

Horse-logging in the Weald of Kent

SWOG member Becky Lupton has recently attended a horse-logging course run by Plumpton College and taught by an experienced horse logger, Frankie Woodgate.

Frankie has been a horse logger for 17 years and is one of the few horse loggers in this country who works full time on a commercial basis, felling the timber, extracting it by using horses, and then marketing it.

The course lasted three days and was held at Frankie's ancient semi-natural woodland in Kent. The course was aimed at horse owners who were interested in driving their horses and using them to extract timber, or people (like myself) who were interested in horse logging as a low-impact system of extracting timber.

Until the 1950s horses were often seen extracting timber in British woodlands. With the mechanisation of forestry, numbers dropped but we are seeing a resurgence now, thanks



partly to the technical advances of the equipment they use, which has increased output making it more cost-effective. More importantly, using horses has little negative impact on the woodland – in fact, horse logging can benefit the woodland by gently scarifying the woodland floor, thus promoting natural regeneration. This is especially important on PAWS sites, as horses are very adept at moving around new broadleaf growth and coppice stools, and do not compact or rut the woodland floor.

We began by discussing the health and safety aspects of horse logging, looking at site risk assessments and emergency plans, which is essential when undertaking any forestry work. Frankie used to run health and safety courses for the British Horse Loggers Association and was clearly very knowledgeable.

After coffee, we met Frankie's horses, Tobias, Jeton and Yser, three very gentle, calm animals. We discussed the advantages of different breeds, what to look for when choosing a horse, and where you might buy one. Interestingly, many heavy horses come from the continent where there is a greater number of horse loggers.

We were all keen to work with the horses, so harnesses were put on and we practised long reining by learning how to guide the horses round a course and using some simple voice commands.

Swingles and traces

After lunch we took the horses into the woods (lovely hornbeam coppice) and looked at extraction routes. One important aspect of horse logging is working out how to extract the timber while avoiding the stumps, coppice stools and saplings. Then we practised driving the horses around the wood to develop our driving skills. When we felt more confident we began to extract some timber using a swingle tree (also known as a draft bar). The swingle tree

is attached to traces and we learnt how to choker the timber with a chain in order to attach it to the swingle tree. This is the most simple piece of horse logging equipment and is suitable for extracting timber over shorter distances. After the log pile had trebled in size, we called it a day and led the horses back to the yard. It was very rewarding to see how quickly we could amass a large stack of wood with seemingly very little effort.

On day two we spent a couple of hours looking at harnesses and how to fit them correctly. Ill-fitting harnesses can injure a horse, so it is crucial to do it properly. A lot of horse logging equipment comes from Sweden where the number of horse loggers never really declined.

As it was a scorching day we led the horses into the woods for some more practice at extracting the timber. Taking the horses into tight spaces, we immediately understood how the horses have such a low impact on the wood as they can turn around in very small area. Feeling very much at peace with ourselves following an afternoon in the woods with the horses, we returned to the yard where we practised taking the harnesses off and gave the horses a groom, paying attention to the hooves, and any areas the harness might rub. Throughout the course we received a lot of useful information about care of the working horse, a lot of it from an holistic point of view.

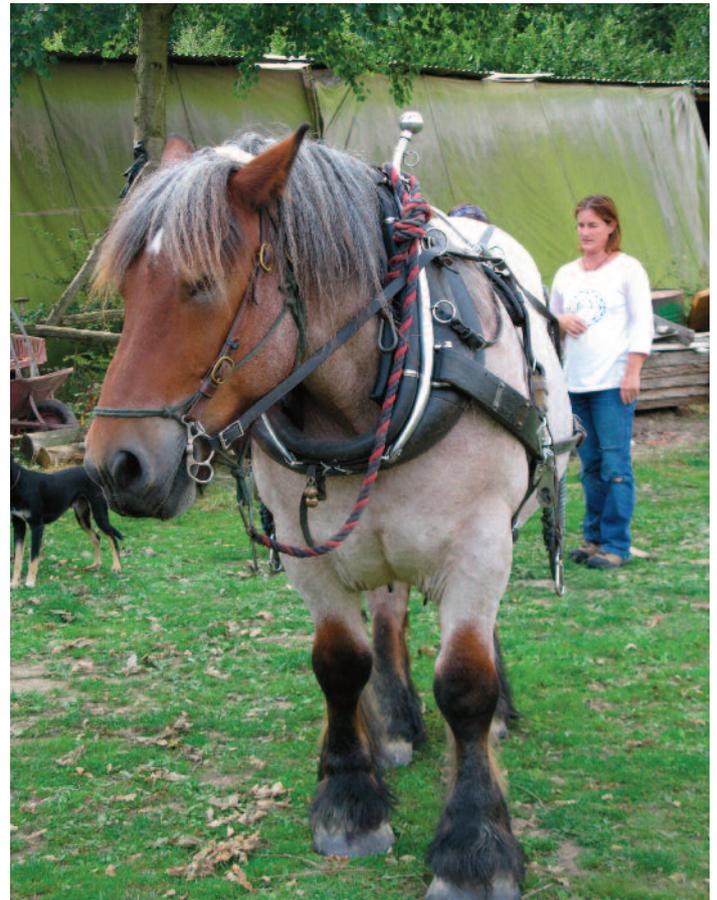
Learning to drive

On day three we looked at equipment such as timber arches and forwarders and how to attach this to the horses. Timber arches can carry more logs over longer distances than a swingle tree.

We then harnessed the horses (relieved that we were starting to get the hang of it) and set off into the woods. Before using the timber arches we practised our driving skills, taking the horses around a course and learning how to ask the horse to move one step to the left/right, etc,

useful techniques as you have to be precise when using a timber arch. Working as teams, we used the timber arches to move the wood to the ride. It was initially difficult to get the hang of the timber arch, but thanks to a very patient and encouraging Frankie, and the tolerant horse, Yser, I began to master it.

Having gathered an even larger wood pile using timber arches, it was time to head back to the yard for the final time to say our goodbyes. Never have I felt so sad to be finishing a course.



Horses and woods are a winning combination and very good for the soul. I now have the utmost respect for working horses and their generous natures, and I admire horse loggers who do a very important, rewarding, but undoubtedly tough job. It would be great to see horse logging become more widespread, as it is cost competitive and much better for the woodland and the environment as a whole. *For more details of Frankie's horse-logging operation, please see her website, www.weald-woodscapes.co.uk*