

Jumbo was a big ex-army horse. Sleepy headed, he would go to sleep while standing. One day he was left at mealtime in a loaded water cart. When the carter came back, Jumbo was curled up on the ground with both shafts of the cart broken. No horses liked having their collars put on and Jumbo was no exception. One occasion, as I put it on, he rammed his head through it, over my shoulder, and snapped a lump out of my back. He was a spiteful old boy, but he was a good worker.

Bob was the one I worked with most. I was with him one day in the railway yard when some Oxford College officer cadets came off a train. They blew a bugle and I just managed to stop Bob from bolting. It must have reminded him of some incident, because he was upset for the rest of the day. We travelled many miles together taking hay presses to farms in the district. The farthest we went was near Chipping Norton. In the winter we took food to the horses at the coal depots at Brackley, Fimmere, Bloxham and Banbury. The carters could not get on with Bob. They said I spoiled him but I only used to tease him.

Mr John Welford, the boss, owned a pair of coal barges. The boatman had Bob for one trip - he didn't want him again as he would not pull the boats unless someone was with him all the time. Bob tried to run away a few times but when we got him back we were both pleased to be together again.

Another horse we had was a very tall one named Uncle. He was the strongest and most gentle horse I worked with. He could bring a ton of goods up Clifton Hill, the weight of the vehicle being extra. Though strong, he was very timid and he was even afraid of puddles of water. We were harvesting one day and at dinner time we put the horses in a grass field, which had a deep wide drainage ditch with reeds and long grass on its banks. When we went for the horses, no Uncle could be seen. We found him in the ditch, with only his head showing. Two of his mates had to pull him out.

I liked working with horses. As the old song says "I am the carter lad, I sit upon my waggon. And happy as a king, I whistle and I sing." I really could whistle: not many do today. The carters called me 'Giles'. (I was the odd one out in our family. Two brothers and father were railmen, the other brother on telecoms.) It was a tough job at times, especially when we broke the colts in. But it was my life. I don't think modern farming has the same feeling that we had, but ways and methods had to change to produce enough food for a growing population. And that's how things used to be ....