

SUFFOLK PUNCH HORSES – THE FACTS

A short history

Historically, the Suffolk horse is the oldest breed of working horse in the world and, next to the Thoroughbred, has the oldest written pedigree.

The Suffolk Horse Society was founded in 1877 to maintain the stud book. Every horse in the stud book goes back in an unbroken male line to a horse foaled in 1768.

The Colony Stud of Suffolk Punch horses was established at Hollesley Bay in Suffolk in the 1920s, but Suffolks have been bred on the farm there, under different owners, for 250 years.

With the advent of modern farming practices the breed was threatened with extinction, reaching its lowest ebb in the 1960s. At that point it was only through the efforts of a few dedicated individuals that the Suffolk horse survived. Fortunately, they were supported by the Suffolk Horse Society who maintained a stud book throughout, and by the efforts of the Hollesley Bay Colony and others; they played a vital part by providing a facility where mare owners could reliably send their mares to be covered, and future stallions bred to maintain the all-important diversity of blood lines.

More recent developments

In the last ten years there has been renewed interest in the breed, and there are more Suffolks today than at any time since 1966. Quite apart from the work at Hollesley Bay (now run by the Suffolk Punch Trust, a private charity), and thanks to the work of many individual farmers and other enthusiasts over the last twenty years or so, Suffolk Punches today are kept throughout the UK - and particularly in East Anglia of course, and the West Country. In some cases they are still kept as working animals - Roger Clark has used them on his farm at Thorington Street for nearly forty years, and members of the British Horse Loggers Association still use them in woodlands. Otherwise, they appear regularly at many of the Agricultural Shows that take place throughout the summer, and are frequently used for ploughing demonstrations. In 2005, the Suffolk Horse Society ploughing match at Bucklesham had ten pairs of horses ploughing.

Saving the breed

The greatest contribution towards saving and maintaining the breed is made by the people who are prepared to keep stallions and to stand them at stud. This is difficult and specialised work and requires a great deal of experience. Hollesley Bay do so of course, but so do many other private individuals, people like Philip Morley at Milden, Sue Wager at Heybridge, the Syretts in Norfolk, the Cracknells at Bretenham, Harry Gotts in Cornwall, the Flemings at Eyke, Randy Hiscock in Dorset, Mike Clarke at Kidderminster, and others.

These are dedicated individuals who love the breed and who for years have fought for it and devoted their time to it, and who have financed their efforts out of their own pockets.

It must be extremely offensive to such people to witness the self-publicising events set up by the Bunting family. They are relative newcomers to the breed, with no previous equine experience, yet they are now promoting themselves throughout the county - at the Agricultural shows, and even in the car park of ASDA supermarket - as saviours of the Suffolk Punch. A great many people have signed petitions in support of their

proposed development in the belief that by doing so they are supporting the survival of the breed; in many instances the implication has been that without this development the Suffolk Punch will find it very hard to survive. This is, thankfully, simply not so: and it is a misrepresentation which may even undermine the real work done by the Suffolk Punch Trust and others. It has created real confusion in the minds of the public about who the true guardians of the breed are, and where they should direct their desire to show interest and support.

In Truth

It is true of course that any publicity for the breed is a good thing, and it is good for the public to be made more aware of the wonderful nature and magnificence of these horses, and to support their survival. It would be extremely difficult for any charitable body to criticise the actions of any individual who claims to be working for the advancement of their cause.

Bunting & Sons

The public should also be aware, however, that for Bunting and Sons the cause of the Suffolk Punch is in truth just another piece in the jigsaw that forms their great campaign to gain planning permission for the Horkesley Park project - a retail and restaurant centre with only a modest country park element attached. The relentless publicity campaign throughout last summer and up to now, and the prominence of the Suffolks in that campaign, make it abundantly clear that Bunting and Sons are pinning a lot of hopes on these beautiful gentle creatures. Yet the use of these impressive animals and the emotions that they arouse in those who are made aware of the fact that they are endangered, may in fact be no more than a marketing ploy to gain acceptance for a controversial development.

Meanwhile, the many dedicated individuals who have worked so long for the breed, and others who care deeply about the survival of the Suffolk Punch, are keeping their heads down as they labour on, watching these antics with some amusement and not a little frustration.

The Suffolk Punch Trust at Hollesley Bay

The Hollesley Bay Centre, probably the finest stud of Suffolk horses in the world, is a wonderful and uplifting place to visit, and urgently in need of funds and support. They of course do not have the considerable resources that the Buntings have at their disposal, and could never contemplate an advertising campaign on such a scale. Surely if Bunting and Sons genuinely wanted to help the breed to survive they should support the work done by the Suffolk Punch Trust at Hollesley Bay, instead of going into competition with them for publicity and funds? Even a proportion of the sums that Buntings' have spent on advertising could make a significant contribution and would surely prove a far more constructive way of helping the breed.

The Suffolk Punch Trust is an organisation with many years of expertise, dedication and hard work behind it. The Trust has no commercial interests and is a charity exclusively dedicated to securing the survival of this magnificent heavy horse.

Anyone who is genuinely interested in the survival of the breed could support their worthwhile work by contacting them at: **www.suffolkpunchtrust.org** or by telephoning **01473 612639**

The Stour Valley Action Group

The organisation was formed in 2001 in response to Bunting & Sons planning application to build the 'Horkesley Park' Heritage & Conservation Centre at Great Horkesley. The membership of SVAG is made up from the twelve surrounding villages and many others who feel strongly that a commercial enterprise built on the edge of an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' would do irreparable damage to the landscape and the communities within it.

SVAG's view is that the Bunting family are merely using the green vision of a country park and the preservation of the Suffolk Punch, as a way of gaining planning permission to build a large restaurant and retail centre in the heart of the Stour Valley within the Dedham Vale.

For more information, please visit the website:
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