



Ormskirk District Historical Society

6th Oct 2025



Presentation to the society by Sharon Brown, Curator of Land, Transport, Industry and Work, Liverpool Museum

The Liverpool Carters

Summary

This document outlines Sharon Brown's talk for the Ormskirk District Historical Society on the history and significance of Liverpool Carters. It highlights their esteemed reputation, the demanding nature of their work, and the central role horses played in Liverpool's industry for over two centuries. The summary details their working conditions, informal entry and training methods, and the physical and technical demands of the job, showcasing real-life examples to illustrate the enduring legacy and pride of the Carter community.

Introduction:

Sharon Brown explained that she was approached by a Mr Jimmy Doran on behalf of The Liverpool Carters' Association regarding their desire to see a monument dedicated to the city's Working Horses erected at The Albert Dock, in recognition of their importance to Liverpool's success as a port for over 200 hundred years.

They approached Sharon at the Museum of Liverpool Life which situated in front of the Three Graces as they were aware that the Museum already had an archive relating to the Carters and their Horses. Although it took over 13 years, the Association was successful in raising enough funds to commission a statue of a life-sized Working Horse with a plaque describing the role of the Carters and Working Horses which can be seen by visitors to The Albert Dock today.

Liverpool Carters:

A United States newspaper reported in 1914 that Liverpool Carters were 'the finest in the Kingdom!' They also reported on the size of the horses and on the Liverpool Carters' reputation for their handling skills. Liverpool Carters were understandably very proud of this.

For over 200 years, there had been over 200,000 horses employed in Liverpool which was the largest number outside London. In 1916 over 9,000 Carters worked with the horses. (This figure included 12 women.) Carters and horses were either employed by the larger firms or by supply companies and each had its own farriers and 'sick bays' etc to care for their horses. Stables were located around Hopwood and Warwick Streets in Toxteth, to the south of the city centre whilst others were located to the North of the city. Liverpool Corporation also owned their own horses.

Conditions:

Carters started work at 5.30am preparing the horses ready for a 7/8am start, 6 days a week. In addition, a rota ensured that Carters worked on a Sunday in order to feed and water the horses. The Carters were happy to do this as they had a later start (7.00am!) and better pay for working on a Sunday. Carters often moved companies when the pay on offer was better.

Entry and training:

There were no formal entry requirements or training available. Carters usually started 'hanging around' the stables as children and then moved into Carting

as soon as they left school at 14. Sharon Brown described how 2 of the Carters' Association became Carters; Jimmy Doran stopped attending school when it was bombed during the Second World War and spent his time at the stables learning the skills of looking after the horses, taking them to the Farriers and assisting the Carters. Jimmy Smith (born in 1931) had 3 stables on the street where he lived. He got an 'after school' job there before becoming a Stable Lad taking care of 16 horses as soon as he left school, earning £1 pound and 12 shillings for a 40-hour week, until he became a Carter.

The work of a Carter:

A Carter had 'massive responsibility', having to load carts safely and efficiently and being able to manage their horses in all weather conditions. Most Carters were extremely physically fit often starting work at 14 and continuing into old age. Sharon gave the example of Carter George Fletcher, who was still working at 84!

Although Carting was not recognised as a skilled job, in practice it did demand specific skills as some of the carts were specialised vehicles whilst different cargoes required specific knowledge in order to load them safely. For example, cotton bales had wire bands which could cut the Carter and made loaded carts extremely flammable.

There were many accidents. In addition, Carters often had to take their horses onto 'floating roads' in order to board ships that would take them across the Mersey. This was particularly hazardous as the roadway would have steep inclines according to the tide and be very slippery in wet weather which often led to horses being lost when they fell into the river and drowned. Runaway horses were also a challenge for Carters. As a result, Carters were renowned for 'mucking in' and generally helping each other whenever they could.

There were no health and safety regulations and poor pay and long hours were the norm. In 1889, Carters were able to join a Union for the first time at a cost of 29 shillings per year which they paid weekly, and were as a result, in a stronger position to negotiate better pay and shorter hours. The Union also tried to discourage sectarianism in the recruitment of Carters. By 1918, their Union was the biggest in the country.

Carters had to wear a Carters' pin on their clothing to show membership of the Union in order to be employed. Although there was no uniform, Carters were

recognisable from these pins and also from the sacks they wore across their shoulders in bad weather.

Carters had a reputation for hard drinking and general bad behaviour including racing their carts. In the 1870's however the Christian faith and the Temperance Movement in particular led to many 'calming down'. Despite this, by 1904, Carters appear to have retained their bad reputation for poor behaviour and hard drinking.

The Working Horses:

Although Liverpool Corporation used an alphabetical system for naming their horses, private companies often gave their horses names like 'Delightful', 'Expert', 'Demon' and 'Daredevil' to reflect the differing temperament's of their horses. Sharon mentioned a Carter who called his horse 'Mischief' as he appeared to enjoy playing pranks. One day he ran off into a warehouse and was found by the Carter standing with all 4 hooves on a bale!

Each horse wore the colours of their company on their head bands etc. with some companies like Lunts using cockleshell blinkers to reflect the company's links with the Port of Liverpool and the sea.

Each cart had a box underneath for the Carter's food and a nosebag for the horse's feed. There would also be a bucket for watering the horse during the day however many horses were also given a bucket of beer every morning!

Carters were known for their passion for the horses in their care. From the 1840's, a 'May Day Parade' and Liverpool Show took place each year when the Carters would compete to win the prize for the best presented horse. The whole family would work together to decorate their horse with flowers and ribbons and many kept recipes for cleaning the horse brasses for example, a family secret.

The First and Second World Wars:

During the First World War, many of the Working Horses were shipped to France with many of the Carters following, to serve in France. 250,000 horses passed through Lathom Park Remount Depot, where they were prepared to go to the front. Many of the horses and the Carters were never to return.

During the Second World War, Carters were exempt from serving in the Military as they were needed to distribute 75,000 tons of food and materials that passed through the Port of Liverpool between 1939 and 1945.

Statue of a Working Horse:

As motorised vehicles took over and tarmac replaced cobbles, the number of Working Horses and Carters fell after the Second World War. There are very few horses working in Liverpool today and the number of former Carters has naturally diminished as they pass away through old age. In the 1990's the Carters' Association recognised this and wanted to celebrate the role of both in the success of the Port of Liverpool with a statue of a Working Horse. A small committee started raising funds to pay for this which included writing letters to the Royal Family (known for their love of horses) and the Museum.

Although the Liverpool Echo responded by issuing appeals, Sir Ken Dodd was very supportive as his own father had used a horse drawn wagon to deliver milk and the Grosvenor Family responded by donating £10,000 it took 13 years to raise the money to pay for a statue to be designed, made and installed.

A well-known equine sculptor, Judy Boyt was employed and initially produced 3 Maquettes (models) of the proposed statue which were later sold in order to raise funds for the finished item. (Liverpool Council bought one which is in the City's Town Hall).

The final statue which cost £110,000 stands 16 hands high on a base that describes the role of the Carters and the Working Horses. The Mayor of Liverpool unveiled the statue on 1st May 2010 and it remains in place at The Albert Dock. Many passing visitors rub the horse's muzzle as they walk past and some members of deceased Carters decorate the horse annually in memory of their loved one.

Sharon Brown said that the archived information remains in the Museum of Liverpool Life with interactive 'Talking Heads' made by actual Carters recounting their experiences, making the information more accessible to visitors of all ages. Sharon mentioned taking part in a BBC Programme 'Who Do You Think You Are?' when Liverpool Actor and Comedian Ricky Tomlinson discovered that members of his family had been Carters and that 2 had died when they were crushed in accidents whilst working.

The future:

Sharon mentioned that The Maritime Museum is currently being massively redeveloped and that the location of the statue of the Working Horse may possibly be moved as part of this.

Diane Edwards

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