

Forged in
FIRE

Axbridge-based farrier **DOM NORTHMORE** tells Catherine Welton why he wouldn't want to do anything – or live anywhere – else

SOMERSET FARRIER

Making horseshoes
is part of the farrier's
work. Photo: Getty





There are certainly easier ways to earn a living than being a farrier. It's back-breaking work, outside in the wind, rain, baking sun, freezing cold, or whatever else the British seasons decide to unleash. As for the clients, they have four legs to kick with and can be notoriously unpredictable.

Yet talk to a farrier, and it's clear they love what they do, taking pride in a craft that's knitted into the very fabric of rural communities.

'It is a way of life rather than a job,' explains Dom Northmore, who's been shoeing horses in Somerset for 16 years. 'I always liked the idea of farriery because it's a tradition.'

Dom grew up on the family farm between Wedmore and Weare. Ponies were part of his

life from an early age, but it was an unusual equestrian sport that really captured his interest. 'I was about nine years old and there was a demonstration of polocrosse at my local riding centre. Polocrosse is basically lacrosse on horses, and I just loved it from the off.'

Unfortunately for Dom, polocrosse isn't a professional equestrian sport and as he got older, he realised he'd need to find a career. 'I wanted to be able to continue playing polocrosse, so I thought, if I'm a farrier, I can shoe my own horses and carry on playing the sport I love. Of course, once you become self-employed, you realise you won't have time for anything else,' he laughs.

Certainly, becoming a farrier is a huge undertaking. 'Back when I trained, you had to do your forging certificate first, making

hoof picks and fire pokers and learning the basics about horses. That took a year. Then I did a four-year apprenticeship.'

Farriers who've trained in Britain are renowned the world over. After Dom qualified, he took part in a farrier exchange with the US. 'I went for four months, travelling all over, Chicago, New Mexico, Texas, Las Vegas – it was an incredible experience,' he remembers.

As a craft, farriery in the UK dates back over 2,000 years, to when the first metalled roads meant horses required shoes to stop their hooves wearing down. In 1356, the Lord Mayor of London called together the leading farriers in the city and established them as a Fellowship to control the quality of their work and punish those who overcharged or did not meet the standards required. The



above: Dom Northmore and his family.

Photo: Dom Northmore

above right: Farriers trim, balance and shoe horses' hooves. Photo: Greg Guillemenet

right: Goats also need farriers.

Photo: Dom Northmore

Worshipful Company of Farriers still exists today and, since 1975, 'farrier' has been a legally protected title, meaning you can't call yourself one unless you have the relevant qualifications.

Dom goes out shoeing four or five days a week and thinks one of the perks of the job is visiting different yards all over the county. 'It is lovely being out and about – you get to see some beautiful countryside that you >





top: Views over Lane End Farm.

Photo: Warren Beavis

above: Lane End Farm offers camping and pods to stay in. Photo: Dom Northmore

wouldn't get to go to otherwise, some yards are tucked away down little lanes or in the middle of nowhere. The Quantocks are one of my favourite parts. I do a bit around Spaxton, it's lovely around there.'

There's a social side to the job, too. Dom explains: 'As a farrier, you become friendly with a lot of the customers, especially having grown up here. When you come across older farriers, they might have someone younger with them doing the actual shoeing, but they still want to drive around seeing the customers. I can see myself cutting down in the future, but I can't ever see myself wanting to stop completely.'

Alongside the farriery, Dom is kept busy running Lane End Farm, which he and his wife, Rachel, bought in 2017. Dom knew it well, as he grew up on the farm next door. 'It was an ex-council farm and was in reasonably good condition because it had been tenanted. But it was quite on top of itself, so we took down some of the calf sheds and put up a hay barn instead.'

Most farriers, Dom included, no longer make their own shoes, as it's more cost-effective to buy them in. But he decided to put in his own forge at the farm to bring the experience to the public. 'I've got a couple of coal forges and a gas forge, which I use to host blacksmith experience days. I make shoes as part of the demo. We also had an apprentice doing a demo on Open Farm Sunday this

year, and it was really popular; people love watching it. Next year I'm hoping to run a farrier competition,' he says.

Dom and Rachel, who is a vet, also created a wild campsite at the farm. 'This has been our first full season, we have two pods, they're insulated and big enough that you can stand up and get dressed in them. They're really popular with young families.'

With 250 acres at their disposal, the couple has horses as paying guests, too. 'When I first started shoeing, I did polo ponies, and someone told me that offering off-season grazing for them during the winter could be lucrative. So, we started that as a side business, and now have regulars from Ascot and Windsor.'

Alongside the polo ponies, they have retired horses living out their days, and one has a special place in Dom's heart. Dom explains: 'We've got one called Spot, he's the first horse I remember shoeing when I started out on my own. He's well into his thirties now, but no one knows for sure how old he is. It will be a sad day when he goes.'

As for what's next, Dom is keen to use Lane End Farm to pass on his passion for the countryside and its skills to the next generation. 'I've got hundreds of ideas!' he laughs. 'I'm keen to get into education. I think it's really important to get kids onto farms, and to connect with the land.' ●

laneendfarm.com