

By Edwin Handcock



Edwin S. Handcock

FINGAL BOOTS & Saddles

No hour of life is wasted that is spent in the saddle.

Winston Churchill

The Garda Mounted Unit, *Marcaonad An Garda*, since its establishment in 1998 proudly follows in the footsteps, or dare I say hoof prints, of illustrious predecessors, the Dublin Horse Police, the Dublin Metropolitan Police and the Royal Irish Constabulary.

The DMP Mounted Troop was based in Kevin Street Barracks under the command of an Inspector; constables were known as troopers. Their duties included patrols, escorting prisoners to and from the courts and prisons using horse drawn vans and providing escorts for the Lord Mayor on ceremonial occasions. Each trooper carried a spare horseshoe in his saddle bag, as blacksmiths were commonplace in the city.

The RIC Cavalry Barracks was based in the Depot in Dublin's Phoenix Park under the command of a 3rd Class Inspector, known as the Riding Master. John Mulcahy, ex 13th Dragoons, who had taken part in the famous Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War was the first officer to be appointed to the post. Queen Victoria requested an RIC Mounted Troop to join the Household Cavalry as part of the escort for her Diamond Jubilee celebrations, on the 29th June 1897.

Cork city also had a mounted troop based in stables at the rear of Union Quay Police station



The imposing entrance to the stables

under the command of a Head Constable. The troop was disbanded in 1913 due to the onset of The Great War. There was an acute shortage of fit and healthy horses for British military requirements, resulting in the escalation of the cost of both horses and feed, it was therefore decided that maintaining the Troop was no longer cost effective.

The Garda Mounted Unit became operational on 17th May 1998. The desirability of horses in Garda service had been the subject of periodic proposals, debate and rejection over the previous 45 years. In 1953 the idea was proposed by Deputy Commissioner W.R.E.Murphy; the matter never progressed but at least the seed had been sown. As the new Millennium approached Senator Quinn addressed the Seanad on the 7th November 1996 and outlined the benefits which would accrue to both the Force and the equine industry by the establishment of a Garda unit, using such



Presidential plaque



Ginger, the rodent patrol

phrases as "Mounted Police are not a colourful relic of bygone days, colourful though they are, but a part of modern policing methods". At the same time Commissioner Pat Byrne was energetically pursuing the issue and in early 1998 the North Yorkshire Police decided to disband its Mounted Unit. The Garda fortuitously acquired six fully trained English Police horses and the necessary equipment to establish its own unit.

Reminiscent of the old saying "putting the cart before the horse" the Garda now had their trained horses and ancillary equipment-but no stables or facilities. The Army Equitation School came to the rescue and provided temporary accommodation in the Curragh. Then later that year, courtesy of President Mary Mc Aleese, the unit moved into permanent accommodation in the old model farm buildings within the grounds of Aras an Uachtaráin; the unit came into existence at a gallop.

This state of the art facility, guarded by imposing black wrought iron gates with the words "Marcaonad An Gharda Síochána" emblazoned in gold lettering, consists of 15 loose boxes,

paddocks, all weather exercise area, tack rooms, veterinary and farrier facilities, stores for bedding, feed, and equipment, yard with outbuildings, offices, conference/briefing room, kitchen facilities etc. A focal point in the centre of the complex is provided by the horse trough and water pump used by the RIC in the Depot. On completion of renovation the complex was officially opened by President Mary Mc Aleese on the 19th December 2000.

The Mounted Unit, which is attached to National Support Services, is currently staffed by two Sergeants, 16 Gardai and two civilian grooms. They have a complement of 9 horses but require more to fulfil their operational requirements. They use only Irish Draught horses, often referred to as "The Horse of the People", as they consider them to have the best temperament for police work, to quote from the breed standard "It has an intelligent and gentle nature and is noted for its docility and sense".

The unit is self sufficient as regards training of both horses and personnel and when vacancies occur there is never a shortage of applicants. The tenure of service for members of the Force may be 30 years, but the horse remains for as long as it is "serviceable" and then enjoys retirement arranged by a League for the Protection of Horses. The minimum period of service for members in the unit is 5 years; with most remaining for 6 to 8. They have established a close working relationship with their counterparts in the Lancashire Constabulary.

On a bright November's day, Sergeant Brendan Duffy gave me a guided tour of the facilities. My previous visit to a stable was at Ballymany Stud on 8th February 1983 re the kidnapping of Shergar when there wasn't a horse to be seen. The facilities enjoyed by the unit, both riders and horses, are excellent, with modern work practices evident at every turn, but I was pleased to note that two of man's greatest inventions, the shovel and the wheelbarrow are still indispensable.

I had surmised that the vast amount of organic waste material produced by 9 healthy horses would be used to nourish the Presidential roses, but I was wrong; the dung comes under "Waste Management" and is professionally recycled by a private company. A question sometimes asked by the public is, why a police horse is allowed to answer the call of nature and just walk away having deposited a bucketful of steaming "poo" on the street or footpath. I have been informed that horse excrement is classified as "biodegradable waste", is non toxic, contains no transferable human diseases, it is environmentally friendly and a well established garden fertilizer. Dublin City Council arranges a clean up upon receipt of a phone call.



The crest

Gone too are the days when the horse was taken to the blacksmith with his fire and bellows in a smoke blackened forge. A farrier, with a mobile unit, attends every three weeks to shoe the horses. Their diet consists of processed nuts in pellet form with hay and added edible oil supplement, to maintain supple joints, coat condition, "regularity" and general health. Hay and bedding comes in vacuum sealed packs to ensure a relatively dust free environment. The giving of treats or tit-bits, by well intentioned admirers, to the horses is not encouraged.

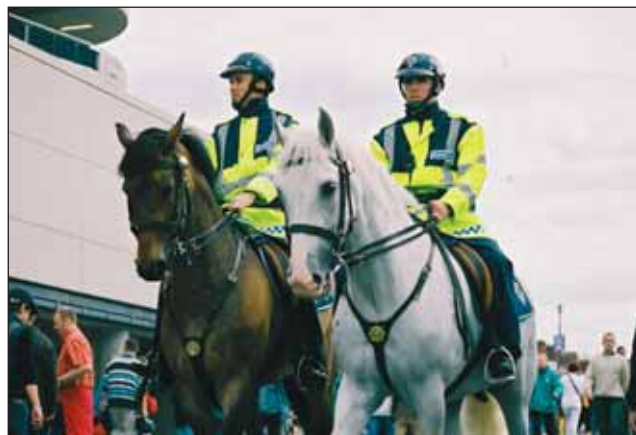
Each horse has its own individual stable with name affixed and history sheet mounted upon the wall, bearing the details; - Name, Breed, Height, Donated by, and Named by. The naming of Garda horses has become a pleasant ritual; an open competition with children sending in their choice of name, the winning entries being literally pulled out of a hat i.e., mounted helmet. The names tend to reflect Gaelic mythology, e.g., Cumhall, Setanta, Fionn Rua, Cullainn, Lir, Boru, Tiarnan and Conn. The saddles used by the unit, made by Stübben of Austria, are tailored for each individual horse and bear its name.

The primary functions performed by the unit include;- crime prevention and detection patrols, searches for missing persons over rough terrain, community policing including visits to schools and local projects, major event policing, public order and crowd control. It is internationally recognised

that one mounted police officer is the equivalent to six officers on the ground. In a crowd situation a member on horseback sits way above the throng and has a birds-eye view of proceedings, it's a case of seeing and being seen, high visibility crime prevention.

Dave Earley, who is currently the only IPA member serving in the Mounted Unit, grew up in horse country, in Newbridge, County Kildare. His father, Major General Dermot Earley, is the present Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces. Dave has fond memories of close contact with the Army Equitation School when his Father was based in the Curragh and can trace his love affair with horses back to his childhood. He too visited Shergar's stable after the horse was gone. He joined the Force in April 1996 and was based in Terenure prior to transferring to the Mounted Unit.

The unit operates from 8am-4pm, and 2pm-10pm on week days with additional extra late night patrols at weekends. When a member arrives for duty he/she must first feed the horse, muck-out, groom, saddle- up and then move out on patrol. In order to save travelling time the horse is often



Croke Park Patrol – Dave Early on right



Fording the River Liffey at Straffan Bridge during the Ryder Cup



St Patrick's Day Parade in 2004



DMP Mounted Troop, Kevin Street 1910



Canine, equine, 'airline'

transported from base to patrol point. There are a number of suitable pit stops which they can use, e.g., Dublin Castle and a new facility in Merrion Mews. The average patrol time for a horse is 5 hours. Upon return to base on completion of duty one must take off tack, groom down the horse, clean tack and of course attend to the inevitable paperwork. In addition to the patrol book, a full history is maintained on each horse, with quarterly reports.

Dave has performed duty at some interesting and colourful events both in Dublin and in the provinces, including Croke Park whenever there is a match, Horse Fairs in Ballinasloe and Tallow (Waterford), open air concerts, the Ryder Cup, the World Rally in Sligo and of course St. Patrick's Day parades, to mention just a few.

Patrolling hard city streets bordered by high rise buildings, being subjected to the constant rumble and noise of traffic and hordes of people must seem like an alien world to the horse and far removed from its natural environment, for the horse is a shy creature. In this regard the horses of the Garda Mounted Unit live in an equine paradise, upon return from duty; they can relax in the solitude of Aras an Uachtaráin and enjoy exercise periods in the vast green acres of the Phoenix Park.

*Somewhere in Time's Own Space
There must be some sweet Wonder Place
Where rivers run and tall tree grow,
Some Paradise where horses go,
For by the love that guides my pen
I know great horses live again.*

*Stanley Harrison
"Gentlemen-The Horse"*

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