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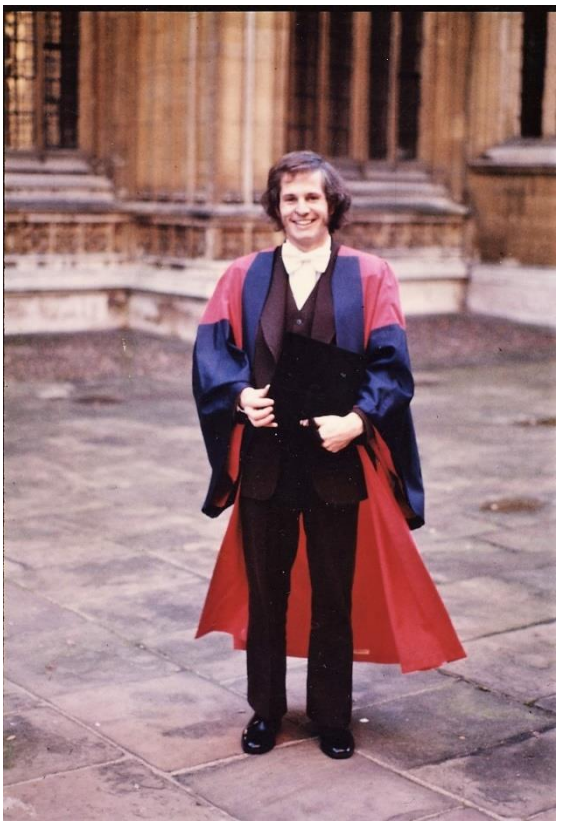
Writing Equine History: A Personal Historiography

Peter Edwards

In an essay created exclusively for *Cheiron*, Our Patron, Emeritus Professor Peter Edwards, reflects on the changes he has witnessed in his six decades as an equine history researcher. He writes that it is interesting to note how his own approach to the topic has changed as he encountered other scholars in the field. He also reveals the important role that serendipity has played in his equine history career; a career, he assures us, that was "never meant to be" and "highly unlikely" when he set off on his research journey. Here at *Cheiron* we also confirm that the pioneering work of Professor Edwards has made a substantial contribution to equine history. His inspiration and practical advice have provided encouragement to many other scholars in the field.

The publication of this essay in a specialist equine history journal marks the fiftieth anniversary of my association with the subject. My career as an equine historian was never meant to be and owes far more to accident than to design. A non-horseman, my only encounters with equids were on holiday riding donkeys on the beach as a boy. Even so, it is not that I had no contact with animals. As a teenager in rural Shropshire, I earned money working on a local farm in the summer, over the years graduating from potato-picking to employment as a general farm labourer. Transporting the harvest back to the farmstead, I sat on sacks of potatoes or sugar beet but, because of the transport revolution, tractors not horses pulled the carts. As a post-graduate student, inevitably my M.A. and D.Phil. dissertations looked

respectively at farming and rural society in early modern Rushock (Worcs.)[1] and on the North Shropshire Plain. Naturally, horses featured in the records but largely as plough and cart animals, and increasingly so as they gradually replaced oxen in the draught.



Peter Edwards, at his graduation at Oxford University. Little did the newly graduated Dr. Edwards realise that a life as a pioneering equine historian lay ahead of him.

However, while researching my doctoral dissertation, the serendipitous discovery of toll books, recording the sale of horses at Shrewsbury fairs, added an extra dimension to the chapter on marketing livestock and other agricultural products.[2] By sheer coincidence Joan Thirsk, my supervisor at Oxford, was also researching equine history and, recognising the importance of the source, encouraged me to focus on that aspect of my thesis. My article, 'The Horse Trade of the Midlands in the Seventeenth Century', appeared in *Midland History* in 1979, although Joan flagged it

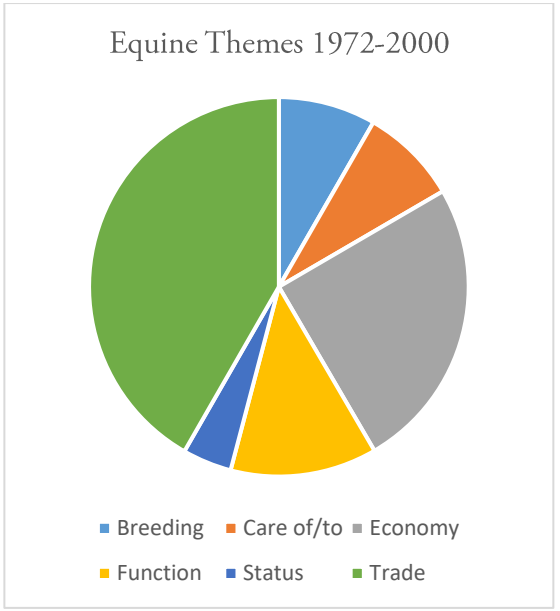
[1] Sir Stephen Jenyns endowed Wolverhampton Boys G.S. with the manor of Rushock when he founded the school in the early sixteenth century. I taught there in the years 1969-72 and the discovery of two iron chests full of estate documentation stimulated my interest in local historical research.
[2] Tudor legislation increasingly tightened up the sale of horses.

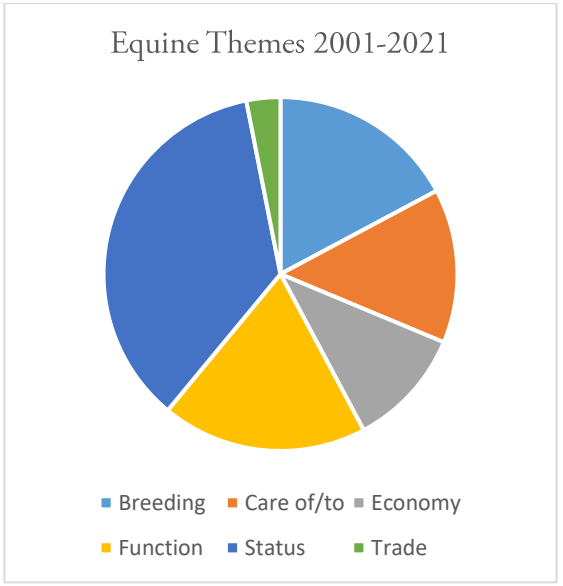
up in footnote 94 of the printed version of her Stenton Lecture at Reading University, *Horses in early modern England: for Service, for Pleasure, for Power*, published in 1978. Supported by funding from the British Academy, I then spent several years touring the country's record offices looking for other toll books and associated documentation such as estate accounts, correspondence, diaries and legal records. In 1988 Cambridge University Press published *The Horse Trade of Tudor and Stuart England*. It was that simple yet so unexpected and improbable.

The dream of all historians is to find a little-known source that also provides valuable information on an important subject: toll books were my pot of research gold. Quite a number of others had discovered them before me, including T. Wainwright, ed., *Reprint of the Barnstable Records*, I (Barnstable, 1900); R. East, ed., *Extracts from the Records in the Possession of the Municipal Corporation* (Portsmouth, 1891); W. Robertshaw, ed., 'Notes on Adwalton Fair', *Bradford Antiquary*, N.S., V (1927); E.A. Lewis, 'The Toll Books of some North Pembrokeshire Fairs (1599-1603)", *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, VII, iii (1934); E. Evans, 'Two Machynlleth Toll Books', *National Library of Wales Journal*, VI, i, (1649), mainly sales of cattle; R. Forder Denington, 'A Midland Horse Fair at Boughton Green, 1627', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 4, iv (1969-70); R. Forder Dennington, 'Sale of Horses at Leicester, 1598', *Northants. Past & Present*, IV, v (1970-1); J. Bathurst & E.J.L. Cole, 'Leominster Fair, 1556', *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club*, XLII, i (1976); and C.M. Gerrard, 'Taunton Fair in the Seventeenth Century: an Archaeological Approach to Historical Data', *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society*, 128 (1984). However, they did not widen their research, perhaps because they were local historians, unconcerned with the overall picture. Apart from *The Horse Trade of Tudor and Stuart England*, between 1979 and 2001 I published essays on the horse trade in Chester, Shropshire, Staffordshire and England, as well as convening a session on horse trading at the annual CHORD conference at Wolverhampton University.

Although these publications opened up the field of equine studies, especially through a greater awareness of the existence of toll books, they remained traditionally economic in content. Indeed, in parallel I also published essays on the dairy and cattle trades of Shropshire in *Midland History*, respectively in 1978 and 1981: toll books occasionally recorded the sale of cattle as well as horses. Moreover, I continued to publish essays on farming and improvement, ending with 'Farm and Family: the Administration of the Estate of William Poore, an Elizabethan Yeoman-Farmer', *Southern History*, 16 (1994) and 'The Decline of the Small Farmer: the Case of Rushock, Worcestershire', *Midland History*, XXI (1996). Then, there was the five years' hiatus in writing on equine history (c.1995-2000) when the article, 'The Supply of Horses to the Royalist and Parliamentarian Armies in the Civil War' *Historical Research*, vol. 68, No. 165 (February 1995), diverted my attention to the subject of military logistics. This resulted in the book, *Dealing in Death: the Arms Trade and the British Civil Wars, 1638-52* (Far Thrupp, Stroud, 2000) and a number of essays on the supply of arms, armaments and equipment. Paradoxically, the change of direction enhanced my understanding of the multi-faceted role of horses in early modern society by giving me more time to soak up the views of scholars from disciplines such as English Literature, Cultural Studies and Anthropology. Erica Fudge's books,

Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture (Basingstoke, 2000) and *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 2006) were illuminating and greatly influenced me (at the time we seemed to attend and speak at the same conferences). The ensuing book, *Horse and Man in Early Modern England* (London, 2007), was a far more nuanced account of demand than the one on supply offered in the horse trade volume.





The influence of scholars, who approached equine history from other directions, had a permanent impact on my output in general too. Using 2000-2001 as the dividing line in the books and essays I wrote and the talks I gave, the shift in emphasis is very noticeable in spite of a certain amount of double counting of some items because of overlap. While I still gave talks on and published material about the economics of horse-keeping in early modern England, the stress shifted markedly towards the care and treatment of horses and the multi-faceted role of horses in the life of the country. *A fortiori*, I tended to focus on their iconic value to their owners. In short, I ceased to view horses as commodities but as intelligent, sentient creatures, who interacted with their environment and who could even change it through the exercise of agency, factors which their riders and handlers had to take into account. Two chapters in *Horse and Man in Early Modern England* respectively deal with attitudes towards horses and their training and treatment. I even compiled a history of an individual horse, the Levinz Colt, who was reared on the Welbeck Estate of Lord Harley in the 1720s. The essay, 'The Tale of a Horse: the Levinz Colt, 1721-29', appears in a volume edited by Sarah Cockram and Andrew Wells, entitled *Interspecies Interactions: Animals and Humans between the Middle Ages and Modernity* (Abingdon, 2018).

Within the genre of equine history *per se* several publications played a crucial role in enhancing my knowledge of the relationship between horses and humans. Joan Thirsk's seminal booklet, *Horses in Early Modern England: For Service, for Pleasure, for Power* (Reading, 1978) heads the list, deftly setting out the agenda that I was to follow for the next forty-three years … and counting. In their book, *The Culture of the Horse: Status, Discipline, and Identity* (New York & Basingstoke, 2005), Karen Raber and Treva Tucker naturally include it among the four key book-length publications on early modern horses written by trained scholars over the course of the previous thirty years. I have read two of the others, Anthony Dent's *Horses in Shakespeare's England* (London, 1987) and Walter Liedtke's *The Royal Horse and Rider: Painting, Sculpture, and Horsemanship* (New York, 1989), and I wrote the fourth book on the list. Although she is not an academically trained historian, I have found Ann Hyland's books, based on a lifetime's experience of riding, eventing and breeding horses, very useful and informative. We have had many fruitful discussions, that is, if Pliny, her parakeet, will let us! Although she has not written a general account of early modern horses,[3] her book, *The Horse in the Middle Ages* (Thrupp, Stroud, 1999) effectively sets the scene. Collections of essays like Raber and Tucker's tend to be disparate but nonetheless offer valuable insights, especially if the editors have invited a group of expert contributors to cover a particular theme. Thus, I selected the contributors to the volume of essays I co-edited with Elspeth Graham, entitled *The Horse as Cultural Icon: the Real and the Symbolic Horse in the Early Modern World* (Leiden, 2012) from among the attenders at my retirement conference at Roehampton University in 2009.

The changing emphasis in my equine-based publications is reflected in the bibliographies printed in the two books, *The Horse Trade of Tudor and Stuart England* and *Horse and Man in Early Modern England*. Between 1988 and 2007 a Damascene conversion clearly occurred in my thinking. Apart from listening to scholars from

[3] She does intrude into the period in her book, *The Warhorse 1250-1600* (Thrupp, Stroud, 1998).

other disciplines at conferences and seminars, I read more widely than was necessary for the former book. A change in the social standing of the people I wrote about occurred too. In the first period, highlighted in the pie charts, I was primarily a bottom-up equine historian, focusing mainly on the economic activities of farmers and traders. In the second period, however, I have become more concerned with the relationship between the upper levels of society and their horses, as illustrated in my book, *Horses and the Aristocratic Lifestyle: William Cavendish, First Earl of Devonshire (1551-1626) and his Horses* (Woodbridge, 2018) and the volume of essays on his nephew, William Cavendish of Welbeck, I edited with Elspeth Graham, entitled *Authority, Authorship and Aristocratic Identity in Seventeenth-Century England: William Cavendish, 1st Duke of Newcastle and his Political, Social and Cultural Connections* Leiden, 2017). Research in estate accounts, correspondence and other papers gave me insights into the management of elite studs and stables and the breeding regimes therein. They also led me to consider more carefully abstract relationships between humans and horses: how did owners perceive their charges and how did horses enhance their status? Mere ownership of a horse marked a social divide but for the ruling elite riding and controlling a fine, mettlesome horse in public demonstrated their fitness to rule.

The Versailles conferences' focus on the horses belonging to the Crown and the aristocracy also helped to push me in a new direction. Their 1998 volume, D. Reytier, ed., Les *Écuries Royales du XVIe* au XVIII *Siècle* (Versailles, 1998) included my essay, 'Les Écuries des Monarches Anglais aux XVIe et XVIIe Siècles'. In the co-edited volume on William Cavendish, 1st Duke of Newcastle, Malcolm Airs contributed an essay on his equine buildings and their significance. Unfortunately, the duke's successors failed to maintain the high standards he set. In an article I published in 2016, 'The Decline of an Aristocratic Stud: the Stud of Edward Lord Harley, 2nd Earl of Oxford and Mortimer, at Welbeck (Nottinghamshire), 1717-29', *Economic History Review*, 69, iii (2016), I concluded that the stud suffered irreparable damage through the neglect of its owner, the husband of Newcastle's great grand-daughter.

Harley's estate manager, Isaac Hobart, tried his best to care for the horses in the stud and stables in spite of the lack of funding, and his letters to his master refer to payments for treatment, notably when he had to call in the Marriotts, father and son, specialist farriers who lived twenty-five miles away at Brodsworth. Harley's brother-in-law, the Earl of Kinnoul of Brodsworth Hall, probably recommended them. Although strong and imposing creatures, horses were prone to illness and injury and often required treatment. I wrote about the care of horses in an essay entitled 'The Training and Treatment of Horses in Early Modern England', in D. Brantz, ed., *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans, and the Study of History* (Charlottesville & London, 2010) and also in 'The Training and Treatment of Horses', chapter 3 of *Horse and Man in early Modern England*. Louise Hill Curth wrote an essay on this subject entitled '"The Most Excellent of Animal creatures": Health Care for Horses in Early Modern England' in *The Horse as Cultural Icon*. For a more detailed account one should read her book, *"A plaine and easie waie to remedie a horse": Equine Medicine in Early Modern England* (Leiden, 2013).

In some respects horses received better treatment than other domesticated animals. In my essay in *Beastly Natures* I argued that as attitudes towards horses

improved over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at least among the social elite and when their charges were of value to them. Rather tangentially, I touched on this subject in an essay I wrote with Bob Wilson, 'Butchery of Horse and Dog at Witney Palace, Oxfordshire, and the Knackering and Feeding of Meat to Hounds during the Post-Medieval Period', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 27 (1993). This raises the question of why Englishmen had an aversion to eating horse meat: was it because of the special relationship they enjoyed with their charges or mere dietary distaste? I spoke on this subject at a conference at Winchester University in 2016, in which I posed the question 'Is Eating Horses Wrong … or merely a Matter of Taste?'

During the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries English elite studs benefited from the importation of foreign stock such as Arabians, Barbs, Turcomans and Spanish Ginetes for the saddle and Dutch, Danish, Flemish and German horses for the draught. These horses often passed as gifts between rulers, as illustrated in a paper I gave at conference at Hampton Court in 2017, 'Gift-Giving as a Diplomatic Tool: the Exchange of Fine Horses between Henry VIII and the Marquis of Mantua'. Andrea Tonni provided context for this exchange in an essay which Elspeth Graham and I included in *The Horse as Cultural Icon*, namely, 'The Renaissance studs of the Gonzagas of Mantua'. For the impact of Eastern horses on English breeds and culture, one should read Donna Landry's book, *Noble Brutes: How Eastern Horses transformed English Culture* (Baltimore, 2009).

In wartime, the elite displayed their superiority by serving as cavalry officers astride expensive horses, often of a foreign breed. In 2014 I gave a paper entitled 'The Influence of Eastern Blood on English Cavalry Horses during the Course of the Seventeenth Century' at the War Horses of the World conference at SOAS (London) and again at the History of Veterinary Medicine conference. In print, I included a chapter on horses and tack in my book, *Dealing in Death: the Arms Trade and the British Civil Wars, 1638-52* (Thrupp, Stroud, 2000) and also discussed the theme in 'Les Chevaux et les Guerres Civiles Britanniques au XVII^{e} Siècle, in D. Reytier, ed., *Le Cheval et la Guerre* (Versailles, 2002). Even so, the best account of horses in the Civil Wars is Gavin Robinson's *Horses, People and Parliament in the English Civil War: Extracting Resources and Constructing Allegiance* (Farnham, 2012).

Surveying my publications, I was surprised to find that I had not written a specific essay on the elite pursuits of hunting, horse racing and the *manège*, although, as indicated below, I contributed one on William Cavendish, 1st Duke of Newcastle and horsemanship in the volume dedicated to his life and times. Of course, they feature in the book, *Horse and Man in Early Modern England*, the former in a section of the chapter, 'Preparation for War' and the latter as a distinct chapter, 'The Racecourse'. In 2016, moreover, I gave a paper entitled, 'Epsom Races: the early Years', at a conference at Surrey Record Office. In the two books I co-edited with Elspeth Graham, Richard Nash respectively contributed '"Beware a Bastard Breed": Notes towards a Revisionist History of the Thoroughbred' and 'William Cavendish: Riding School and Race Track'. Mike Hughes's book, *Horse Racing and British Society in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 2018), details the development of the sport "from a marginal and informal interest of the elite to becoming the most significant event of the summer season". For hunting, Daniel C. Beaver's book, *Hunting and the*

Politics of Violence before the English Civil War (Cambridge, 2008) is evocative, as is Donna Landry's *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking and Ecology in English Literature, 1671-1831* (Basingstoke, 2001) for the later period.

The status accorded to members of the social elite by riding in coaches drawn by powerful horses, matched in size, conformation and colour, is covered in my essay, 'Une Forme d'Étalage Ostentatoire: la Mode de Carosses et l'Aristocracie Anglaise du XVII Siècle' in D. Reytier, ed., *Voitures, Chevaux et Attelages* (Versailles, 2000). Coaches first appeared in England in the mid-sixteenth century, although at the time, many gentlemen were loath to acquire one, feeling that to ride in one was effeminate … and detrimental to the needs of the cavalry. Nonetheless, by 1600 even a gentleman of the old school like William Cavendish, later 1st Earl of Devonshire, had bought one, probably at the prompting of his wife. In 2017 I published an essay, 'On the Road (and the Thames) with William Cavendish 1st Earl of Devonshire (1597-1623)' in Jon Stobart, ed., *Travel and the British Country House: Cultures, Critiques and Consumption in the long Eighteenth Century* (Manchester, 2017). Several chapters of the book on his relationship with horses published the following year discuss the social visits he and members of his family made by coach to their friends and associates in the provinces, as well as their trips to and around London.

In 'Horses and Elite Identity in Early Modern England: the Case of Sir Richard Newdigate II of Arbury Hall, Warwickshire (1644-1710)' in P. Cuneo, ed., *Animals and Early Modern Identity* (Farnham, 2014), I emphasized the importance of the possession of fine horses in the construction of elite identity. The iconic value of owning and riding fine horses, as well as the nature of the relationship between humans and horses, were the themes that Elspeth Graham and I chose for the collection of essays in *The Horse as Cultural Icon*. My essay is entitled 'Image and Reality: Upper Class Perceptions of the Horse in Early Modern England'. In our Duke of Newcastle volume of essays, contributors deal with the multi-faceted career of the person who wrote the seminal study on horsemanship, *A new Method, and Extraordinary Invention, to Dress Horses* (London. 1667).[4] The commander of the royalist northern army, he fled abroad after his defeat at the Battle of Marston Moor in 1644. Living in reduced circumstances and depressed, exhibitions of horsemanship to an appreciative crowd of onlookers seemed to raise his spirits. This is covered in my essay, 'Manèging to Survive: Horsemanship and the Rehabilitation of the Exiled William Cavendish, Marquis of Newcastle'. Monica Mattfeld's essay in the collection, 'Embodying "Bonne Homme a Cheval": William Cavendish and the Politics of the Centaur' tightens up the relationship, utilising the concept of the Centaur to portray the perfection of horsemanship in which horse and rider act as one. She develops this theme in her book, *Becoming Centaur: Eighteenth-Century Masculinity and English Horsemanship* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 2017).

Re-reading this account of the genesis and subsequent progress of my equine history research, I am struck by the influence of serendipity in life. In my case it began when I was teaching History at Wolverhampton Boys' Grammar School in the years

[4] He had written a better, non-identical French version during his exile abroad.

1969-1972.[5] One day, while clearing up in the school tower, some sixth-formers discovered two trunks of estate documents relating to the endowment of the school, which Sir Stephen Jenyns, an old Wulfrunian, had founded c.1512.[6] The school's estates were centred on Rushock in North Worcestershire and the records stimulated my interest in local history, especially when I and a few interested sixth formers visited the village and transcribed its documents at Worcestershire Record Office. As soon as I had saved up enough money,[7] I enrolled in the English Local History M.A. course at Leicester University, the department founded by the redoubtable W.G. Hoskins. A year later and firmly set on a research-oriented path, I cheekily applied to Oxford University to undertake research for a D.Phil. under the supervision of Dr Joan Thirsk. Once there, not only did I benefit from the guidance of the leading authority on early modern agriculture and rural life in general and in equine history in particular, I won an award to pay for my studies. I think I got the money because I threw the supercilious opening question of the chair of the award-giving committee back at him.

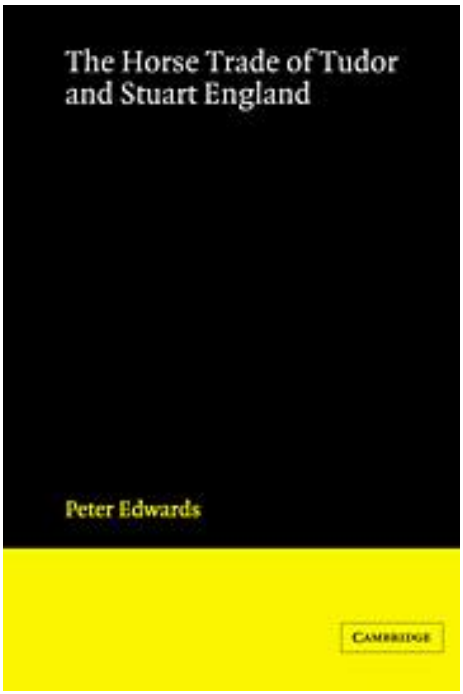
Clearly, fortune was smiling on me in every conceivable way: all I had to do was to ride my good luck and take advantage of the unexpected opportunities that kept opening up for me. Even so, I still find it hard to believe that of all the subjects to base an academic reputation on, it took the highly unlikely form [for a non-horseman] of research on the centrality of horses in early modern society. Surely, someone before me would have – and should have - done what I did. To my credit, when I discovered the toll books documenting livestock sales at Shrewsbury's markets and fairs at the town's Guildhall, I did recognise their importance. And, of course, I had Joan Thirsk to prompt me. Never mind the tons of cheese being produced in the area [she might have said], focus your life's work on the far more important subject of the relationship between horse and man in early modern society.

[5] Before reading for a B.A. in History and Politics at Leicester University in the years 1966-1969, I was a Physical Education student at Loughborough College of Education for the previous three years.

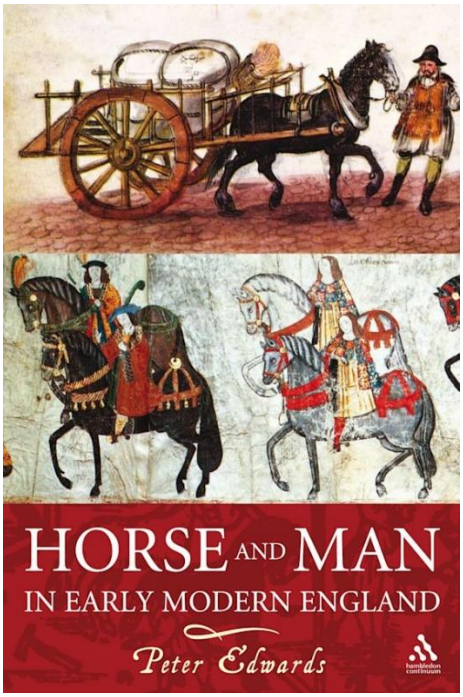
[6] Like so many other provincials at the time, he went to London to find fame and fortune and, once he had done so, he remembered his old home town.

[7] Fortunately, the Mander Centre was then being built in the centre of Wolverhampton.

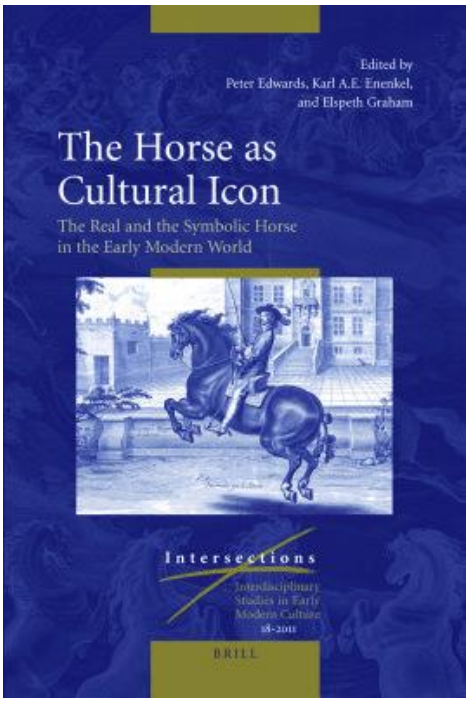
Selected publications



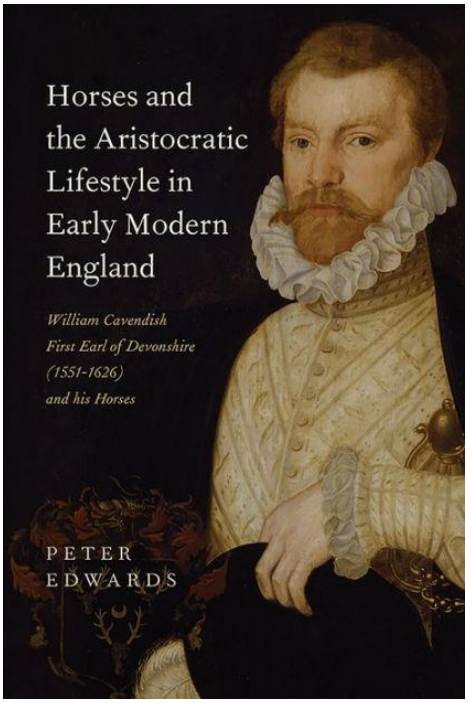
Peter Edwards. *The Horse Trade of Tudor and Stuart England.*
Cambridge University Press, 2011.



Peter Edwards. *Horse and Man in Early Modern England.*
Hambledon Continuum, 2007.



Peter Edwards, Karl A. E. Enenkel, Elspeth Graham, eds. *The Horse as Cultural Icon. The Real and the Symbolic Horse in the Early Modern World.* Brill, 2012.



Peter Edwards. *Horses and the Aristocratic Lifestyle in Early Modern England: William Cavendish, First Earl of Devonshire (1551-1626) and his Horses.* Boydell & Brewer, 2018.