

DEFINING THE ENGLISH “HACKNEY:” TYPE AND TERMINOLOGY

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Abstract

References in texts from England, written in English, in Latin, and in Anglo-Norman French, allow us to identify some features of the horse known to the English as a hackney. The earliest references are all to hired horses, but already by 1300, we find hackneys in private ownership. They were small, hardy, and easy riding, preferred for long journeys. They were ridden by the poor, by the elderly and the sick, by merchants, by pilgrims, by archers on their way to war, and by knights travelling incognito. In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century stable accounts, they were distinguished from “horses” and listed separately.

Keywords

hackneys; mares; packhorses; ambling; palfreys; rounceys; transport; horse trade; medieval England

I. The problem of the hackney

Hackney, or Saddle Horses, are such as man useth to ride upon for the ease of his Body, and hastiness of Travel, and Journeys.

Randle Holme, 1688¹

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¹ Randle Holme, *An Accademie of Armory or A Store House of Armory & Blazon Containing The severall variety of Created Beings, and how born in Coats of Arms...* (Chester: Printed for the Author, 1688), 150.

In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the company of pilgrims who had left Southwark together are joined at Boughton under Blean, five miles from Canterbury, by two riders who had ridden fast to catch up with them – a Canon and his yeoman or servant. Both their horses are “sweated” by the hard riding and “could scarcely go.” The Canon's own horse is described as a dappled-grey “hackney.”

His hakeney, that was al pomely grys,
So swatte that it wonder was to see;
It seemed as if he had picked miles three.
The horse that his yeman rood upon
So swatte that unnethe myghte it gon.²

But what was a “hackney” to the poet and his readers? And was it distinguishable from the generic “horse” that the Canon's servant rode?

Sadly, the illustrator who provided the well-known depictions of the Canterbury pilgrims in the Ellesmere manuscript of the *Tales* did not show the Canon on his hackney – the Canon himself had ridden off in high dudgeon when his yeoman began to reveal the truth behind the Canon's fraudulent experiments in alchemy, leaving the servant the joint honours of a *Tale* and a portrait by the Ellesmere artist. The horse shown is clearly, from the position of its legs, not an “ambler” – and that, as we shall see, may suggest it is *not* a “hackney!”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a “hackney” as follows:

A horse used for general-purpose riding. In later use: spec. a horse of a medium-sized breed characterized by strength, stamina, and a high-stepping trotting action, now frequently shown competitively, esp. in harness events; such horses are considered collectively as a breed.³

We can dismiss the “high-stepping trotting action” and the hackney's use

² Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue,” *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer: Vol. 4: The Canterbury Tales: Text*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 527, lines 559-63.

³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “hackney, n. and adj.,” *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, March 2023) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/83066> (accessed April 4, 2023).

“in harness events” which refer to the modern *breed* of hackney horse first given that name with the establishment of the Hackney Horse Society in Norwich in 1883, which has no connection in descent or function with the medieval hackney.⁴

The *OED* provides citations of the use of the word “hackney” of horses from 1299 to 2009, although these short quotations do little to confirm the dictionary’s own definition or suggest how the hackney might be distinguished from other riding horses. The dictionary also cites a second meaning, described as “now *historical* and *rare*,” “A horse used for hire” – with the earliest supporting quotation only from c. 1387. This seems to imply a chronological development in the meaning of the word, from the general riding horse to more specifically a hired horse. As we shall see, this is not borne out when we study a wider range of occurrences of the word in medieval sources – and not only in English (*bakeneye* and various spellings), but in other languages in use in medieval England, in Latin (*bakeneius*) and Anglo-Norman French (*bakenei*, becoming later continental French *baquenée*).

The first problem with the hackney is of course the *origin* of the word. Why was the horse apparently called after a small Middlesex village, now a Greater London borough, on the banks of the river Lea? There is little doubt that the two words are the same. The *OED* suggests:

Probably < the name of Hackney, formerly a village in Middlesex (now a borough in London; 1198 as Hakeneia, 1236 as Hakeneye), probably with reference to supply of horses from the surrounding meadows.⁵

And it then cites notes on the subject by the pre-eminent Victorian philologist W. W. Skeat in *Notes & Queries*.⁶ Yet there seems to be no independent evidence to support the contention that Hackney was involved in the raising of, supply of, or trade in horses (although Hackney Marshes and the other Lea Valley marshes would certainly provide excellent summer pastures for putting horses into good condition). In

⁴ Hackney Horse Society, “About Us,” <https://hackney-horse.org.uk/about-us/> (accessed April 4, 2023).

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “hackney.”

⁶ W. W. Skeat, “Hackney,” *Notes & Queries* (10th series) 8 (1907): 465; 9 (1908): 52, 92.

the absence of such evidence, the connection of the hackney horse to the place Hackney remains hypothetical.

II. Dictionary definitions: hackneys and *iumenta*

So what does the word *mean* in each of the languages spoken and written in medieval England? We can consult the authoritative modern dictionaries devoted to those languages:

- *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*: **hakeneius**: small horse for riding or for carriage of goods.⁷
- *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*: **hakenei**: hackney, small saddle-horse.⁸
- *Middle English Dictionary*: **hakenei**: A small saddle-horse, often one let for hire; a hackney horse.⁹

And we can compare (and contrast) medieval French:

- *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*: **haquenée**: Petit cheval ou jument facile à monter, docile et allant ordinairement l'amble, gén. réservé aux dames.¹⁰

[Small horse or mare, easy to ride, docile and usually an ambler, generally reserved for ladies.]

The earliest citations in the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* are from the

⁷ *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, ed. R. K. Ashdowne, D. R. Howlett and R. E. Latham (Oxford: British Academy, 2018), s.v. “hakeneius.” <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/hakeneius> (accessed April 5, 2023).

⁸ *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, ed. William Rothwell, Stuart Gregory et al. (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2005-) s.v. “hakenei.” <https://anglo-norman.net/entry/hakenei> (accessed April 5, 2023).

⁹ *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath, Sherman H. Kuhn et al. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001), s.v. “hakenei.” https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary?utf8=%E2%9C%93&search_field=hnf&q=hakenei (accessed April 5, 2023).

¹⁰ *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*, version 2020 (DMF 2020), (ATILF-CNRS & Université de Lorraine), s.v. “haquenée.” www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/haquenée (accessed April 6, 2023).

late fourteenth century – long after the word had come into use in England.¹¹ There can be little doubt that the word entered French from English, presumably via Anglo-Norman French – although, as we shall see, clerks in the royal household of the English king were already using the Latin word “*bakeneius*” in records of the hiring of local horses in France in the 1280s.

The fuller description provided by the French dictionary should be considered to apply to these later French horses, usually an ambler, generally reserved for the use of ladies, and the reference to mares.¹² And we note that the noun is *feminine* in gender. This has led, alongside other evidence, to suggestions that *baquenées* (and perhaps by extension English hackneys) were usually mares.¹³

In his discussion of this topic, Philippe Contamine cited the records of the export to France of English horses through the port of Sandwich, detailed in the customs records of that port for 1439-40. The “port” of Sandwich, for customs purposes, comprised most of the Kent coast, including Dover, and some of these records might relate to the latter harbour. Citing Marie-Rose Thielemans’ earlier study of political and economic relations between England and Burgundy Contamine concludes:

Les comptes du port de Sandwic signalent par exemples
l’envoi vers le continent, en direction de Calais et des Pays-
Bas, entre le 29 septembre 1439 et le 28 septembre 1440,
de mille quatre-vingt-neuf juments, plus seulement sept

¹¹ The French spelling *baquenée* reflected the pronunciation of the Anglo-Norman word usually spelt *bakenei*. Thereafter the “-ée” ending would encourage the French belief that the word was *feminine* and thus referred to a female horse.

¹² As we shall see, “réservé aux dames” does *not* apply to the contemporary English hackney.

¹³ Philippe Contamine, “Le cheval ‘noble’ aux XIVE-XVe siècles: une approche européenne,” *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 152e année, N. 4 (2008): 1695-1726 at pp. 1722-23; Camille Vo Van Qui, “Good Mothers or Lascivious Females? The Perception of Mares in the Context of Equine Husbandry and Breeding in Medieval France (1200-1500),” *Cheiron* 3.2 (2023): 45–66.

chevaux.¹⁴

[The accounts of the port of Sandwich indicate, for example, the export to the continent, to Calais and the Netherlands, between 29 September 1439 and 28 September 1440, of one thousand and eighty-nine mares, and only seven horses.]

These 1,089 “*juments*” (i.e. “mares”) were, he considered, none other than examples of the *baquenées* known to have been brought from England, here distinguished from the seven male “horses” in the same accounts.

Modern readers, and perhaps Contamine himself, may be biased in their interpretations by the use of the modern French word “*juments*” – a feminine noun meaning “mares.” The original Sandwich port records are, of course, in medieval Latin, where the word is (at least, probably, as we shall see) “*jumentum*” or “*iumentum*,” plural “*jumenta/iumenta*,” a neuter noun of debatable meaning.

Fortunately, a transcript of those same records from Sandwich in 1439-40 is now available online.¹⁵

Medieval Latin “*iumentum*” like “hackney” itself, is a word whose meaning can only be understood in context. In classical Latin, a *iumentum* was a draught-animal – not always a horse, but perhaps an ox, a mule or an ass – or a beast of burden. The word is neuter and bears no connotation of sex.¹⁶ However, in medieval Latin and related later languages, the application of the word seems to have changed, and it is

¹⁴ Contamine, “Le cheval ‘noble’,” 1722, citing Marie-Rose Thielemans, *Bourgogne et Angleterre: Relations politiques et économiques entre les Pays-Bas bourguignons et l’Angleterre, 1435-1467* (Bruxelles: Presses Universitaires de Bruxelles, 1966), 219.

¹⁵ Angelo Nicolini, *Sandwich Port Book for 1439-40: The National Archives, Exchequer, E122/127/18: Portus Sandewici Custuma (18-19 Henry VI)* (2006). https://www.academia.edu/11569958/Sandwich_Port_Book_for_1439_40_2006_ (accessed April 20, 2023). See also Angelo Nicolini, *Navi liguri in Inghilterra nel Quattrocento. Il registro doganale di Sandwich per il 1439-40*, Collana storica dell’oltremare ligure VII (Bordighera: Istituto internazionale di studi liguri, 2006), 91-251.

¹⁶ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, ed., *A Latin Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), s.v. “*iumentum*.” <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/iumentum> (accessed April 21, 2023).

often clearly applied to mares in particular.

Perhaps this usage began because mares were favoured as draught animals – we note, for example, William Fitzstephen’s famous account of London’s Smithfield market in the 1170s, where there stand mares (*equae*) “suitable for ploughs, sledges and carts.”¹⁷ Some, Fitzstephen tells us, are pregnant, others have their foals alongside them. In his study of the use of horses in medieval agriculture, John Langdon identified *jumenta* as “usually mares serving as combination breeding-working stock” and cites a record from a Sussex estate in 1366-7, where the *jumenta* had had no foals during the year because of the “*magnum laborem*.”¹⁸

Thus the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* [DMLBS] defines *jumentum* in three distinct ways: “domestic draught animal or beast of burden” (perhaps a meaning favoured by medieval writers who knew their classical sources), “horse (as dist. from cattle and sheep),” and “(spec.) mare” – with quotations to illustrate each meaning.¹⁹ However, the older dictionary of medieval Latin familiarly known as “Du Cange” prefers the single meaning “mare,” citing, from records concerning the “*Custodes Equicii Regis*” (keepers of the royal stud), “*Custodia equorum, jumentorum, pullanorum et Equicii*” and “*equos, equas, et pullanos de Equitio Dom. Reg.*” – in which “*jumenta*” and “*equae*” are clearly equivalents and synonyms.²⁰

Some medieval clerks seem to have been aware of the inherent ambiguity, and invented an alternative obviously feminine form of the word: “*jumenta*” (singular) and “*jumentaē*” (plural), as in a quotation cited from about 1300: “*de iiij pullanis provenientibus de exitu dictarum jumentarum*

¹⁷ “*Stant ibi aptae aratris, trabis, et bigis equae; quarundam ventres foetibus protument; alias editi foetus obeunt, pulli lasciviores, sequela inseparabilis.*” James Craigie Robertson, ed., *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, 7 vols, Rolls Series 67, (London: Longman, 1875-1885), vol. 3, 7.

¹⁸ John Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation: The Use of Draught Animals in English Farming from 1066 to 1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 296 and note 18.

¹⁹ DMLBS, s.v. “jumentum.” <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/jumentum> (accessed April 21, 2023).

²⁰ Charles du Fresne, sieur du Cange, et al., *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*. (Nior: L. Favre, 1883-1887), s.v. “equitium.” <http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/equitium> (accessed November 18, 2023). The DMLBS cites this word in the form “equitiū.”

quorum ij masculi et ij femine?” – four foals (two male and two female) born of the said *jumentae* (i.e. mares).²¹

Similarly, in Anglo-Norman French, the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* cites “*jument*” with both a generic meaning “beast of burden” and more specifically “mare, female horse.”²² It cites thirteenth-century sources where *jument* is glossed as Latin “*haec equa*,” a female *equus*, and attracts the French feminine definite article “*la*.” Also cited is a quotation from a letter of 1304-5 from Edward, Prince of Wales (later King Edward II) concerning “*deux beles gementz de nostre dit haralz ové lur poleins queles portent ore*” – “two fine *juments* from our said stud-farm with the foals that they are now carrying.”²³

So, what exactly were the *iumenta* exported in large numbers through the port of Sandwich, and why (and how) were they distinguished from the *equi* carried on the same vessels? The edited transcript of the account for 1439-40 published by Angelo Nicolini allows us to reconsider Contamine’s conclusions.²⁴ Although we could reassess the figures in Contamine’s quotation from Thielemans’ work – there were not “*sept chevaux*” listed in the account but at least nineteen *equi*. I have not attempted to count the total number of *iumenta* exported, but the imbalance between the two figures is extraordinary – there are many hundreds of *iumenta*.

In his glossary, Nicolini assumes that the nominative singular form of the word used by the Sandwich clerks was *iumenta* – a feminine noun – and translates it in Italian as “*giumenta, femmina del cavallo*.”²⁵ Italian *giumenta*, like French *jument*, does indeed mean a mare, and presumably derives from a late Latin form *iumenta*. But, in fact, the nominative case of the word never appears in the text – the entries are stereotypically “*pro *** iumentis, precio in toto ****,” the ablative plural that would be the same whether the noun was neuter ending in *-um* or feminine ending in *-a*. As

²¹ DMLBS, s.v. “*jumentum*.” <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/jumentum> (accessed April 21, 2023).

²² *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, s.v. “*jument*.” <https://anglo-norman.net/entry/jument> (accessed April 21, 2023).

²³ Ibidem. Citation from Hilda Johnstone, ed., *Letters of Edward Prince of Wales 1304-1305* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for Roxburghe Club, 1931), 158.

²⁴ Nicolini, *Sandwich Port Book*.

²⁵ Ibidem, 101.

we have seen, the feminine form *iumenta* is known elsewhere, but nothing in the Sandwich records confirms that the customs clerks had this feminine noun in mind rather than the common neuter form *iumentum* – whether or not it referred to a female horse!

The only evident distinction is one of *value*. Thus merchant Thomas Hervy loaded 22 *iumenta*, valued at £8 16s, and 3 *equi*, valued at 40s, onto an unnamed ship whose master was John Porter.²⁶ The difference in value is not great – the *iumenta* average 8s each, the *equi* 13s 4d.²⁷ And unfortunately, when *iumenta* and *equi* appear elsewhere as part of the same cargo, only the total value of both together is given. Thus on another occasion, Hervy loaded 25 *iumenta* and 3 *equi*, total price £7, on one ship and on the same day 20 *iumenta* and 2 *equi*, total price £5 10s, on a second ship.²⁸ Thomas Hervy seems to have been a large-scale dealer in horses (although he also occasionally traded in sheep and in other miscellaneous cargoes), exporting 166 *iumenta* and 9 *equi* in the one year.

The medieval customs jurisdiction centred on and named after Sandwich had “member” ports all along the Kent coast that included Dover.²⁹ The records of 1439-40 list only the masters of the ships, and not the harbours they sailed from; it is not clear how many (if any) of the horses were exported through Sandwich harbour itself. Yet Sandwich may have a long history as the chief customs clearing house for the export of horses to the continent. Of the many customs accounts edited and brought together by Norman Gras in a study of the medieval English

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 5.

²⁷ Note on currency: here and elsewhere, in both Latin and English texts, we use the normal abbreviations £ (or l) for a *pound*, s for a *shilling* (20 shillings to the pound), and d for a *penny* (12 pence to the shilling). For much of the period under review the silver penny (and later the silver groat valued at four pence) would have been the chief coin in circulation. The value 13s 4d, two-thirds of a pound, represented a *mark* – a unit of account rather than a coin, although the gold *noble* introduced by Edward III was worth 6s 8d, half a mark.

²⁸ Nicolini, *Sandwich Port Book*, 29. In both these cases the average price would be exactly 5s for each animal, suggesting that *iumenta* and *equi* had the same (low) value.

²⁹ E. M. Carus-Wilson and Olive Coleman, *England's Export Trade 1275-1547* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 183, 192; Maryanne Kowaleski, “Port Towns: England and Wales 1300-1540,” in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. I, 600-1540, ed. D. M. Palliser, 467-94 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 472-73, Map 19.1.

customs system in 1918, his index shows that the vast majority of references to *equi* and *all* the references to *iumenta* occur in one document – the records for the “port” of Sandwich for 1304/5.³⁰ In fact, they all more specifically relate to *Dover*, for which Sandwich was the customs head port.

Thus, we find in 1304/5, under the heading “*Douorria*” [Dover], payments of duty on such cargoes as “*iiii equis estimatis ad £.xl*” or “*iiii iumentis estimatis ad xxxii s.*” or “*iii equis et ii iumentis estimatis ad xl s.*”³¹ Gras himself interpreted *iumenta* as “work horses,” calculating that they had an average value of 8s 7d – whereas *equi* (Gras assumed they were better quality horses) had an average value of 42s 6d – a much higher mark-up than for Thomas Hervy’s cargo 125 years later.³²

What was the distinction the Sandwich/Dover customs officials were making? Contamine assumes throughout that an *equus* was male and a *iumentum* (or *iumenta*) was, as in modern French, female, and we have seen that *iumentum* did often – and perhaps increasingly in later medieval Latin – mean a mare. The clerks did not have the option of using the regular, and shorter, Latin word for a mare, *equa* – since both *equa* and *equus* would appear identical in the ablative plural case used in their formulaic phraseology “*pro *** equis, precio in toto ***.*”³³ Instead, they seem to have used the same terminology for 125 years or more, in which an *equus* is distinct from a *iumentum*. And I think one can accept that the distinction in this context was indeed between male *equus* and female *iumentum* or *iumenta*. More widely, we may conclude that, although in many contexts (or out of context) the word “*iumentum*” is ambiguous, in any context where *iumenta* are distinguished from *equi* the latter are male horses and the former are female horses.³⁴

³⁰ Norman Scott Brien Gras, *The Early English Customs System: A Documentary Study of the Institutional and Economical History of the Customs from the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Century*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1918), 302-46.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 344-45.

³² *Ibidem*, 302.

³³ We may suggest that this confusability of *equus/equa* in many grammatical contexts could have encouraged the general adoption in Latin administrative language of the term *iumentum* in the limited sense of “mare” – and thus its cognates in French and other Latin-derived languages.

³⁴ One Sandwich record provides a third distinction – when Henry Broune (like Thomas Hervy a large-scale horse-trader) paid duty “*pro xxvii iumentis et uno*

What the Sandwich records seem to show is evidence of a large-scale export trade from the Kentish ports in the fifteenth century of *mares* – breeding stock as well as working animals. Whether Contamine was right in concluding that these were all English hackneys – or perhaps rather the prospective mothers of French *haquenées* – is unclear.

Contamine's long discussion of the *haquenée*, although he sometimes cites evidence from Britain, should perhaps best be taken as referencing chiefly the meaning of the term in later medieval France.³⁵ And there were differences in usage that may have led to misunderstandings. In 1578 a French traveller in London described the Lord Mayor riding in procession:

Après luy vient le Seigneur Maire en tres magnifique arroy,
ayant son gran Ordre et tres-riche Colier autour du col, vestu
d'une grande et magnifique robe d'Escarlate rouge, avec le
Manteau d'estat dessus, fourré de fins Menus vair, monté sur
vne belle *haquenée*, en harnachee pompeusement.³⁶

But compare the modern English translation by Derek Keene and Ian Archer:

After him comes the Lord Mayor in most magnificent array
with his great order and a very rich collar around his neck,
garbed in a great and magnificent robe of scarlet red with the
Cloak of Estate trimmed with fine miniver on top, and
mounted on a fine *hackney* in splendid harness.³⁷

geldyng *precio in toto viii lb. xiii s. iv d.*" – confirming that *iumenta* were not geldings! See Nicolini, *Sandwich Port Book*, 59.

³⁵ Contamine, "Le cheval 'noble'," 1710-23. This is true also of Lois Forster's recent discussion of the term in "The Typology of Horses in Burgundian Chronicles of the Fifteenth Century," in *Echoing Hooves: Studies on Horses and Their Effects on Medieval Societies*, Explorations in Medieval Culture 22, ed. Anastasija Ropa and Timothy George Dawson, 223-45 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022), 242-44. Forster concludes that, by the fifteenth century, the hackney was, at least in Burgundy, "predominantly a woman's horse."

³⁶ L. Grenade, *The Singularities of London, 1578*, ed. Derek Keene and Ian W. Archer, London Topographical Society no 175 (2014), 248-49.

³⁷ Ibidem, 133.

This was a fine, if perhaps small, horse, harnessed and decorated to match the estate of its rider. The French author, Grenade, is surely referring to the French concept of a *haquenée*. Thus the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* cites a poem of c. 1361 for a similar “very fine” well-harnessed *haquenée*:

Uns siens voisins li envia
 Une tres bele haguenee,
 Bien alant et bien ensellee...³⁸

[One of his neighbours sent him
 A very fine *haquenée*,
 Well-going and well-saddled...]

Many of the *haquenées* discussed by Contamine could probably be similarly described. In 1484, the French king Charles VIII made his first entry into Paris riding a *haquenée*, as did Louis XII in 1498.³⁹ But in 1578 would any Londoner have described the Lord Mayor’s mount as a “hackney”? As we shall see, by the sixteenth century, the English hackney was in common usage a small sturdy road-horse, fit to carry King Henry VIII’s jester, perhaps not the Lord Mayor in procession.

III. Hackneys in context

If modern dictionaries are unhelpful, do medieval “dictionaries” help? There are a number of fifteenth-century Latin vocabularies that give one-to-one equivalent Latin terms for English words, and several include terms for types of horse.

Thus, we find that the Latin for “hackney” is either *b(l)adius* (a bay horse); or *mannus* (in Classical Latin, a kind of small Gallic horse, a carriage-horse – one used especially for pleasure-drives); or *spado* (a gelding); or *equilas/equillus* (a little horse).⁴⁰ To these we may add as late

³⁸ *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*, version 2020, s.v. “haquenée.”

³⁹ Contamine, “Le cheval ‘noble’,” 1710-23.

⁴⁰ S. J. H. Herrtage, ed., *Catholicum Anglicum, an English-Latin Wordbook Dated 1483*, Camden Society, n.s. XXX (1882): 170; T. Wright and R. P. Wülcker, ed.,

as 1685 *equus meritorius* (a hired horse).⁴¹ None of these terms *defined* a hackney, but perhaps they may all be descriptive terms that a layman might apply to a hackney.

The modern dictionaries all give brief citations to illustrate the usage of words, but usually too brief to confirm their distinct meaning. Sometimes, by consulting the original source, and seeing the word in a more extended context, the meaning becomes clearer. For the purposes of this study I have consulted only sources that are available in modern printed or online editions – the wide range of these, from literature and poetry to household and stable accounts, suggests that many other references exist in unpublished manuscript sources. I have consulted about 60 documents in printed and online sources from the thirteenth century to the sixteenth century, containing more than 170 references to hackneys, many of which detail or at least imply their use or their status.

The earliest published references I have found so far are in the 1280s, in the wardrobe accounts of Bogo de Clare, a junior member of the great de Clare family who scandalously held multiple ecclesiastical posts in many parts of England and Wales.⁴² On three occasions, a hackney was hired for a journey, with entries such as "*in quodam Hakeneyo conducto*" or "*pro locacione cuiusdam Hak*."⁴³ A hackney was hired to carry Adekin the harper from Leicester to Oxford, and another when Thomas of Houghton rode on the lord's business from London to Leicester. The use of hired hackneys for long journeys by road seems already to be established – although on two occasions it is simply generic "horses" *equi* that are hired, for journeys from London to York and from London to Stafford.⁴⁴

And there is one hint elsewhere that the word "hackney" was still novel and not widely understood at this time. In a "bill of eyre" from Shropshire in 1292-3 – these were bills of complaint written in Anglo-Norman French for presentation to the king's justices – the scribe or

Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies, (London: Tübner & Co., 1884), vol. 1, col. 580, col. 637, col. 697-9, col. 757.

⁴¹ George Meriton, *Nomenclatura Clericalis, or, The Young Clerk's Vocabulary...*, (London: Richard Lambert, 1685), 69.

⁴² M. S. Guiseppe, "Wardrobe Accounts of Bogo de Clare AD 1284-86," *Archaeologia* 70 (1920): 1-56, at pp. 23, 33.

⁴³ The word is spelled with a "y" – it is an English word borrowed into Latin.

⁴⁴ Guiseppe, "Wardrobe Accounts of Bogo de Clare," 35; 45.

clerk seems to have difficulty with one unfamiliar word.⁴⁵ Phelippe of Montgomery, a clerk, son of Adam of Montgomery, complains that Thomas the son of Colyn of Lydom [Lydham Manor, Bishops Castle, Shropshire] has failed to return a mare (“*une jument*”) valued at 7 shillings and a “*hache de nethe*” valued at 12 pence.⁴⁶ Presumably, the mangled “*hache de nethe*” is the local scribe’s best attempt at spelling, in French, an English word with which he was unfamiliar!

Our first extensive published source for hackney references comprises the English royal Wardrobe and Household accounts of Edward I, from 1285 to 1289.⁴⁷ These accounts cover periods when the royal court was travelling in France as well as in England, and they assign a specific role to the hackney. The accounts, in Latin, refer to over 90 “*bakeneii*,” of which 88 are specifically described as “hired” – either “*conducti*” or with payments made “*pro locacione*” or “*pro conductione*” as in the earlier records of Bogo de Clare. Of these 79 are hired as *packhorses* – “*ad portandum*” – for example, to carry two saddles from London to Leeds [in Kent?], a bed from Lyndhurst to “Bymingdon”[?], or wax, rice and almonds from La Rochelle to Saintes in France. And on 41 occasions hackneys are hired specifically to carry bullion from the royal treasury. Thus, two hackneys were hired to carry 400 lbs of silver coins from London to Langley, and five to carry 1000 lbs of coinage from Corfe to Somerton.⁴⁸ Similarly, hackneys were hired in France, to carry a variety of French coinage.

Only in rare circumstances, at least as the term was used by the royal clerks, were hackneys called upon to be ridden. For example, to carry a

⁴⁵ William Craddock Bolland, ed., *Select Bills in Eyre, A.D. 1292-1333*, Publications of the Selden Society, vol. 30 (London: B. Quaritch, 1914), 24.

⁴⁶ The feminine article “*une*” confirms the gender of the “*jument*” in this context! The identification of the “*hache de nethe*” as a hackney is made by the compilers of the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, s.v. “hache²,” https://anglo-norman.net/entry/hache_2 (accessed May 14, 2023). However, its valuation at only 12 pence (one shilling) is low even for a hackney!

⁴⁷ B. F. Byerly & C. R. Byerly, ed., *Records of the Wardrobe and Household 1285-1286* (London: HMSO, 1977); B. F. Byerly & C. R. Byerly, ed., *Records of the Wardrobe and Household 1286-1289* (London: HMSO, 1987). I have not given specific page references for each of the many occurrences.

⁴⁸ For such purposes a horse for each 200 lb weight seems to be the regular allocation.

cook in service to John of Brabant who had fallen ill, or a wounded Welshman, or to carry four prisoners being taken from Chichester to Windsor Castle. And perhaps most significant, the messenger John Barbary had to hire a hackney for nine days at 6d per day when his own horse (*equus*) died on route: "*pro conduccione unius hakeney per novem dies quia equus suus mortuus fuit in itinere... per diem vi d.*"

The concept that hackneys were *hired* horses seems consistent, and already we get the impression that hackneys were second-best as saddle horses – only ridden in emergency, or by second-rate people. References to prisoners being carried on hackneys suggest that already it was regarded as somehow shameful, not the appropriate horse for a gentleman. In 1295, Thomas Turbeville, convicted of treasonous communications with the French, on his way from the Tower of London to execution in Westminster, was led through the streets of London on a "poor hackney" – his feet tied together under the horse, his hands tied in front, accompanied by the hangman, and by torturers disguised as devils.

Il vint de la Tur monte *un povere hakeney* en une cote de raye, et chauce de blaunche chaues, et sa teste coverte de une hovel et ses peez lyez desuz le ventre del chival, et se meyns lyez devant luy, et furent chivachaunz entur luy sys turmenturs a la forme del deble atirez, et le un mena soen freyn et le hangeman sa chevestre, kar le chival ke luy porta aveyt le un et lautre; et en tel manere fut il mene de la Tur dekes a Weymocter parmy Londres...⁴⁹

[He came from the Tower mounted on a poor hackney in a coat of striped cloth, wearing white boots, his head covered with a hood and his feet bound under the belly of the horse and his hands in front of him, and his torturers rode on either side him dressed as devils, and one of them held his rein and the hangman held his halter, for the horse had both; and so he was led from the Tower through London as far as Westminster.]

⁴⁹ Bartholomaeus de Cotton, *Bartholomaei de Cotton Monachi Norwicensis Historia Anglicana*, ed. H. R. Luard, Rolls Series 16 (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1859), 306.

The “poor hackney” seems to be part of the show – the reverse of the “noble steed” that might be a proper element in pageantry.

Or there was the occasion during the Anglo-Scottish wars, when three high-ranking Scottish clerics, the Bishop of Glasgow, the Bishop of St Andrews and the Abbot of Scone, were taken prisoner by the English and sent to England “fettered on hackneys.”⁵⁰

Strikingly similar to the treatment of Thomas Turbeville was a “marvellous adventure” that befell Sir Bors in Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d'Arthur* (c. 1470). Riding on the Quest of the Holy Grail, Sir Bors...

...mette at the departynge of the two wayes two knyghtes
that lad sir Lyonell, his brothir, all naked, bowndyn uppon a
stronge hakeney, and his hondis bounden tofore his breste;
and everych of them helde in theyre hondis thornys
wherewith they wente betynge hym so sore that the bloode
trayled down more than in an hondred placis of hys body, so
that he was all bloodé tofore and behynde.⁵¹

Here, as elsewhere (and as we shall discuss later), Malory is applying the English word ‘hackney’ to a mount that is identified otherwise in the French text that was his source. In the early thirteenth-century *La Queste del Saint Graal*, the horse is described as “*un roncin grant et fort*” – a large and strong rouncey.⁵² Presumably, Malory and his fifteenth-century English readers, rightly or wrongly, must have envisioned a bound prisoner more likely to have been mounted on an English hackney than on a French rouncey!

Although the royal documents suggest that hackneys were hired only for special purposes, “hackney” seems also to have been adopted at one point as the term for the sort of horses poor people owned. For example,

⁵⁰ Peter Langtoft, *Peter Langtoft's Chronicle (as Illustrated and Improv'd by Robert of Brunne)*, ed. Thomas Hearne, 2 vols (Oxford: Printed at the Theater, 1725), vol. 2, 335.

⁵¹ Thomas Malory, *Malory: Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 567.

⁵² Albert Pauphilet, ed., *La Queste del Saint Graal: roman du XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1923), 175. I am grateful to Anastasija Ropa for drawing my attention to this source, and for discussion of Malory’s translations of French terms for horses.

two East Anglian tax assessments from about 1300 have been published.⁵³ In these, “horses” (Latin *equi*) are distinguished from hackneys (the English word usually appears uninflected as “*Hakeney*” or “*hakeneye*” in the Latin text – the clerk knew no Latin word for it).⁵⁴

And the price differential is clear. In villages near Colchester, Essex, John Ayelett had two *equos* and a cart – each horse valued at one mark (13s 4d),⁵⁵ while William Gray had one cow and two pigs (not priced), and a hackney worth 4s.⁵⁶ In Norfolk, Margaret, the widow of Ralph of Southmere, had a hackney worth 3s 4d.⁵⁷ Three or four shillings seems to have been the going rate for a hackney, apart from one owned by Robert Barber, which was worth twice as much!⁵⁸

In 1308, we get our first reference to a London hackneyman – in a complicated lawsuit involving a “hakeneyman” called Adam de Blakesale, three tuns of wine, three hackneys, and one of the sheriffs of London.⁵⁹ We assume that, as later, this hackneyman was a man who *hired out* hackneys, but this is not evident from the context.

A clear illustration of the latter meaning comes from the accounts of Sir John Howard (later Duke of Norfolk) in 1467: “My mastyr paid to the hakeneyman in party of payment of the horse that my mastyr hered

⁵³ John Strachey, ed., *Rotuli Parliamentorum, ut et petitiones et placita in Parlamento...*[1278-1503], 6 vols (London: 1767-77), vol. 1, cols. 247a ff; George H. Dashwood, “Remarks on a Subsidy Roll in the Possession of the Corporation of Lynn Regis,” *Norfolk Archaeology* 1 (1847): 334-54.

⁵⁴ We should however allow, in relation to the discussion of whether hackneys were *mares*, that in the Essex records the word twice appears with a Latin *feminine* ending: “hakenayam” – see Strachey, *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, vol. 1, cols 247b and 259b.

⁵⁵ Strachey, *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, vol. 1, col. 253a.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, col. 247a.

⁵⁷ Dashwood, “Remarks on a Subsidy Roll,” 346. “Suthmere” in the original text, presumably the now deserted medieval village of Southmere, in north-west Norfolk. See Norfolk Heritage Explorer, “Southmere or Summerfield deserted medieval village,” <https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?MNFI1592-Southmere-or-Summerfield-deserted-medieval-village> (accessed April 4, 2023).

⁵⁸ Dashwood, “Remarks on a Subsidy Roll,” 344.

⁵⁹ R. R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Books Preserved Among the Archives of the Corporation of the City of London at the Guildhall: Letter-Book C, Circa A.D. 1291-1309* (London: J. E. Francis, 1902), 158.

to ryde to Stoke, xx s.”⁶⁰

Already by the end of the fourteenth century Richard II was responding to the request of the “Hackneyemen of Suthwerk Derteford Roucestre and other towns between London and Dovore” to regulate prices and conditions for the hire of hackneys to travellers between the towns on the Dover road. Each town would have an official brand and all hackneys based there were to be branded.⁶¹

[The king wills and ordains...] that for the hire of one Hakenei from Southwerk to Roucestre twelve pence only be taken, and from Roucestre to Canterbury twelve pence, and from Canterbury to Dovorre sixpence.

The function of hackneys as packhorses, if it was ever more than a peculiar usage by the 1280s royal accountants, seems to have been forgotten. However, there is further, and growing, evidence for the existence of hackneys in private ownership – and not only among the peasantry. In 1305 the household accounts of Henry, Lord de Grey of Codnor (Derbyshire) record the expenditure of one penny “*In j capistro empto pro le hakenay Domine*”.⁶² “For one halter bought for the Lady’s hackney.” Probably this hackney was the favoured mount of Lady de Grey.

In this case, the Anglo-Norman word, complete with the definite article, is inserted into the Latin text. The use of the masculine definite article “*le*” seems to confirm that this lady’s mount, unlike the elegant *baquenées* ridden by later fashionable French ladies that were discussed by Philippe Contamine, was not a mare, but probably a gelding.

In 1321, successive inventories of the stable of Jarrow monastery record:

⁶⁰ “The Expenses of Sir John Howard, Knight, of Stoke by Neyland, Afterwards Duke of Norfolk; from November, A.D. 1462, to July, A.D. 1469,” in T. H. Turner, ed., *Manners and Household Expenses of England in the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, part 1, Roxburghe Club Publications 57 (1841), 146-621, at p. 398.

⁶¹ Paul Q. Karkeek, “Chaucer’s Schipman and his Barge ‘The Maudelayne,’ with Notes on Chaucer’s Horses” in *Essays on Chaucer, his Words and Works*, Chaucer Society 2nd series, 19, Pt. V, Item 15 (London: 1884), 453-500 at pp. 499-500.

⁶² Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *Report on the Manuscripts of Lord Middleton* (London: HMSO, 1911), 327.

Item in stabulo sunt ij. palefridi de domo Dunholm et j hakenay.

Item in stabulo unus palefridus et unus hakenay.

Item in stabulo est j. equus pro monachis, j. hakenay, iiij. affri.⁶³

Sadly, the role and status of these hackneys, here distinguished from *equi*, *palefridi*, and *affri* (the last being the cheapest sort of farm horse), is not clear from the context.⁶⁴ But in the fourteenth century, we do get some indications of the relative status, and indeed different function, of "horses" (*equi*) and "hackneys" when they are found together.

Thus, in an account of King Edward II's household in 1323, we find there were 30 sergeants-at-arms, each with "one horse for arms," one hackney and a sumpter.⁶⁵ Each, then, has a horse "for arms," the hackney perhaps as a general-purpose riding horse, and a sumpter to carry his equipment and belongings. And in the royal stables, each of the king's horses had its own varlet or groom.⁶⁶

In 1337-8, four hackneys belonging to the Bishop of Bath and Wells each received only half the ration of hay that his ten horses had: "*In feno manerii pro x equis capientibus plenam liberatam et iiij hakenais capientibus dimidiam liberatam.*"⁶⁷ There is no indication of the size or cost of each ration, nor in this case of any other fodder that was provided. Two centuries later, in the royal stables of Henry VIII at Eltham Palace – to

⁶³ J. Raine, ed., *The Inventories and Account Rolls of the Benedictine Houses or Cells of Jarrow and Monk-Wearmouth*, Publications of the Surtees Society, 29 (1854): 11, 14, 24.

⁶⁴ On the *affrus* or *affer* see Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation*, 294.

⁶⁵ F. J. Furnivall, ed., *King Edward II's Household and Wardrobe Ordinances A.D. 1323, Englisht by Francis Tate in 1601*, Life-Records of Chaucer II (London: Tübner, for Chaucer Society, 1876), 19.

⁶⁶ "Also in the kings stable there shalbe as many valletes as horses. The valletes shall keepe the destrers, palfreyes, coursers & other the kinges horses... In the same stable shalbe an hackney man, who shal keepe the hakeney of the house." Furnivall, *King Edward II's Household and Wardrobe Ordinances*, 43. Note the alternative meaning of "hackneyman" – one who looks after hackneys rather than hiring them out.

⁶⁷ J. Armitage Robinson, ed., "Household roll of Ralph of Shrewsbury 1337-8," in *Collectanea i. A collection of documents from various sources*. Somerset Record Society 39 (1924): 72–174, at p 88, and repeated similar entries.

which we shall return later – hackneys were receiving the same daily allowance of “hay and litter” as the king’s horses (costing 1½d per day each) but only half the ration of oats – one peck (a quarter of a bushel) per day, whereas each horse received a daily half bushel of oats.⁶⁸

IV. In war and in peace: the multipurpose hackney

In medieval documents and literature, hackneys seem to have had many functions. What follows is a survey, in roughly chronological order, of some uses to which hackneys were put.

Already by the end of the thirteenth century, we find records of hackneys being employed for one special function – they were “for the destriers” – they were ridden usually by a groom or servant, leading a valuable warhorse by hand.⁶⁹ Thus, in 1299-1300, three rather expensive hackneys were bought to “lead” several of the king’s destriers – “*pro quibusdam dextrariis Regis ducendis*” – from York to Berwick on Tweed. One hackney was piebald, one bay, and one black. They were purchased in three different towns between York and Durham.

pro tribus haken’ empt’ per eundem per perceptum Reg’ pro
quibusdam dextrar’ Reg’ ducend’ de Ebor’ usq’ Berewicum
super Twedam... videlicet uno haken’ bauzan’ empto per
eundem apud Tresk, i.l. vj s. viij d., alio haken’ bad’ empt’ apud
Castr’ juxta Dunolm’ xvij s. et tercio haken’ nigro empto per

⁶⁸ “Ordinances for the Household made at Eltham in the XVIIth year of King Henry VIII A.D. 1526,” in *A Collection of Ordinances and Regulations for the Government of the Royal Household, Made in Divers Reigns. from King Edward III. to King William and Queen Mary. Also Receipts in Ancient Cookery*, (London: Society of Antiquaries, 1790), 135-240 at pp. 200-2. I am grateful to Gail Brownrigg for discussion of the possible significance of the reduced rations for hackneys.

⁶⁹ The phrase “*p’ les destrers*” appears in a “List of the King’s Horses,” London, The National Archives (TNA) E 101/613/15 (dorso) – a list, in French, of the King’s horses in 1305-6 which includes 27 hackneys, 10 of which are *p’ les destrers*. I am grateful to Emma Herbert-Davies for this information, and for the modern term for the practice, “ponying.” The term seems to have originated in America, where it is more widely used. Wikipedia advises that “horses used for ponying are generally full-sized, rather than ponies.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponying> (accessed April 4, 2023).

eundem apud Thorp juxta Ebor' i l.⁷⁰

[For three hackneys bought by the same on the authority of the King for leading certain of the King's destriers from York to Berwick on Tweed... that is, one piebald hackney bought by him at Thirsk, £1 6s 8d, another bay hackney bought at Chester near Durham 18s, and a third black hackney bought by him at Thorpe near York £1.]

In the fifteenth century, Thomas Malory described the same practice:

And than he [Sir Perceval] mette with a yoman rydyng uppon an hakeney the which lad in hys right honde a grete steede blacker than ony bere [bear].⁷¹

Sir Perceval, in pursuit of Sir Galahad but temporarily without a horse, asks to borrow the "grete steede" – the yeoman refuses on the grounds that his master would kill him if he let anyone take the horse. But later, the black horse is stolen, and the yeoman agrees to lend Perceval the hackney to pursue the thief. The unfortunate hackney is killed when Sir Perceval challenges the knight who had stolen the black horse!⁷²

However, as we have noted in another such instance, the word "hackney" does not appear in the French text that was Malory's source:

Et lors a encontre un vaslet sor un roncín fort et legier et bien corant, qui menoit en destre un grant destrier noir.⁷³

[And then he met a servant on a strong and light and well-running rouncey, who was leading on his right hand a great black destrier.]

⁷⁰ J. Topham, *Liber quotidianus Contrarotulatoris Garderobæ. Anno Regni Regis Edwardi primi vicesimo octavo. A.D. 1299 & 1300* (Society of Antiquaries of London: London, 1787), 71.

⁷¹ Malory, *Malory: Works*, 544. The editor Vinaver prints "beré" and glosses this as "berry" – I have amended this to "bere" ("bear") on the basis of French versions and the advice of Anastasija Ropa (pers. comm.).

⁷² Ibidem, "and he smote the hakeney in myddis the breste, that *he* felle downe dede to the erthe." My emphasis: this hackney at least was *not* a mare!

⁷³ Pauphilet, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, 88.

Thus, the thirteenth-century writer of *La Queste del Saint Graal* considered it fitting for a servant leading his master's destrier to ride a rouncey. Malory, translating and perhaps modernising the text for the benefit of his readership, opts for the term "hackney." He and his English readers presumably shared an understanding that in such circumstances a servant would likely ride a hackney, not a rouncey.

There are other examples of the close pairing of a horse and a hackney—or at least, a *baquenée*! French chronicler Froissart tells us of events leading up to the battle of Nogent-sur-Seine (13 June 1359). Sir Eustace d'Ambreticourt, supporter of the English against the French king, heard that a French force was approaching the area, and, unaware of the size of the French army, he set out to confront them.

Sir Eustace d'Ambreticourt, who was informed of this expedition, collected those garrisons under his command, to the amount of four hundred lances and two hundred archers, with whom he set out from Pont-sur-Seine. He was completely armed, except his helmet, and was mounted on a hackney which had been given to him [*une baguenee que s'amie par amours lui avoit envoyee*], but he had a very fine war-horse [*coursier*] led by one of his people.⁷⁴

Froissart's emphasis that Eustace was "completely armed" perhaps suggests that it was unusual for a knight to be seen riding on a *baquenée* in full armour.

From a later reference, we learn more about this pair of horses – the identity of the paramour who had given them to Sir Eustace, and that they were *English* horses. Captured in the battle and deprived of his

⁷⁴ Jean Froissart, *Chronicles of England, France and Spain and the Surrounding Countries*, trans. Thomas Johnes (London: William Smith, 1848), 260. Cf. Jean Froissart, *The Online Froissart*, Besançon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 864, f. 201r, https://www.dhi.ac.uk/onlinefroissart/browse.jsp?div0=ms.f.transc.Bes-1&panes=1&GlobalMode=facsimile&img0=&disp0=pb&GlobalWord=0&pb0=Bes-1_t_1r&GlobalShf=&NavDiv0=ms.f.transc.Bes-1&NavBy0=pb&NavPb0=Bes-1_201r&NavMsch0=Bes-1_1&NavShf0=Bes-1_SHF_1A-0&NavPred0=SHF-1_209&NavGo=Go (accessed April 9, 2023). The identification of the "war-horse" as a courser is evident in the manuscript versions.

horses, Sir Eustace was later ransomed and able to get his horses back:

He obtained his hackney and war-horse that he had lost at the battle of Nogent, which had been sent to him by the lady Isabella de Juliers, countess of Kent, from England, out of her affection to him.⁷⁵

This *haquenée*, given as a no doubt costly gift of love by an English countess to a French knight, was, although English in origin, surely of better quality than the English "hackneys" we have met elsewhere. This seems to support our suggestion that in continental French usage, the term *haquenée*, even when applied to horses imported from England, might be a very different animal from that usually described as a hackney in England.

Of Froissart's many references to hackneys (or rather, to *haquenées*), some relate to Britain, such as his well-known description of the Scottish army that faced Edward III's campaign against Scotland in 1327:

Their army consisted of four thousand men at arms, knights and esquires, well mounted; besides twenty thousand men, bold and hardy, armed after the manner of their country, and mounted upon little hackneys, that are never tied up or dressed [curried/groomed], but turned, immediately after the day's march, to pasture on the heath or in the fields.⁷⁶

...bien IIM armeures de fer, chevaliers et escuiers montéz sur bons courciers et bons roncins, et XXM hommes arméz a leur guise appers et hardiz, montéz sur ces petites haguenées

⁷⁵ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 264. Isabella de Juliers had married John Plantagenet, Earl of Kent, in 1348. The Earl died in 1352, and Isabella subsequently abandoned a vow of chastity to marry Sir Eustace d'Ambreticourt in 1360 – a happy reunion for lover, courser, and hackney! See Geni, "Isabella 'Elizabeth' de D'abrichecourt," <https://www.geni.com/people/Isabella-Elizabeth-de-D-abrichecourt/6000000004287186222> (accessed April 4, 2023).

⁷⁶ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 18. Elsewhere Johnes translates Froissart's Scottish *haquenées* as "Galloways"! For more on Froissart's *haquenées* see Miriam A. Bibby, *Invisible Ancestor: The Galloway Nag and its Legacy* (Budapest: Trivent, 2024), 80-82.

qui ne sont ne liees ne estrillees mais les envoie l'en tantost
paistre que on est descenduz en préz, en terre et bruieres.⁷⁷

The French text makes it clear that the mounts of the men-at-arms, knights and esquires were coursers and rounceys.

The Scottish troops may have dismounted from their hackneys to fight. Similarly, in the English royal army in the early fourteenth century, Andrew Ayton notes that the hackney was typically the horse ridden by a mounted archer: “a horse for the march rather than the battlefield.”⁷⁸

During Edward III's 1327 campaign, Sir John de Hainault had led a company of Hainaulters in support of the English king. Some of them lost warhorses during the campaign and were paid compensation.⁷⁹ Froissart tells us that with the money they received, they bought small hackneys “to ride better at their ease” on the long return journey by easy stages through England to Dover, where they took ship for Wissant.

Quant les Hennuyers orent delivrez leurs chevaulx, ilz
acheterent chascun petites haguenees pour chevauchier
mieulx a leur aise...⁸⁰

The compensation paid for warhorses was *not* usually payable for the loss of hackneys. Thus, when in 1346 Sir Thomas Dagworth, after a campaign in Brittany, claimed compensation not only for 66 warhorses at £10 each but for 120 archers' hackneys at £1 each (we note the price differential!),

⁷⁷ Froissart, *The Online Froissart*, Besançon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 864, f. 14v, www.dhi.ac.uk/onlinefroissart/browse.jsp?pb0=Bes-1_14v&img0=&div0=ms.f.transc.Bes-1&panes=1&GlobalMode=facsimile&img0=&disp0=pb&GlobalWord=0&GlobalShf=&pb0=Bes-1_14r (accessed April 9, 2023). Other manuscripts confirm Johnes's figure of 4000 men at arms, but it seems evident that Johnes's translation should not always be trusted.

⁷⁸ Andrew Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses: Military Service and the English Aristocracy under Edward III* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1994), 57.

⁷⁹ On *Restauro Equorum* and compensation for the loss of horses in warfare see Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses*, especially 84-137.

⁸⁰ Froissart, *The Online Froissart*, Besançon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 864, f. 19v, www.dhi.ac.uk/onlinefroissart/browse.jsp?pb0=Bes-1_19v&img0=&div0=ms.f.transc.Bes-1&panes=1&GlobalMode=facsimile&img0=&disp0=pb&GlobalWord=0&GlobalShf=&pb0=Bes-1_19r (accessed April 9, 2023).

the royal clerk crossed out the latter claim.⁸¹

Both Froissart and some literary texts confirm the comparatively lowly status of hackneys, or rather of their riders, when people disguise themselves by riding hackneys. Thus, according to Froissart, the Cornish justice Robert Tresilian, on a secret mission from Bristol to London on behalf of King Richard II, disguised himself as a poor merchant, riding "*une basse haguenee*" – a wretched hackney.

Il se departy de Brisco en abit d'un povre marchat et monté
sus une basse haguenee, et tant chevaucha qu'il vint a
Londres et se loga en un hostel descongneu.⁸²

[He left Bristol in the costume of a poor merchant, riding on
a wretched *haguenee*, until he came to London and lodged in
disguise in an inn.]

In an early fourteenth-century English text of the romance of *Bevis of Hampton*, Bevis prepares to carry a secret message (in fact, a letter from King Hermin to King Brademond, decreeing Bevis's own death). He is advised that no messenger would be allowed to ride a "heavy steed" – he must leave his steed Arundel and his sword Morgelai behind and take a "lighter hackney."

King Ermin seide in is sawe
Pat ner no mesager is lawe,
To ride vpon an heui stede
Pat swiftli scholde don is nede:
"Ac nim a liȝter hakenai

⁸¹ Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses*, 113-14. I am grateful to Emma Herbert-Davies for information on rare references to hackneys being included in compensation claims for horses lost at the Battle of Bannockburn (1314).

⁸² Froissart, *The Online Froissart*, Besançon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 865, f. 357r, www.dhi.ac.uk/onlinefroissart/browse.jsp?div0=ms.f.transc.Bes-2&panes=1&GlobalMode=facsimile&img0=&disp0=pb&GlobalWord=0&pb0=Bes-2_t_Ar&GlobalShf=&NavDiv0=ms.f.transc.Bes-2&NavBy0=pb&NavPb0=Bes-2_357r&NavMsch0=Bes-2_1&NavShf0=Bes-2_SHF_2-83&NavPred0=TLF-594_103&NavGo=Go (accessed April 9, 2023).

& lef her þe swerd Morgelai.”⁸³

In the fifteenth century, we continue to find references in which hackneys are distinguished from other types of horses in cost or ongoing expenditure. Thus, in the Wardrobe accounts of John de Vere, Earl of Oxford, in 1431-2, the costs of shoeing differ:

Ferruri equorum:	
pro lez cursors	ii d per
pro equis chariotti	ii d per
pro equis carectarum et pro lez hakeneyis	i d ob. ⁸⁴

At two pence each for coursers and carriage horses, one penny farthing each for cart horses and hackneys, it seems likely that the shoes for the latter were smaller or lighter.

The price of a hackney continues to be lower than that of other types of horse, and in 1408 (just as in 1321) the monks of Jarrow and Monk-Wearmouth house in their stables both palfreys (including a palfrey valued at 13s 4d) and hackneys (including a hackney valued at 10s) – and different saddles for each, a “palefraysadill” and a “haknaysadill.”

Item in stabulo j. palefray precii xiiij s. iiij d. j. haknay precii x s. j. palefraysadill, j. haknaysadill et ij. frena pro quadriga, iij. haknays, ij. equae.⁸⁵

In 1379, the hosteler of Durham Abbey had paid 6s 8d for a “Hakenaysadyll,” and in 1410 the sacrist paid 7s 3d for a new

⁸³ “Sir Beues of Hamtoun,” The Auchinleck Manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland Advocates’ MS 19.2.1), ff. 176ra-201ra, lines 1255-61, <https://auchinleck.nls.uk/mss/beues.html> (accessed April 4, 2023).

⁸⁴ “Wardrobe Account of John de Vere, Earl of Oxford 1431-2,” in C. M. Woolgar, *Household Accounts from Medieval England: Part 2: Diet Accounts (ii), Cash, Corn and Stock Accounts, Wardrobe Accounts, Catalogue*, 522-48 (Oxford: Oxford University Press/British Academy, 1992), 529.

⁸⁵ Raine, *Inventories and Account Rolls of Jarrow and Monk-Wearmouth*, 81. So, three more hackneys, alongside the priced one, and two mares, not distinguished by “type.”

"haknaysadill" with stirrups and "poles[?]" – "*cum stirapis et polis*."⁸⁶ In 1467 John Howard, first Duke of Norfolk, paid the large sum of 44s 6d to "Smythe the sadelere" in payment for goods supplied, including both "a new sadelle large for a cowser" for 8 shillings and "a new hakeney sadyll" for 5 shillings.⁸⁷ In his study of French *haquenées* Contamine cites evidence from France of the use of "*selles pour haquenées*" and suggests these were "adapted to their gait rather than their morphology."⁸⁸

In 1453, a hackney was involved in the last battle of the Hundred Years' War, which took place on 17 July at Castillon, east of Bordeaux. The previous year, an English expeditionary force under the leadership of the elderly John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, had retaken Bordeaux from the French, and other towns in Gascony had accepted English rule. Now, French royal forces threatened to surround Bordeaux, and established a strongpoint outside Castillon, heavily fortified and armed with some 300 guns and cannons. Talbot was persuaded to attack the French strongpoint, and quickly arrived from Bordeaux with a mounted force of about 500 men-at-arms and 800 archers, having left his infantry far behind.

Not realising the power of the French artillery, Talbot decided to attack without waiting for the infantry to arrive. He ordered his mounted troops to dismount to make a frontal assault on the French lines – but he himself, "because of his age, rode on a litle hakeney."⁸⁹ Talbot, aged 70, was killed after he and his hackney were struck by gunshot – trapped under the horse, Talbot was an easy victim: the enemy "fyrst shot him through the thyghe with a hādgoñe [handgun], and slew his horse, & cowardly killed him, lyenge on the ground."⁹⁰ After initial success, the English were routed – Bordeaux surrendered to the French a few months later.

⁸⁶ J. T. Fowler, ed., *Extracts from the Account Rolls of the Abbey of Durham, from the Original MSS*, 2 vols, Publications of the Surtees Society 99-100 (1898-99), 131, 403.

⁸⁷ "The Expenses of Sir John Howard," in Turner, *Manners and Household Expenses*, 389-90.

⁸⁸ Contamine, "Le cheval 'noble'," 1720 and note 129.

⁸⁹ Edward Hall, *The union of the two noble and illustre famelies of Lancastre & Yorke* (London: Richard Grafton, 1548), fol. clxv.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, fol. clxvi.

So the hackney continued to be the easy-to-mount, easy-to-ride mount of choice of the elderly or sick – one of our earliest references, of course, was to the sick cook of John of Brabant for whom a hackney was hired in 1285-6.⁹¹ But at Castillon in 1453, the unlucky hackney played a crucial role in a turning point in history!

VI. An ambling hackney

In fifteenth-century literature the hackney is still the mount of a knight who, like Bevis of Hampton, wanted to be incognito or at least informal. Thus, Partonope of Blois makes arrangements to slip away from Blois unnoticed:

Partonope seide: “I will that þou go
When Evyn cometh, and make noone aray,
And prively gete me an hakeney
That is swyft and right wele ambling.
And when men be all faste slepyng,
Then wil I ride into þe felde.
I wolde þat no man me be-helde.”⁹²

And in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* (c. 1470) Sir Bewmaynes (Gareth of Orkney) defeats Sir Persaunte of Inde, the Blue Knight, in combat. They are reconciled, and Persaunte accompanies Bewmaynes and the Damsel Lynet on their way before leaving them...

...then they toke their leve, but Sir Persaunte toke an
amblynge hakeney and conveyed them on their ways and
then betoke he them unto God.⁹³

⁹¹ Byerly and Byerly, *Records of the Wardrobe and Household 1285-1286*, 398.

⁹² A. Trampe Böttker, ed., *The Middle English Versions of Partonope of Blois*, Early English Text Society, extra series 109 (London: Kegan Paul, 1912), 265, lines 6826-32.

⁹³ Malory, *Malory: Works*, 195. This passage is from “The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney” – the one book of Malory’s work that seems to have no French precursor. Thus, the use of the term “hackney” in these circumstances, and its ambling gait, presumably directly reflect Malory’s own experience or his English readers’ expectations.

Both Partonope and Persaunte, we note, ride *ambling* hackneys. No other of the early documentary or literary sources considered in this paper has confirmed that the hackney was regularly an ambler, a "gaited" horse.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this gait, in early usage, as follows: "a two-beat lateral gait, faster than a walk and often promoted by training, in which the fore and hind legs on one side move in unison, alternating with those on the other."⁹⁴ However, the definition as a two-beat gait, in which fore and rear feet on one side would hit the ground simultaneously, is disputed. Miriam Bibby, for example, concludes:

It is in fact more likely to be a four-beat lateral, which can sometimes be extremely hard to identify by eye. The two-beat lateral is notoriously uncomfortable to ride but is used for harness racing, whereas the four-beat lateral is comfortable to ride.⁹⁵

In a four-beat lateral gait, though both legs on the same side would move together, either the front or the rear leg would lead, striking the ground slightly before the other.

The earliest citation of the word "ambler" in the *Middle English Dictionary* is from Chaucer's description of the Wife of Bath: "Vpon an ambleres esily she sat."⁹⁶ Sadly, we do not know if the horse was also a "hackney" in any of the senses we have considered. The Wife of Bath was of the merchant class, and well-travelled. She may have owned her own horse or hired it long-term, rather than hiring one from a London hackneyman simply for the journey to Canterbury. She may well have ridden the same horse from Bath to London before the Canterbury trip – perhaps, as we shall see later, it was an ambling palfrey.

The *Middle English Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* concur on the earliest appearance of the verbal/adjectival form "amble, ambling," in the romance of *Guy of Warwick* (the National Library of

⁹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "amble, n.," *OED Online*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, March 2023), <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/6180> (accessed April 5, 2023).

⁹⁵ Bibby, *Invisible Ancestor*, 25.

⁹⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Prologue," *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer: Vol. 4: The Canterbury Tales: Text*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 14, line 469.

Scotland Auchinleck Manuscript version of about 1330), when Guy, severely wounded, rides upon “a mulet [a small or young mule] ambling.”⁹⁷ It is presumably because of his wound that Guy chooses to ride such a lowly mount.

The source of the word is Latin “*ambulare*” (“to walk”) either directly from medieval Latin or via Anglo-Norman French. In fact, the earliest dictionary citations in Anglo-Norman or continental French are to *palfreys* rather than hackneys adopting this gait, in the late twelfth-century *Lais* of Marie de France “*Deus puceles virent venir | Sur deus beaus palefreiz amblanz*,”⁹⁸ and in an Anglo-Norman romance of Bevis of Hampton of about 1300 “*vus avereiz un palefrei swef e ben amblaunt*.”⁹⁹ Notably the latter is the same episode in which, in the English version, we have seen Bevis advised to leave his “heavy steed” and take a “lighter hackney.”¹⁰⁰

Although his description is difficult to follow or to translate, the amble seems to be the gait described by William Fitzstephen (writing in the 1170s) of horses seen at London’s Smithfield market that he calls “*gradarii*” – “walking” or “stepping(?)” horses:

Iuvat videre gradarios succussatura nitente suaviter
ambulantes, pedibus lateraliter simul erectis quasi a subalternis
et demissis.¹⁰¹

[It is pleasant to see the *gradarii* smoothly ambling with
elegant steps, lifting both feet on one side at the same time

⁹⁷ “Guy of Warwick (couplets),” The Auchinleck Manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland Advocates’ MS 19.2.1), ff. 108ra-146vb, line 1134, https://auchinleck.nls.uk/mss/guy_cp.html (accessed April 4, 2023).

⁹⁸ Jean Rychner, ed., *Les Lais de Marie de France*, Les Classiques français du moyen âge, no 93 (Paris: Champion, 1966), 87, line 473. “They see two maidens come | On two fine ambling palfreys.”

⁹⁹ Albert Stimming, ed., *Der anglonormannische Boeve de Haumtone*, Bibliotheca Normannica 7, (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1899) 29, line 814. “You shall have a palfrey gentle and well ambling.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, line 813: The Anglo-Norman version identifies Bevis’s “heavy steed” as his destrier: “*le destrer est pur vus trop asprement coraunt*.”

¹⁰¹ Robertson, *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, vol. 3, 6. Fitzstephen is the earliest citation for this meaning of Latin “*ambulare*” in the DMLBS, s.v. “*ambulare*.” <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/ambulare> (accessed April 11, 2023).

as if dependent on each other and putting them down.]¹⁰²

Two fifteenth-century Latin-English vocabularies also gloss Latin "*Hic gradarius*" as English "a hawmbler" or "a hawmlore."¹⁰³

French dictionaries imply that the amble was the regular gait of the French *haquenée*, and in his section "Les haquenées et l'amble" Philippe Contamine concluded that

...on the continent there was an almost perfect equivalence between the amble and the *haquenée*: one called a mount that practiced this gait preferentially and almost exclusively a *haquenée*, even if other equids could also, among other gaits, move at the amble.¹⁰⁴

Was the English hackney also an ambler? Miriam Bibby recently concluded that

As a broad rule of thumb, Hackneys trot and Palfreys amble, and thus are sometimes described as ambling nags or amblers in medieval texts. However, this is not an infallible rule.¹⁰⁵

This seems counterintuitive. Given the roles we have seen the hackney adopted for – for comfortable long-distance road travel, or ridden by a servant rather than a trained knight, or by the elderly or the sick, or hired

¹⁰² Fitzstephen's language is notoriously flowery. I cannot guarantee my interpretation of "*quasi a subalternis*." Moreover, the term "*succussatura*" would normally imply a "trotting" or "jolting" motion, very different from the reputed "smooth" gait of the ambler. See *DMLBS*, s.v. "succussare." <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/succussare> (accessed June 2, 2023). Note that my translation differs from that adopted by Miriam Bibby, *Invisible Ancestor*, 25-26.

¹⁰³ Wright and Wülcker, ed., *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, vol. 1, col. 697 and col. 757.

¹⁰⁴ Contamine, "Le cheval 'noble'," 1715-17. My translation. Contamine (*ibidem*, 1722, note 133) also cites several French sources in which Latin *gradarius* is glossed as *haquenée*.

¹⁰⁵ Bibby, *Invisible Ancestor*, 82. For further discussion of ambling, see *ibidem*, 91-94.

out to (probably) inexperienced riders, or even hired as a packhorse – it seems very likely that many or most hackneys could amble. The palfrey, although we have noted references to ambling palfreys, was in general a much “smarter” mount.

The evidence from our sources in England does not allow us to confirm Contamine’s conclusion of an “almost perfect equivalence” between hackney and ambler, and certainly the two words were not synonymous – not all ambler were hackneys, given our references to ambling palfreys. On the other hand, we seem to lack any references to trotting hackneys!¹⁰⁶

VII. All the King’s horses – and his hackneys

We have already noted a number of sources in which “hackneys” are distinguished from “horses” – in Latin “*equi*.” In 1469, the stables of George, Duke of Clarence, contained “69 double horses and 24 hackneys, in all 93 Horses and hackneys.”¹⁰⁷ There are detailed allocations like “vii palfreys, and iii groomes, with iii hakeneyes,” “ii coursers for the litter, and to them i groome, with one hakneye” and “iii palfreys of the Baronesse, and a groome, with a hakney.” Thus there is one groom to every two or three horses, and a hackney allocated to each groom for his own use – indeed, perhaps sometimes to “pony” (to lead or exercise) the palfreys or coursers for which he was responsible.

A document from the sixteenth century further emphasises the distinction – a set of regulations for Henry VIII’s stables at Eltham Palace in the 1520s, which lists the equids (including mules) stabled there.¹⁰⁸ There are 109 “King’s Horses” – ranging from “Coursers” (30) and “Hobbyes and Geldings” (12) to “Horses for the close carriage of

¹⁰⁶ Nor can we comment on Contamine’s question of whether it was their natural gait or one they were trained to.

¹⁰⁷ “Ordinances for the Household of George Duke of Clarence A.D. 1469,” in *A Collection of Ordinances and Regulations for the Government of the Royal Household, Made in Divers Reigns, from King Edward III. to King William and Queen Mary. Also Receipts in Ancient Cookery*, (London: Society of Antiquaries, 1790), 87-105, at p. 104. The obscure term “double horse” also occurs in the 1526 records from Eltham Palace discussed below.

¹⁰⁸ “Ordinances for the Household made at Eltham in the XVIIth year of King Henry VIII A.D. 1526,” in *A Collection of Ordinances*, 135-240, at pp. 200-02.

the Robes" (5), but also including two "Moyles" and 23 "Moyletts" – together with ten horses assigned to the Master of the Horses and three other officers of the stables. There are no hackneys so defined in this list of "horses," but separately listed are "The Number of Hacenies of diverse Officers." Some of these officers are listed by name, others by their posts, such as "The three Surveyors of the Stable" who are allocated six hackneys – but even "The King's Foole" warrants one hackney. In all, there are 66 hackneys.

At Eltham, estimated total annual costs, based on the costs of each animal per day, are also given separately for "horses" and "hackneys." The only noticeable difference is in fodder costs. Although both horses and hackneys are allocated the same amount, 1½d per day, for "Hay and Litter," horses get half a bushel of oats a day, hackneys get only half that amount, a peck of oats. Were the Eltham hackneys simply smaller or lighter-built than the horses, or were they also hardier, flourishing on a rougher diet, like Froissart's *haquenées* of the Scottish army two hundred years earlier?

VIII. Conclusions

So a hackney was not a horse in 1526. But how could we tell them apart? Clearly hackneys, at least on average, were smaller, easy to mount and comfortable to ride. We've seen a variety of colours – bay, black, dappled-grey, piebald – but the fact that two fifteenth-century Latin vocabularies identify a hackney as Latin "*badins*" may suggest that the compilers of those word lists considered bay to be the typical colour of a hackney. They were relatively cheap, hardy and easy riding, preferred for long journeys. They were probably amblers, gaited horses, but this cannot be proved by the evidence of the medieval sources I have considered here. They could, at least in the thirteenth century, serve as packhorses.

There is no evidence in England that they were usually mares, as has been suggested for French *haquenées*. And although we have encountered "*le bakenay Domine*" (the Lady's hackney) in 1305, they were not, like the French *haquenées*, "*gén. réservé aux dames*."

In the English king's wars they carried archers to the battle. They were used by servants to lead their masters' destriers, but sometimes served as a knight's own "informal" horse. They took pilgrims to Canterbury and

travellers to Dover. They were ridden by the elderly and the sick, and by prisoners on their way to justice. They carried the more lowly officers of the Tudor royal court.

But in spite of the many hackneys we have encountered in private ownership (from peasants to royals), in England and in the English language it was their role as horses for *hire* that persisted and is reflected in a sixteenth-century slang term for a prostitute, or “hack writers” who will write anything they are paid to write, or even today in usages like “hackney carriage” – still the legal definition of the familiar London black taxicab.¹⁰⁹

Context is all – the word was ambiguous, applied differently at different times and in different circumstances. A medieval observer might have been able to identify a hackney. A modern reader, coming across the word in a medieval text, can only conclude that it was a horse that, in particular circumstances a particular writer designated a hackney.

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¹⁰⁹ “If you own or run a hackney carriage (taxicab), it needs to be inspected and licensed by the local authority.” Gov.uk, “Hackney carriage vehicle licence (England, Scotland and Wales),” <https://www.gov.uk/hackney-carriage-vehicle-licence> (accessed April 8, 2023).

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