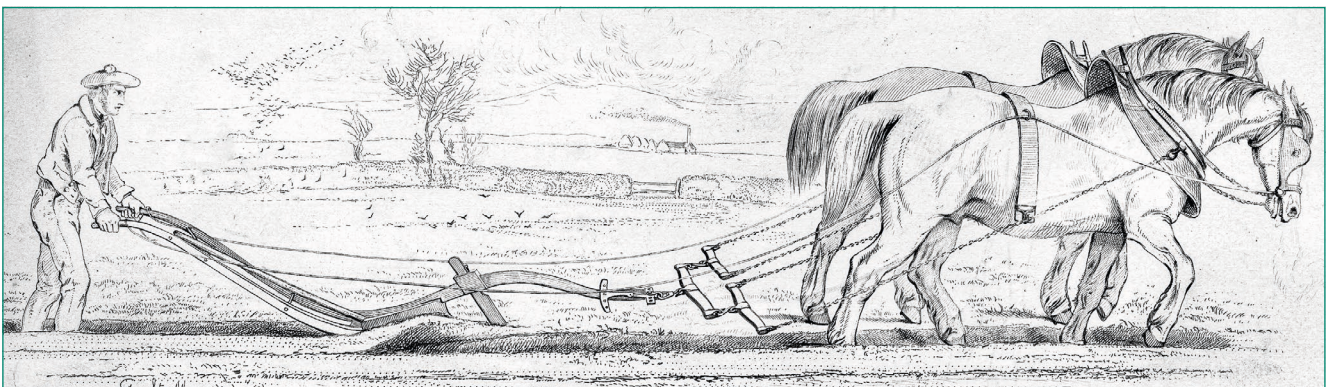


Figure 5 – From the 1842, first edition of Henry Stephens' *'Book of the Farm'*, James Small's "Iron Plough" guided by one "plooman" driving his own "pair" of horses



the culmination of this realisation was to look towards the models created by the established, once Medieval trades organisations, the "Worshipful Companies". The oldest of these being the Worshipful Company of Masons who oversaw their traditions, skills, training, and standards and from whom "The Masons" originated. These protective organizations by their nature were secretive but to the benefit of their accepted members and the people they served through the practice of their trade. Consequently, what the farm servant horsemen did first was adopt and adapt the brotherhood template developed by 'The the 'Masons', creating a protectionist, self-regulating 'closed shop'. It was tantamount to a trade union, becoming known as the 'Horsemen's Society'. However, secondly, they also embraced and adapted the deemed "secret" Masonic ritual practices as part of membership initiation which added to the mysteries, the "magic" of their trade.

It appears that by the early to mid-1800s that, what some consider a cult, the Horsemen's Society was well-established in Scotland particularly from the Glasgow-Edinburgh "central belt", up along the east-coast to Aberdeenshire, and extending further west towards Moray and Nairn. As stated, this coincided with the principal arable areas, where not only were the greatest number of horsemen employed, improved agricultural horses kept but where, on many farms, the "f'eed" (hired) six-month term at a time hired, unmarried and younger farm horsemen lived together in communal "bothies". A bothy was often a single room with a fireplace, attached to a farm building such as a stable, furnished with beds, a table, chairs and minimal cooking utensils, crockery, and cutlery. It engendered an environment where horse related culture could be shared, taught, and learned. It was from these bothies that the senior horsemen, either on the farm or in the local community, would select youths, known as "loons" in some areas, as prospective candidates to join the Society and take their first steps to becoming acknowledged by their peers as worthy of being considered a horseman.

For many "loons" as aspirational or prospective horsemen there was a hierarchy on the farms. The ultimate ambition would be the position of "First Horseman", with often the best team or "pair" of horses, and har-

ness, on the farm. Depending on the size of the farm, for which some calculated one pair of horses for every 50 acres, there could be "Second", "Third", or more horsemen. However, for a youth, leaving school at the age of fourteen (Scotland from 1901), his initial position would probably be as an "Orra Loon", an odd or individual lad with an old single horse often undertaking tasks around the farm steading. Depending on his personal history, the lad may have had existing experience with, for example, his father, but his "orra loon" position was one for hands on learning, whilst being assessed by the established horsemen on his farm or in his community.

The progress from "Orra Loon" through, for example, "Third" to "First" horseman would be familiar to any aspirational horseman. In fact, the bothy accommodation system was a renowned source for "bothy ballads", songs often composed by the horsemen that reflected their lives as farm servants, both good and bad. One well known ballad was called "A Pair of Nicky Tams". The latter is the name given to the buckled straps that many of the horsemen wore around their trouser legs below the knees to keep the trouser leg bottoms out of the mud. Some horsemen even went to the extent of having buckles that matched those on their horses' harness.

In "A Pair of Nicky Tams", the ballad reflects on a loon's progress, from being hired as a Third man to becoming a member of the Horsemen's Society for which part of the process included the ritual to receive the Horseman's Word. Of course, it was possible for loons to join the Horsemen's Society if they were deemed good enough by their peers. However, many were at least sixteen before having the opportunity, which if having left school at fourteen would have given them two years' experience and time to be assessed as being worthy. The key aspect was that whether as a loon or a young lower rank horseman, they had a lot to learn before they could progress. However, that knowledge and assistance would not be forthcoming from the senior Horsemen's Society members until the horseman in need had been accepted and inducted into the Society. As stated before, it was a form of trade protection to ensure that the skills were only passed to those who needed to know.



Figure 6 – A three pair farm: The second person from the right is probably the farm's "grieve" or foreman; next, the 'First Horseman' with the better horses and harness; then the 'Second' horseman and finally a young man, lower in the ranks as 'Third' horseman who may have aspired to, one day, being hired as a 'First' man

*First I got on for bailie loon (First I was hired as the farm loon)
 Syne I got on for third (Then I was hired as Third horseman)
 And syne of course I had to get (And then of course I had to get)
 The Horseman's grippin' Word (The Horseman's gripping Word)
 A loaf of breid to be ma' piece (A loaf of bread to be my food)
 A bottle for drinkin' drams (A bottle of whisky for sharing
 "drams"/drinks)
 Ye couldna get thru' the caffhoose door (However, you
 cannot pass through the chaff house door)
 Without your Nicky Tams (Without your Nicky Tams)*

The following is a version of the initiation ceremony or ritual that the aspirational member of the Horsemen's Society may have undergone. Initially the youth, who would have been partially aware of what he would have to do, may have been notified of his senior peer's intentions and invitation by, if he lived in a bothy, by a horse's hair being left in an envelope under his pillow. If his response to his fellow horsemen was deemed positive, he would be both tutored and guided by a senior Horseman.



Figure 7 – A young horseman with his pair stood in front of arched cart sheds, above which is a loft, a "Hall", and where the Horsemen's Society may have held meetings

Firstly, to enter the "Horsemen's Hall" to undergo the ceremony and receive the Horseman's Word, he would have to pass through the "Chaff Hoose Door". The latter meant passing through the door to the chaff (*Chaff ~ chopped hay or straw for feed*) house, a hay loft or other suitable hall-like space on a farm where the horsemen could meet to perform the ceremony. Consequently, the initiate would be instructed to be present at such as the chaff house or hay loft closed door at midnight and bring whisky and bread with him. There, outside, met by a senior Horseman, firstly he would be blindfolded and secondly, he would have to answer questions for which he would have been instructed.

For example:

Q: "Wha telt ye to come?"

A: "The Devil."

Q: "Which way did ye come?"

A: "By the hooks and crooks of the road."

Q: "By which licht did ye come?"

A: "By the stars and licht of the moon."

Q: "Where were ye made a Horseman?"

A: "In a Horseman's Hall where the sun never shone, the wind never blew, the cock never crew. And the feet of a maiden never trod."

Such questions answered he would be led into the "Horseman's Hall"



Figure 8 – Kneeling in front of the "alter" made from a grain measuring "bushel" upended over a sack of oats, while the lead senior horseman holds the Devil's hoof

Inside the Hall, still blind folded, now stripped to the waist and unaware of who or what was there, the young initiate, sometimes already plied with whisky, was often nervous if not scared. Not that he could see it, but the initiate would be made to kneel before an altar, often made by a grain bushel measure upended over a sack of oats. From this point he would be made to both repeat and swear the Horsemen's "Oath" that would allow him to receive "The Word" which in turn would allow him to receive the knowledge, skills, and powers of horsemanship.

The following is extracted from 'The Oath':

"I of my own free will and accord solemnly vow and swear before God and all these witnesses that I will heal, conceal and never reveal any part of the true horsemanship which I am about to receive at this time...

... and if I fail to keep these promises may my flesh be torn to pieces with a wild horse and my heart cut through with a horseman's knife and my bones buried on the sands of the seashore where the tide ebbs and flows every twenty-four hours so that there may be no remembrance of me amongst lawful brethren so help me God to keep these promises. AMEN."

Finally, still blindfolded, the maybe slightly inebriated initiate would have to confirm his allegiance to the Brotherhood of the Horsemen by shaking hands with the "Auld Chiel", the Devil. The Devil was, as shown in **Figure 9**, a pole covered with hide and a sewn-on hoof, although Jock Hepburn told me that they used to get a calf's leg with a real cloven hoof from the slaughterhouse! This really would have frightened many a God-fearing initiate and confirmed the seriousness of what he was undertaking. Nearing the end of the ceremony, the initiate would then be permitted to receive 'The Word', the never to be spoken, written, or otherwise revealed key and bond that joined the brotherhood of the Horsemen together.

Therefore, what is The Word? Yes, I know. It is out there to be found but never reveal! Without revealing it, the "Word" describes the mutual bond and empathy between man and horse.

This in essence was the end of the ceremony, after which the newly confirmed Horseman would share his

1 Printed Leaflet, National Museum of Scotland.





Figures 9 and 10 – A horsehide covered pole with a created sewn on Devil's hoof for the initiate to shake hands with the "Auld Chiel". This pole came from Aberdeenshire and is in the collection of the Highland Folk Museum, Newtonmore, Inverness-shire

whisky and bread with his fellow brethren. It was not though the end of the allegiance, for from that point forward, the new horseman was free to request assistance from his peers on issues such as training, working, or veterinary care for his horses.

In common myth or perception, being a member of the Horsemen's Society and having received 'The Word'



Figure 11 – Getting a horse to stand on a half barrel was a common Horsemen's Society trick

was said to give the horseman power over horses. Some people claimed women too. To uninitiated outsiders it was often perceived as "magic". Commonly this was perpetuated by the horsemen doing tricks with their horses of which the most common was to have a horse or horses standing with their forefeet on the top of an upturned half barrel. It was not magic but a demonstration of trust between man and horse.

Away from the ritual and perceptions of the Society, there were benefits from being a member of the "Brotherhood." Firstly, knowing that you were approved by your peers and would have their support. Support that would include unity and strength in numbers for negotiations. Secondly, enjoying camaraderie that engendered pride in being a "Horseman", which for some top horsemen it gave them enhanced community respect and status. As implied for younger horsemen, access to mentoring and training, thereby gaining a peer lead informal qualification and a stepping-stone to improved employment positions. Finally, overall membership was intended to encourage best practice and maintain standards including through tradition and competition for horse and harness care

After over 100 year's existence, the second decade of the 20th century heralded the death knell for both the farm horse and the 'Horsemen's Society'. Firstly, there was the 1914-1918 First World War. It was a watershed. Previously the culture associated with both the horsemen and horses, the latter including the establishment of the horse breeds societies, had peaked. However, as both men and horses either went to War or were affected by it, change was inevitable. The men who went to war, came back with different attitudes to work and tradition. The latter became significantly less important. With emergency food cultivation and military needs, Scottish agricultural horse numbers slightly increased during the War but, thereafter, horse numbers dramatically decreased.

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Figure 12 – The onset of tractor mechanisation in 1915 (Image published in the Scottish Farmer, exact date unknown)

Mechanization was a further major reason for the demise of both horses and the 'Horsemen's Society'. Tractors such as the International "Mogul" were introduced by 1915. In December 1917, the 'Fordson' was brought into production and by April 1918, six thousand had been supplied to Britain. During the War on the farms, the older resident horsemen were mainly averse to tractors. This gave women a role in driving them through such as the Women's Land Army. Coming back from the War, the

younger men especially were aware of the possibilities of mechanisation. Their inclination was more to crank a tractor engine rather than getting up early to feed, groom and harness a team of horses. There was no need for the Horsemen's Society.

A further reason for the Horsemen's Society's decline was an alternative, namely "The Scottish Farm Servants Union". Founded in 1887 the 'Union' had some similar aims to the 'Society' but as a formal Scottish national organization it was inclusive for all farm workers. By 1913 the Union had over 6,000 members and with united strength to negotiate for pay, working conditions and holidays the Horsemen's Society became increasingly irrelevant.

By the 1920s and onwards the changes were dramatic. There was a post-War agricultural depression. Wages fell and, if not leaving the land, farm workers were more concerned with their work conditions than tradition. In photos horsemen's clothing became more relaxed, their stance less depicting pride and the horses' harness less cared for. For committed horse breeders, many moved away from smaller working horses that suited the farm work in hand, to breeding larger animals to breed society standards whose conformation was more suited for show and making money.



Figure 13 – The badge of the Scottish Farm Servants Union

In simplistic terms such was the accelerating demise of both the Horsemen's Society and working farm horses. And the final nail in the coffin? ... the 1946 'Freed from Bondage' introduction of the successful Ferguson TE-20 tractor that was compared to the detriment of remaining Scottish farm horses in economic, practical and farm worker terms. There really was little argument for final change!

Related Literature

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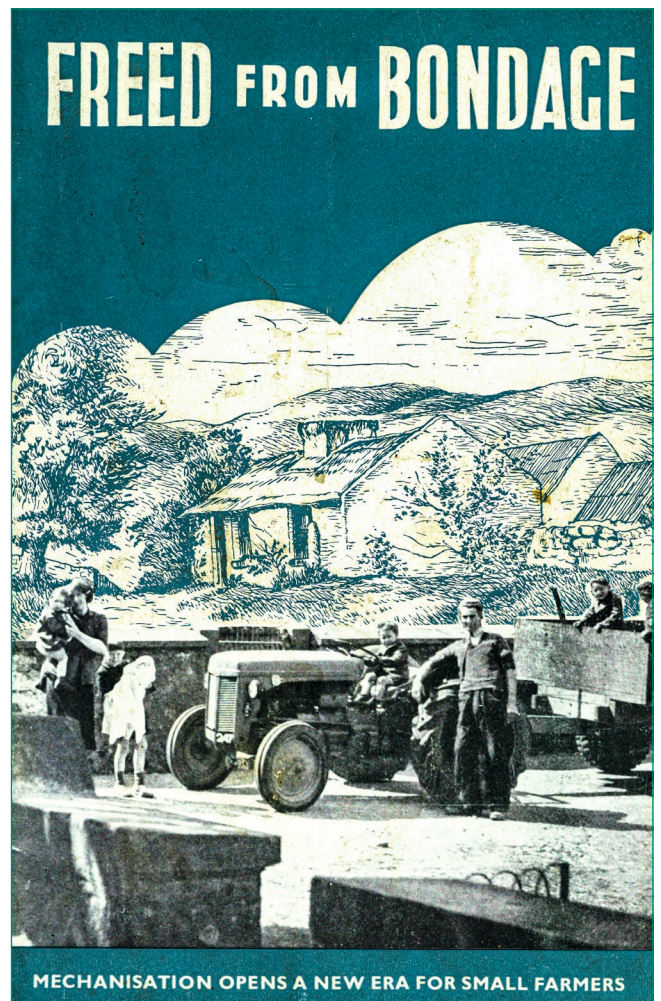


Figure 14 – The introduction in 1946 of the "Little Grey" Ferguson "TE" Tractor did more for the demise of the farm horse than possibly any other factor

- B. Powell, The Farm Servant, in: A. Fenton/K. Veitch (eds.), Scottish Life and Society, A Compendium of Scottish Ethnology 2 Farming and the Land (Edinburgh 2011), 446-476.
- E. Taylor, Hooves Harness Hardwork, Ploughmen of Yesteryear (Finavon 1997).

List of Figures

Title (In this rare photograph probably from the north-east of Scotland, some Scottish farm horsemen having received the "Horsemen's Word", demonstrated their newly granted "power" by training their horses to do tricks. Commonly this was to get their horses to stand with their fore feet on a half barrel) – Bob Powell Archive.

Figure 1-14 – B. Powell.



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