

Animal accidents in Tudor England

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About one in ten fatal accidents in sixteenth-century England involved animals and horses were the prime culprits. More than a third of animal accidents were falls from horses and nearly as many involved horses kicking, trampling, biting or dragging those who died. The reason was that so many people rode. An Italian visitor reported with astonishment in 1557 that ‘there is no male or female peasant who does not ride on horseback’. Riding accidents happened to gentlemen, clergymen and rich yeoman farmers, but also to farm labourers, servants and craftsmen, boys and girls and women of all social ranks.

With a population of under four million the landscape was comparatively empty, and horses were the best means to get about. Thus it was quite natural for John May of Moulton, Lincolnshire, labourer, to send his son, Ambrose, on his bay mare to Alexander Symson’s house to collect a pig on Saturday, 10 September 1552. The mare stumbled and Ambrose fell off and died. Not all the victims were riding. Horses needed to be fed, watered and taken to pasture and many of the incidents happened then. Sometimes mere bystanders got unlucky, like Anthony Coke, who was kicked by the courtier Sir Thomas Heneage’s horse as he rode into Lincoln on 18 August 1550. Heneage’s horse was a fine animal, reckoned by the coroner’s jury as worth eight times as much as John May’s mare; but either could be deadly.

Horses were also the most common draught animals. Ploughs, field-rollers and horse-powered mills could all cause accidents, but the great majority of mishaps involved carts. Manoeuvring in tight spaces was difficult. Edmund Dodde was hit on the head by a cart loaded with peas when the horse drawing it backed up suddenly inside a Warwickshire barn in 1558. But the open road was dangerous too. Books like Leonard Mascall’s *First booke of Cattell* (1587) warned that controlling horse-powered vehicles going downhill was particularly difficult, and one in eight cart accidents happened on downward slopes. The thill horse, the horse placed between the shafts of the cart, was the key to steering and speed, and more than one in ten cart accidents involved this animal. No wonder Mascall warned drivers to keep ‘thy hand nigh his head: wherby thou maiest the better rule him’. Both hazards combined when John Burton was run over by a cart carrying grain downhill towards Newbury in icy weather in January 1551, despite the efforts of his colleague John Nashe to hold onto the thill horse to brake the cart’s descent.

Cattle were the second most dangerous animals to work with. Oxen were used for pulling ploughs and carts, sometimes in teams of four or six, and caused similar mishaps to those involving draught horses. Occasionally cattle of all sorts trampled or crushed people, but most of the damage was done with their horns, which caused deep wounds which were readily fatal. Bulls wandered loose and attacked passers-by, like Alison Alderson who was

walking down the road in Grinton, Yorkshire in November 1599 when she was charged by a black bull, or Hugh Dese who was hit under the jaw bone by a two-year-old bull calf while walking down Woodclose Lane in Morfe, Staffordshire in July 1600.

Cows caused nearly as many accidents as bulls and oxen combined. Some were described as mad when they attacked and those with calves were easily frightened. John Elwarde went into a barn at 6 am on a December morning in 1599 to check on a red cow with a calf and his dog followed him in. The cow attacked the dog, the dog hid behind John and the cow charged him and gored his left thigh to a depth of 3 inches. Milkmaids were especially at risk. Jane Wheler was milking a cow in her husband's croft at 5 pm on 11 November 1550 when a young red bull came up from behind and attacked her. She died within an hour from loss of blood.

Pigs were a danger less to adults than to babies and young children, who accounted for at least two-thirds of the deaths they caused. It was mostly boars rather than sows or hogs that attacked, goring with their tusks as well as biting. Some young boys died herding pigs. Five-year-old William Barghe of Huggate, Yorkshire, hit in the stomach by one of a herd he was driving to the fields, is the youngest victim of a work accident we have yet found. More gruesome were incidents where pigs scavenging for food came into houses and bit sleeping babies in the head: 20-day-old Agnes Clay at Erringdon in Heptonstall, Yorkshire, young James Ball who was in a cradle in the kitchen at Charlton Adam in Somerset. Pigs also caused accidents indirectly because of the need to gather acorns to fatten them in the autumn. Several people fell from oak trees they had climbed to knock down acorns for their pigs.

Birds caused the widest variety of accidents because of the various means used to catch them, kill them or scare them away from crops. Over the century guns became more common for shooting birds and with them came accidental shootings. John Norton esquire, of Milton Regis in Kent, paid dearly for his casual approach to gun safety in March 1599. He tried to use his 'small birdinge peece' to shoot a pigeon to feed his hawk without leaving his bedroom. A wire on the window frame caught on the sear, the piece of the lock that held the hammer ready to fire when the trigger was pulled, and he shot himself through the chest and shoulder.

Catching birds to eat or destroying their nests to stop them eating crops or taking chicks and ducklings often involved climbing. People fell from dovecots and from trees where they were taking young rooks to put in pies or pulling down the nests of ravens and kites. Alan Walton was apparently trying to catch a pet martin for his daughter Ellen when he climbed up by the portcullis of Pontefract castle and fell to his death. Nets could also be hazardous. Richard Wolstanrose was running along with a 'cockeshut nette', a large net to catch woodcock, at Westbury in Shropshire in November 1596, but, the jurors reported, because of his inexperience he ran under a large rock. The net snagged on the rock and he hit his head on it, dying instantly.

Bloodsports caused accidents of many sorts, from a collapsing cockpit in Coventry and a Buckinghamshire huntsman attacked by a deer he had shot to the goring of Peter Tucker, a Bridport sailor, by the bull on which he had just set his mastiff. But the most alarming animals involved were bears. Between 1563 and 1570 three got loose and mauled people to death near Hereford, in the suburbs of Oxford and at Lord Bergavenny's house at Birling in Kent. The bear in the last case had to be shot with a gun by one of the lord's servants. Bears frightened other animals as well as people. On Wednesday 4 June 1567, Simon Poulter, one of the great entrepreneurs of the Southwark bear-baiting shows, sent his servants out to announce that bears and a bull were to be baited with dogs at Paris Garden two days later. Banging a drum and leading along a bull and a bear, they reached Charing Cross between 10 and 11 in the morning. Startled by the drum and scared of the animals, the horse drawing a collier's cart bolted and five-year-old George Jeames was run over.

Sheep, even rams, do not seem to have attacked people to fatal effect, but they still caused deadly accidents. They wandered into places where those herding them came into danger: salt marshes criss-crossed with treacherous creeks, fields edged with streams, woods where horses galloped. These resulted in single deaths, but larger tragedies struck between May and July when sheep were taken into rivers for washing before they were sheared. When a sheep drifted downstream or struggled in the water it was easy for a labourer, often a young woman, clothed in waterlogged wool and linen and unable to swim, to get into trouble too. Others tried to help and soon whole parties were drowning. Four died at a ford on the Wiltshire Avon near Beanacre in 1551, four in the Nidd at Plumpton in 1557, three more in the Hodder at Slaidburn in 1560.

Rats famously caused fatalities by spreading disease, but efforts to control them could result in accidents. 'Take heede how thou laiest the bane for the rats, / For poisoning servant, thy selfe and thy brats' warned Thomas Tusser in his *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* of 1575. Taking care with ratsbane – arsenic trioxide – was easier said than done. One housewife, fifty-year old Barbara Gilbert of Syston, Leicestershire, mistook it for flour and added it to the 'floure meate' she was making with milk, poisoning herself. Another, Margaret Morlande of South Elmham in Suffolk, used it to make a lotion to kill lice, which she drank by mistake, instead of the pot of beer standing next to it, when she got up in the dark to help her lame husband. Several servants or labourers ate poisoned food prepared for rats or birds without knowing what it was. The little pieces of bread soaked in sweet milk that William Keme, servant of Robert Hunt, found in a skillet in his master's house at Whateley in Warwickshire at 4 in the afternoon on 21 July 1552 sound particularly tempting. It took William nine days to die after eating them.