

'They moved the table and chairs out of the kitchen and brought the cob in'

FROM a young age, I helped my grandad on farms. I was used to animals, but not horses back then. I discovered a love for decorative metalwork at school and, aged 16, I answered an advert for a blacksmith's apprentice. My future boss, Derek, said he did lots of metalwork and "one or two horses". I didn't know he meant one or two horses a day.

The first time I picked up a horse's hoof, I just got on with it. Horses know if you're afraid of them. I didn't have machine-made shoes, we had to make every horseshoe ourselves. Back then a full set cost 25 shillings (£1.25).

I loved the job because it got me out. In the 1960s, you had to be wealthy to have a horse. I went to places and met people I never would have crossed paths with otherwise.

In 1976, I started a farrier business with my friend Andy Speck, despite having no money. By then, a full set was £5. We earned £30 on our first unofficial day of work. Our plan was to use it to open a business account and ask for an overdraft to get us up and running properly. But instead of getting an overdraft, we got a 45-minute lecture from the bank manager about how we wouldn't succeed.

We bought an old Ford Anglia for £35. A farmer had given us some fence paint and we used it on the van. Unfortunately, it wasn't quick drying and we had horses to shoe that afternoon. So off we went with a wet van, hoping no one would lean on it. The tyres weren't great, and our tax disc was stuck on with insulating tape. So, when we were stopped by a police officer we feared the worst. But on finding out we

Farrier Mick O'Reardon recalls elusive abscesses, getting stopped by the police and trimming donkeys in Cyprus

were farriers he said, "My girlfriend has just bought a horse and it needs shoeing, can I have your number?" Instead of a fine, we gained a client.

SOLVING PROBLEMS

I've had some wonderful clients over the years. There was one couple who worshipped their Welsh cob. I usually shod it on their driveway between two scrap cars. But on this day, it couldn't have rained any harder. I thought they'd make a new appointment but instead they moved the dining table and chairs out of the kitchen and brought the cob in. Halfway through, it decided it needed the toilet, flooding the place, but the owner just brushed the pee out of the door while I finished shoeing.

I had one lovely lady client who looked after her two horses and pony with the greatest care. To her horror, her best dressage horse went down with laminitis, not a touch but the full-blown works. The pedal bones were poking through the soles. I said to the vet, "Have you told her this could be a no-hope case?" and he said, "Let's hope we can work a miracle."

Incredibly, the horse did recover and a year later it was competing again. The euphoria of getting that horse back to doing dressage – I still think about it now.

ABOUT MICK...

MICK O'REARDON was a farrier for 52 years. He was the chairman of the Leicestershire Branch of Farriers and the East Midlands Branch of Farriers. He is now retired and the author of two books, *All Clenched Up* and *Nearly Finished* and *All Clenched Up* and *Finally Finished*. He lives in Derbyshire with his wife.

I had the same feeling if I found an abscess. I remember one hopping lame horse; my colleague Andy went to see it and thought it had bruised its foot. But you can be a day too early with abscesses. Sure enough, the horse got worse. I went to see it and no sign of an abscess, it just flinched slightly when one side of the foot was pinched.

The owner called the vet, who X-rayed the foot. Did I want to come and see the X-rays, he asked? I looked and couldn't see anything wrong.

I was just starting to wonder what I was missing when the vet admitted he couldn't see anything either. I started digging around in the hoof again and suddenly, I heard a squelch and the pus shot out. I've never seen so much. The abscess wasn't even where the horse had been flinching.

We had one broodmare with arthritis. It looked like she had one leg shorter than the other. When she was heavily in foal, she struggled on the shorter leg, so we made two shoes for one foot, and she

walked fine after that. Problem-solving is a big part of being a farrier.

RETIREMENT THWARTED

TOWARDS the end of my career, I could pick and choose my clients. All the places I went had their horses on concrete to shoe. I would say to any horse owner, if you have a good, clean hardstanding, your farrier can do the best job.

My wife and I retired to Cyprus in 2004. Well, I thought I'd retired. When the local donkey sanctuary found out I'd been a farrier, they asked me if I'd trim their donkeys. Fine, I thought. Then another lady asked me to shoe her horse, which I did, and she told a local riding school. Before I knew it, my name was all over Cyprus. We've since moved back to the UK and I am definitely retired now.

The idea to write a book came from a TV writer whose horses I shod. We'd always share the latest horsey scandal and he said to me, "Mick, you've got a blimmin' good book in you." For about 40 years I told everyone I was going to do it, and when I retired, I finally did.

I have ridden over the years. The last time was on holiday in Jordan. My wife was on the horse in front and its back shoes were sticking out either side

of the hoof. Of course, typical farrier, I got off and had to have a look. The guide asked if I was a farrier. When I said I was, he said, "Great, I've got 300 horses!" I thought if I'd been 30 years younger, I'd have enjoyed that. But I had to tell him I'm definitely retired now. **H&H**
● As told to Catherine Welton

"Back in the 1960s a full set of shoes cost 25 shillings"

My farrier mantras

I ALWAYS insisted on the owner holding the horse if it was difficult to shoe. Some people think it's the farrier's job to make them stand still. You've got to remember we've probably only got an hour – the price doesn't include schooling!
I also insisted on being paid the day

the horse was shod – my attitude was, it works for Tesco, why not for me?

A valuable lesson I learnt from my old boss was – don't underprice yourself or you'll end up working like the clappers and cutting corners to make ends meet. Go with the going rate.

Illustration by Emma Earnshaw