

Horses and the Past

We often divide our experience of the world into three parts: the past, the present and the future. However each can affect the others. The past influences the present, which is where we act in ways that will fashion our future. Very many people feel that their past has an effect on their present and future. What they did in the past, or what happened to them in the past, will continue to affect their future choices, often in a negative way.

But the past can influence the present and future for better or worse. I would like to illustrate that point with two true stories, both of which (entirely co-incidentally) involve horses.

The first story uses the Space Shuttle to show how the past can change future choices. You will be familiar with the shape of the space shuttle. The shuttle itself sits atop three huge rockets – the vast main tank and two thin little tubes on either side called Solid Rocket Boosters or SRBs. But the shape of the SRBs is not ideal.

Their manufacturer, a company called Thiokol, had originally designed them in a different, more efficient shape. However, they had to be altered and the boosters made thinner because the design of the space rocket was affected by another factor. What affected the width of the space rocket? The width of a horse's rear end.

Let me explain – it's an odd journey. Over two and a half thousand years ago, the Romans built their chariots and carts with a standard axle length of 4'8½" - this was because their chariots were pulled by two horses and that length would accommodate the width of two horses' backsides. Why did the Romans standardise the width of chariots? They had to because the chariot's wheels formed ruts in the mud of the road which set solid in dry weather. If your chariot didn't fit the rut, it could become fatally damaged. So the 4' 8½" axle width spread throughout the Roman Empire.

European axle makers kept this standard width for the next two thousand years – into the railway age. After all, there is no incentive to change when any alteration would damage your vehicle. The standard width was retained, even into railway age. We British were the pioneers in railway technology, we were the ones that decided the gauge of the railway tracks,

which we fixed at the same standard axle width. This was copied by the Americans, where it influenced the width of the new railway tunnels being built across the United States.

Back to the Space Shuttle. Since SRBs have to be ferried to the launch site by rail, they had to be made thinner, so they could fit through the railway tunnels between Thiokol's plant in Brigham City, Utah, and the launch pad in Florida. So NASA's high tech rocketry was controlled by standards set thousands of years before, relating to horses rather than modern engineering.

This is a perfect example of the past controlling the future. The future rocket design had to be made less efficient in order to accommodate the restrictions imposed by the past. Many of us in this room might feel a degree of recognition there. How many of us feel restricted or even hurt

by things that happened before? How many are carrying feelings or memories from the past that negatively affect choices for the future?

I have another, more hopeful story, involving horses, the past and the future. After the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, Sir Astley Cooper, the famous London surgeon, attended the sale of the wounded horses, considered fit only for the knacker's yard. He bought twelve of the most seriously wounded, had them taken to his Hertfordshire estate, and began to treat their injuries. Slowly, he extracted all the bullets and grapeshot. He saved the lives of every one of those horses, and turned them free to run on his park. One day, he went out to see them. This is what he saw, in the words of his biographer:

“One morning, to his great delight, he saw the noble animals form in line, charge, then retreat, and afterwards gallop about, appearing greatly contented with the lot that had befallen them.”

The horses had all served in different formations, and their self-taught drill was remarkable in itself. But it was more than that: the horses had not forgotten their past – how could they? They did not ignore or repress their military experiences which had brought them so much pain. What they did was to turn that past into a way of joining together anew.

To use their past to provide them with a present source of joy and brotherhood. They freely chose to use their military drills to express their happiness at being healthy and at liberty in the great surgeon's estate.

Perhaps there is something here for us today. This is the start of a new school year together. We are on the brink of a new journey together. The past is there. It will be an influence upon the future that this new year offers us. We can't alter it. But will we be a slave to it, like the SRBs on the Space Shuttle? Or will we acknowledge it and use it to make joy, like the horses of the Battle of Waterloo?

I hope that we will learn from both these horse stories – If the *past* cannot be changed, our *relationship* with the past can be altered. It can control us or set us free. It can shut down options, or open them up. The choice is in ourselves – we are only controlled by our past experiences to the extent that we allow ourselves to be. Let us begin this fresh new year in hope and excitement, looking forward to all that it might bring us, determined to seize every opportunity, recognising that we might carry memories of the past, but ready to use those memories to drive for even greater success.