

The Animals' War: Personal accounts

Horses in WWI

The call up

When war broke out in August 1914, the army purchasing officers were sent to towns and villages to obtain more horses for the rapidly expanding military forces. In just two weeks, 140,000 horses were drafted into the army.

Len Whitehead (1907–2004) aged seven in 1914

The horses were very important to us. We only had four – two of them were beautiful shire type horses – they took those and another bay mare – three of them, and left us with just one horse. I was sad all day at school. I think I cried myself to sleep that night. Meant a lot to us those horses. Boxer, Duke and Violet were their names. Never saw them again of course.

Source: *War Horse: The Real Story*, Channel 4 TV documentary

Elizabeth Owen, English schoolgirl aged seven in 1914

I was seven and I was playing in the garden when I was asked to go and speak to my grandmother. She said, 'Now children, I have got something very serious to tell you. The Germans are fighting the British, there is a war on and all sorts of people will be killed by these wicked Germans. And therefore there must be no playing, no singing and no running about.' And then she took from us all our toys that were made in Germany, amongst them a camel of which I was very fond.

Then we heard that the khaki men were coming to take away all the horses from the village. Everything in the village was done by horses. The station was about a mile or a mile and a half away and the train was met by a brake drawn by horses. The milk was delivered by horses and the butter used to be collected from the farms and brought in by horses to the butter market.

There was a farmer who had a lovely pair who we called the prancers. He thought he would try and hide these horses but the khaki men found them. They tied them all together on a long rope, I think there was about twenty – all horses we used to know and love and feed. Then they started trotting them out of the village and as they went out of sight we were all terribly sad.

Source: *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*, Max Arthur, Ebury Press, p15

The Animals' War

A poem from a collection sold by the RSPCA during the war to raise money for wounded horses.

*We didn't know much about it.
We thought they'd all come back
But off they were all taken
White and Brown and Black;
Cart and cab and carriage,
Wagon and Break and Dray,
Went out the call of duty.*

*And we watched them go away.
All of their grieving owners
Led them along the lane
Down the hill to the station
And saw them on the train.
They must be back by Xmas,
And won't we give them a feed!*

Source: *The Animals' War*, Juliet Gardiner in Association with the Imperial War Museum, p14