

# PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.

## The Remount Depot at Manor Hill, Purton

When War was declared in August 1914 the British Army had 5 Remount Depots in the UK (Woolwich, Dublin, Melton Mowbray, Arborfield Cross and Godolming). These Depots were responsible for the training / grading of horses to Military standards. To cope with the huge numbers of horses and mules required to maintain the War machine more Depots were established and by 1915 there were 42 Depots recorded in Great Britain and Ireland. The UK had a Registration Act in peace time to enable compulsory purchase in event of War. In 1914 the BEF needed 140000 horses.

Areas of the Country were divided to provide support for the Army, Southern Area Command was found to have 11 Remount Depots including one at Purton. Despite extensive searches very little was found regarding the Remount Depot at Purton, one entry was found in Michael Young's book covering the history of the Army Service Corps, but little else was found even in Village archives and after extensive searches of the North Wilts Herald and Swindon Advertiser. Reference was however found in Ethel Richardson's books, and, after 6 years research I met with a family holding an extensive collection of paperwork (*that I will refer to as the Robson papers*) concerning the work undertaken at Purton Remount Depot (the Purton Depot was also found referred to as Purton Breaking Depot or horse breaking establishment).

The pre War registration scheme provided a suitable record to pursue horses to support the initial BEF deployment, further horses and mules were purchased from overseas such as North and South America, New Zealand, Spain, Portugal, India and China as the War dragged on and huge numbers of animals became casualties. Again from the Robson papers evidence was found supporting this, animals from America and Canada being mentioned. Whilst many of the animals to pass through Purton were part of the normal processing of animals for War work, the Robson papers clearly show that Purton became a Depot where problematic animals were sent to be broken or "re-trained" by William Robson and his team. There is documented evidence showing animals with specific behavioral traits that needed to be adjusted, often single horses and mules being transported "for the attention of Robson, Purton, near Swindon".

The work undertaken at the Purton Depot was very obviously very skilled and the full story regarding an area of the War so close to the Village deserves to be told. However, the full extent of the work carried out by William Robson and his team can probably never be fully documented, but, with the evidence presented in the Robson papers, this will be the best to date. I will start with the known recorded evidence concerning the Depot as recorded by Ethel Richardson in her books.

In The story of Purton Ethel recorded;

During the Great War a large Army Remount Depot was organised by Mr. W. H. Robson and his sons. It was an interesting though pitiful sight to see the horses being trained in happy and peaceful methods for the terrors awaiting them. Special trains brought large consignments to Purton, and, tied in sections of four, one might see perhaps a hundred of them process through the village, led by a band of willing helpers, to their destination on Manor Hill. Mrs. Bickford, Mrs. Bucknill, Mr. and Mrs. Finch, Mrs. Chappell, Miss Bushby, and Miss Pethick gave their services voluntarily to help in this work. A number of mules were also trained there, some of which, arriving quite intractable, left patterns of all that a mule should be.

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Herbert and Basil Robson had both been discharged from the Army in late 1914.

In Remembrance Wakes Ethel recorded;

During the four years of War, an immense number of mules were called for, being found, it was said, to be both less subject to illness, and more easily fed than horses for transport work.

I recall a curious sight one morning when about 200 of these animals were being led up from our village station, tied in couples together, by a large party of our neighbours, to the farm where their training was to take place. As is well known, a mule is both a suspicious and revengeful animal, and I could not help being amused by the apprehensive and uneasy glances which some of these patriotic ladies cast at them, as they gingerly led them along.

It was said that the poor beasts responded to kind treatment, and they certainly became much more tractable after undergoing a few weeks of careful training at this place.

The addresses used for correspondence to the Depot included Manor Farm, Manor Hill Farm and also Diana Lodge. Outlying farms were mentioned on a number of occasions, being used to put horses to grass, all addresses and people mentioned are included in the following pages. Whilst the Robson papers form an impressive archive of material there is no way to confirm the numbers of animals that passed through Purton. Like all other areas of my research I will quote facts whilst urging the reader to bear in mind that other archives may hold further information.

Whilst no documented evidence has yet been found to confirm when Manor Hill became a Remount Depot, the earliest documents in the Robson papers date from early 1915. An envelope postdated 18/03/1915 from the War office was in the Robson papers, but the contents were not found. The administration of the Depot was all through William Robson, who was the Superintendent of the Depot. All letters concerning animals, feed and financial matters are addressed to William, the only Military personnel on site in Purton were visiting Officers or regular Veterinary inspectors.

Later in the War the Purton Depot was referred to at the highest levels, but it appears in the early months that suspicion was passed over the men who worked there. A letter dated 13/11/1915 from A P Richardson (Purton House) reads;

Mr Robson has passed me your letter of Nov 11<sup>th</sup>. In order to remove the misapprehension about the men who are working for him, I am writing to inform you that I have taken over Mr Robson's establishment for the Remount Department, as a training Depot, for unbroken American horses and mules. So far as possible this work is done by unfit men, or by men over Military age, but it is impossible to do so altogether. If you were to see some of the horses we have to deal with, and I am sure Mr Robson will be glad to let you see them, you will readily agree that some proportion of fit men are necessary. The War Office are issuing munitions workers badges for Mr Robson's men, and no one deserves them more, as the risks they have run are higher than for any other class of workmen. Mr Robson has saved the Country hundreds of pounds already by curing apparently hopeless cases which would otherwise have been sold for what they could fetch. Yours truly, A P Richardson Esq

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The retention of suitable workers at the Depot was to prove problematic as you will see, conscription in 1916 & manpower shortages stripped away Williams workforce and made tough, dangerous work even harder.

From the Robson collection (and remember I am only quoting known numbers) during 1915 horses and mules were received from America as well as from; 32<sup>nd</sup> Division at Codford, 168<sup>th</sup> Brigade Ammunition column, 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, 14<sup>th</sup> S Battalion, Gloucester Regiment, 60<sup>th</sup> Remount Depot and Rolleston. 41 horse and 4 mules are documented along with an unknown amount of N American horses.

From the letters it clearly shows that animals were now being sent to Purton due to their nature and the belief that William and his team could do something with them. Common traits found on paperwork include;


**nervous about the head, vicious, dangerous, impossible to handle, unmanageable, jibber, kicker, unmanageable in the rank, unsuitable for infantry work, will not leave with other horses, bad to shoe, nappy, wild.**

Everything that belonged to the Military was given a number, even horses. The Military documented everything (often in triplicate) so that everything could be tracked and someone ultimately be held accountable having signed for that item. The movement of animals on what must have been an already overcrowded railway system appears to have been carried out in a smooth manner. Often single animals in single railway wagons were dispatched to Purton from all over the Southern Area Command and further afield. Usually the receiving Depot would be notified of animals being sent detailing the intended mode of transport, this was then followed by a Telegram detailing the timings.

C.M. Form 504.

Any further Communications should be addressed to:  
**HEADQUARTERS,**  
and the following letter and number quoted:  
**C.R.A.I.F.  
16756 Q.**

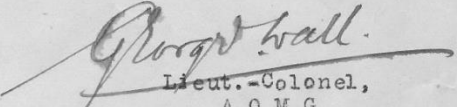
Telegraphic Address:  
"SALAUSTRA, TIDWORTH."  
Telephone No.: TIDWORTH 101 (5 lines).

 **BHURTPORE BARRACKS,  
TIDWORTH,  
SALISBURY PLAIN.**  
12th February, 1918.

HEADQUARTERS:  
**AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE**  
DEPOTS IN UNITED KINGDOM.

Mr Robson,  
Horse Breaking Establishment,  
Purton,  
near SWINDON.

Acting upon instructions from Headquarters (H.O.H.)  
Southern Command, two unmanageable horses, Nos. 214 and 603,  
are being sent to you on Thursday next. Time of arrival  
will be notified you later.

  
Lieut.-Colonel,  
A.Q.M.G.  
A.I.F. DEPOTS IN THE U.K.

Printed by John Worrall, Ltd., Oldham. 5000 Books. 12/16. W.T. 46504/10. (E 755.)


Each consignment of animals came with the relevant paperwork, this included Army Form G. 1033. This was the Issue and receipt voucher, once handed over the person accepting the paperwork would check to make sure that all was there as it would now be that persons / establishments responsibility.

[illegible]



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The next piece of paperwork was the Army Form O. 1640. This contained the animal details and appears to have changed later in the War to the Army Form B 88.



Army Form O. 1640.

### Report of Transfer of Officers' or Troop Horses and Mules.

(To accompany the animal or to be despatched not later than the day on which the animal leaves the unit.)

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(a) Unit from which transferred. C Batt. 316th Bde. R.F.A.

(b) Unit to which transferred. Remount Depot. Purton

(c) Army numbers. 67  
(Mules should be distinguished from Horses.)

(d) Date last shod. June 1st

(e) Date last foraged. June 4/16.

(f) Height and Class. 14 hands Black Horse.  
(i.e., charger, cob, troop horse, &c.)

Date June 1/16. T.W. Watson  
COMDG. "C" BATTERY 316th BDE R.F.A.  
Officer Commanding.

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### Certificate of Veterinary Officer.

I certify that I have inspected the animals about to proceed to \_\_\_\_\_  
and that they are properly shod and free from disease.

I further certify that these animals have not been in contact with any animals affected  
with contagious or infectious diseases.

Date 1/6/16 H.V. Lunn  
Veterinary Officer.

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This portion to be completed by the Receiving Officer.

I certify that the above animals have been brought on charge in my account  
on 2. 5. 16. \*being the day following that shewn at (e) above.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date 5. 6. 16. Rank \_\_\_\_\_

\* Horse billets will, in accordance with Allowance Regulations, be shewn on the F. 718 of the unit at the station of arrival and not of departure.

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In true Military fashion, men were dying in their thousands but the Army still had to account for all its equipment in its inventory, even head collars, chains and rugs. The letter below is typical of many found in the Robson papers, this was sent the day following the dispatch of the animals from Tidworth and already they are hastening the return of their equipment.

CR.AIF. 18916.Q7.

T/I.

6th December 1917

To:  
Mr Robson,  
Horse-breaking Establishment,  
PURTON, near Swindon.

Sir,

With reference to this Office CR.AIF.18916.Q7,  
of the 3rd inst., re the two Mules despatched to your Depot  
on the 5th inst., it is advised that Head Collars, Chains,  
and Rugs accompanied the Mules. Please return these articles  
addressed to the A.Q.M.G., A.I.F., Bhurtpore Barracks, Tidworth,  
at your earliest convenience, at the same time advising date  
of despatch.

I am, Sir,  
Your obedient Servant,

Lieut.-Colonel.  
A.Q.M.G.  
AIF.DEPOTS IN THE U.K.

As the War continued through 1916 even greater numbers of animals were required to assist the efforts undertaken in France and Belgium, further afield Theatres of War were supplied from Remount Depots that had been established in India. Although the Purton establishment was a smaller Depot than most the increase in animals can be seen by documents in the Robson papers (again these figures are the only confirmed numbers available, the true figure may well be much larger). At least 135 horses, 2 ponies and 7 mules were sent to Purton, animals were received from;

213 Coy ASC, XI Divisional train, 60<sup>th</sup> Remount Depot, Rugby Remount Depot, 2/2<sup>nd</sup> S.W.B, 2/3<sup>rd</sup> South Midland Brigade Ammunition Column, Bulford, No1 section A Echelon 63<sup>rd</sup> Divisional Ammunition Column, HQ 316<sup>th</sup> Brigade RFA, 2/6<sup>th</sup> London Field Ambulance, Hampshire Yeomanry, Bicester, 58<sup>th</sup> Division Artillery, Worcester, 2/11<sup>th</sup> Battalion London Regiment, Longridge Deverill, Artillery training Depot, Gloucester, Maidenhead, 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Glos Battery RFA, Templecombe Depot, 58<sup>th</sup> Division, Heytsbury, Warminster, Bristol, 58 signals Sutton Veny, 173<sup>rd</sup> Inf Brigade, Sutton Veny, 175<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 291<sup>st</sup> Brigade RFA, Heytesbury, 509<sup>th</sup> Company ASC, Warminster, 288<sup>th</sup> RFA, Heytesbury, 502<sup>nd</sup> (HTS) Company ASC and the Royal Naval Division Blandford.

Accompanying paperwork detailed the specific problems being encountered, these include "Every means at our disposal have been employed to render these animals services", whilst other statements clearly showed that some animals were clearly dangerous to those working with them "is the maddest horse I have ever had anything to do with" sent "by himself in his own cattle truck". Other recorded details included "there is a very dangerous grey horse amongst the Remounts which is stated to have already injured 2 men. He should be taken away and if found incurably vicious cast".

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On the 20/07/1916 Salisbury sent Robson a letter requesting a form to be completed showing all the civilians being employed at the Depot. It asks him to include details of attested men including details for the place that he was registered under the National registration act. It is quite strongly worded stating that "this has nothing to do with the question of transfer to the reserve of men whom you wish to have exempted". On the 29/07/1916 a letter was received from Salisbury for William, from the content it gives a glimpse of the pressures being felt at Manor Hill "I am glad to hear you are going away for a change and I hope it will put you right".

War had been raging for 2 years now and shortages in manpower were being felt by the Army. In October 1916 Salisbury wrote to Robson stating that "the War office is calling up all class A men in Depots to serve with the colours and I expect that before long they will call up your men also, if they have not done so already. I think your Blacksmith is safe as he has total exemption and I hope that C W Saunders will also be spared, but I expect that you will lose Sutton and F J Saunders".

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1917 a letter arrived from Salisbury. It stated that as from 13<sup>th</sup> December 1916 the Ministry of munitions was withdrawing War Services badges (given to those in reserved occupations, on protected essential War work) adding that the withdrawal did not necessarily mean that the men would be called up. Individual letters to the following men were found (confirmed names shown);

William Herbert ROBSON	Badge 49051.	William George DUNN	Badge 49054.
George Albert SCOTT	Badge 49055.	J A SCOTT	Badge 49056.
H J SAUNDERS	Badge 49057.	Frederick Harold SUTTON	Badge 49058.
C SAUNDERS	Badge 49062.	F J SAUNDERS	Badge 49063.
Sidney OVENS	Badge 49064.	C J LEWIS	Badge 49065.
H J RUMMING	Badge 49066.	John ILES	Badge 49067.
?? RICKS	Badge 49068.	P D SHAILES	Badge 49069.
R TITCOMBE	Badge 49070.	W J RICKS	Badge 49071.
W HANKS	Badge 49072.		

I have been unable to confirm who the men were for badges 49052, 53, 59, 60, 61 and any that may have been issued after 49072 although I suspect that 52 and 53 were Herbert and Basil Robson.

From the documented evidence 1917 was to be the busiest year at the Depot, animals received from all over the Southern Command area and beyond, at least 350 horses and 75 mules were received from;

ASC Chisledon, 6<sup>th</sup> Reserve Regiment of cavalry, Romsey, 173<sup>rd</sup> Inf Brigade Sutton Veny, 502<sup>nd</sup> ASC, 58<sup>th</sup> Divisional Ammunition Column, 50<sup>th</sup> Division, C Battery 295<sup>th</sup> Brigade RFA, 467<sup>th</sup> Field Company Royal Engineers, Essex Camp Larkhill, 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Ambulance, 177<sup>th</sup> Brigade HQ, 2/5<sup>th</sup> Lincoln Regiment, 2/4 Leicester Regiment, 22<sup>nd</sup> Training Reserve at Chisledon, 8<sup>th</sup> Reserve Brigade Bulford, 4<sup>th</sup> Reserve brigade RFA Boyton Camp, Australian Artillery depot, 6<sup>th</sup> Reserve Cavalry Regiment Tidworth, Dragoon Tidworth, Remount Depot Romsey, Strensham Depot Worcester, RFA, Heytesbury, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Otago Regiment Australian Forces Codford, Gloucester depot, Bristol, 311<sup>th</sup> ASC Winchester, 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Infantry Brigade, 44<sup>th</sup> Brigade RFA, Templecombe, Spring Hill Remount Depot Rugby, 4<sup>th</sup> reserve Brigade Boyton, 5<sup>th</sup> Reserve Cavalry Regiment, Remount Depot Gosport, 69<sup>th</sup> Battalion Australian Imperial Force, 40<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battery RHA, 311<sup>th</sup> Company ASC, 16<sup>th</sup> Australian Brigade, 166<sup>th</sup> Brigade RFA Larkhill, 63<sup>rd</sup> Royal Naval Division, ASC Swanage, Russley park, Amesbury, 12<sup>th</sup> Mountain Battery, 432<sup>nd</sup> Company ASC, Veterinary Hospital Larkhill, Australian Army Service Corps training Depot Parkhouse, 60<sup>th</sup> Remount Depot Bulford, 206<sup>th</sup> ASC and the No 1 Cavalry Cadet school.

The Depot was also still taking larger numbers of imported animals such as those detailed on the 10<sup>th</sup> January when 100 horses were received. Amidst the endless formality of Military paperwork there was time for less formal remarks against some of the animals sent such as from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Training Reserve at Chisledon, "I should like to know what is the matter with her, as it is sometimes the fault of the man and not of the horse".

Whilst the Purton Depot was a civilian run establishment, it was done so on behalf of the Army and as such came under its control procedures such as regular inspections from Veterinary Corps men.

12/03/1917      Report of veterinary inspection. 68 horses and 18 mules at Purton yard / Manor Farm. 98 horses at grass, total 176. All animals here are sent for vice or unmanageable except horses at grass which are American imports. Personnel are all civilian including the Farrier, there is an isolation stable at Manor Farm for sick animals

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28/05/1917 Report of veterinary inspection. 69 horses and 18 mules.

The Purton Depot also had regular visits from various Directors of Remount Depots who appear to have been invited to attend by the D.A.D.R in Salisbury to witness the techniques being used by William Robson and his team. In June 1917 the Director of Remounts Brigadier General Charles H Bridge visited Manor Hill. He stated in a later letter "36 horses and 4 mules under corrective training and another 20 horses present". Having seen a number of the horses prior to transfer to Manor Hill he can see that there has been a measure of success using the methods applied. "The problematic horses at shoe can be placed down to the specially able shoeing smith" recalling that "the establishment comprises 23 men". After this visit a letter to Robson from Colonel Kennedy Shaw states that General Bridge has written privately to him "I have said it more privately in favour of Robson and his methods generally than I could put in my report. It is a good place and I should say very economical". Further documents in the Robson papers clearly show that horses from other Depots were sent to Purton after visits by General Bridge when he advised that they should be "sent to Robson at Purton".

N.B.—This Form must accompany any inquiry respecting this Telegram.

**POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS.**

Office Stamp.

Charges to pay s. d.

Handed in at 12.20 P.M.

Received here at 29 JY 18 1917

TO { Reply/Reid Robson Purton

Colonel Colline wishes to see you at work with horses Wednesday afternoon wire if you can give him as good a show as you did when I brought all the officers from here he will arrive about 2.30 Major Lomer Dragoons Tidworth

Also in June a letter was received from the D.A.D.R in Salisbury, Colonel Kennedy Shaw had been ordered to a Remount Depot in France. From the beginning of the War he had sent all the correspondence to Purton and indeed visited the Depot on a number of occasions and clearly appreciated the work carried out. "Thank you for the good work you have done for your Country. I hope when I get back to meet again, I shall never forget all you have done for us". The drain on fit manpower for the Army was by now really beginning to tell on the Purton Depot as more and more men were recalled from reserve. William Robson was still fighting to keep as many of his experienced men at the Depot, his applications on behalf of F H Sutton and Edward Selby being heard in Wootton Bassett backed by Colonel Kennedy Shaw's replacement F J Ryder.

21/07/1917 Report of veterinary inspection. 53 horses, 16 mules with 54 horses at grass.

In December 1917 a horse was received from Mr Cecil Aldins stables, Purley near Reading. Salisbury added in detail that "The staff at Mr Aldins consists entirely of women, and it is not quite a fair thing to ask them to deal with dangerous animals". Another Remount Depot close to Purton was established at Russley Park, Baydon. This like Reading was also staffed entirely by women, further research found that there were 3 such Remount Depots staffed entirely by women during the Great War, Russley park being the largest. The only men to be found at these Depots were the Veterinary



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inspectors who visited to ensure that all was well with Army property. Within the Robson papers it was found, unsurprisingly, that animals were also received from Russley Park.

Remount Depot  
Russley Park  
Baydon  
Wilts  
19/12/17

Dear Mr Robson

Lie William has told us to send you these  
three horses, who are not really at all  
unmanageable - the bay gelding 826 is  
a very good ride but very nervous about  
his head - the chee nut mare is also a  
good ride & appears to be quite quiet but  
suddenly she will rear up for no apparent  
reason at all & can be quite nasty -  
the chee nut gelding is bad to shoe  
& nervous - you will be thinking  
as an awful nuisance -  
With very best wishes for Christmas -  
Yours sincerely  
Lydia Ironside

REMOUNT DEPOT, RUSSLEY PARK  
No. \_\_\_\_\_  
Date 18.12.17  
BAYDON, WILTS.

Dear Mr Robson.

Three horses have  
been ordered to you from  
this Depot and they will be  
at Mr Caudell's at 12. noon  
on Thursday if it is convenient  
for you to meet them

Through the last year of the Great War problematic animals were received from now familiar locations, and from new establishments, at least 43 horses and 11 mules were received from;

6<sup>th</sup> Reserve Cavalry Regiment, Russley Park, Monkton House Alverstoke, Remount Depot Gloucester, 206<sup>th</sup> Company ASC, Remount Depot Gosport, 2<sup>nd</sup> Reserve Cavalry Regiment, AIF Tidworth, Remount Depot Sherborne, 878<sup>th</sup> Company ASC, 60<sup>th</sup> Remount Depot, Spring Hill remount Depot Rugby, 504<sup>th</sup> Company ASC, POW camp Stoke Green, POW camp Faringdon, Worcester, 2<sup>nd</sup> life Guards, Windsor, Aylesbury, Remount depot Shirehampton, 4<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion, Winchester, heavy Artillery training centre Winchester, No4 Section AVC Bulford, Remount Depot, Romsey.

08/01/1918      Report of veterinary inspection. 50 horses 30 mules. Stables satisfactory including temporary shelters at two farms in Purton.

05/03/1918      Report of veterinary inspection. 58 horses 30 mules.

As the Army pursued more and more men to fill the gaps left by casualties, Robson fought to keep a core of men to keep the Remount Depot functioning. He did receive the backing from Salisbury, within the Robson papers a copy of a letter dated 03/04/1918 was sent to the Director of Remount at the War Office justifying the manpower levels at Purton. Signed by Lt Colonel Merrick R Burrell it reads "PURTON BREAKING DEPOT. About 60 horses and mules. The animals all look well. The methods applied to these wild and vicious horses appeared to be extraordinary successful, besides being most cleverly devised and humane. Much of the work done is on quite original lines and I would suggest that a careful record should be kept of all Mr Robsons methods for dealing with the various forms of vice, and that comprehensive collection of photographs should be taken of the tackle he uses and of its application, with detailed description and

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measurements. For Mr Robson to carry on successfully and safely the valuable work he is doing it is essential for him to have a small staff of experts besides his ordinarily unskilled help. Four men I consider come under this description, besides himself and his two sons; C F Saunders - Foreman and breaker aged 23, F H Button (*believed SUTTON*) - breaksman aged 26, W G Dunn - Blacksmith and breaker aged 28, A Scott - foreman and manager aged 45, and on no account should they be removed from the work they are doing.

19/04/1918      Receipt from Chisledon. Chisledon Camp appears to have been the stores Depot where William ordered his supplies.

The minimum standards for men to be accepted into the Army had been adjusted throughout the War, men who were turned away in 1914 / 15 were now conscripted since 1916, so, when the requirements changed they were recalled from reserve to serve. This meant that workplaces lost many workers, women were used more and more but a letter in the Robson papers shows another way that the workforce was bolstered. The letter dated 26/04/1918 was sent from Superintendent A E Hodder of the Oxford poor law incorporation, specifically from Poor law schools, Cowley, Oxford.

Dear Sir

I am writing to say I have a lad whom I think can be thoroughly recommended who has been out on a farm for a couple of years. He is not very tall but is sturdy and strong, and is nearly 16 years of age. If you think him likely to suit you, will you kindly let me know by letter as i will then put it before the committee at once. Hoping Morgan is doing well.

A E Hodder.

A letter dated 08/05/1918 shows that William Robson was clearly struggling to maintain the work at Purton with the manpower he was left with. The letter was from the Ministry of Labour in Swindon, it details that as yet they have been unable to find suitable workers for Robson. The letter shows that the available workforce within the Village must have been exhausted if he was now asking Swindon to help.

William wrote direct to the War Office on the 19/06/1918 pressing the point regarding the lack of personnel to assist the skilled manpower remaining. He is also concerned that the local National Service tribunal may call up men from the Depot without informing the War Office beforehand. William asks if the possibility of using grade III men at the depot was a possibility. If London agreed he would then go through Colonel Ryder with the idea. The problem with this option that William sees is that due to the civilian nature of the Depot, Military personnel would not be possible to be employed as there was no Military Officer Commanding them. William again clearly states that "I hope you will be able to see this plan official as otherwise I shall have to give this work up" (underlining the last section to emphasize the point). The next few lines make interesting reading, William writes "I understand that one obstacle in the way of making this official is that myself and my sons would have to have commissions, which would cost the Country more money, but £5 obviate this difficulty we would all three be willing to do the work as commissioned Officers without increasing any pay. The question was asked at the Tribunal this morning that if the work was that important why were the men not in uniform? some of them seen to think I want the men for my own glorification". The Tribunal referred to was adjourned for another month and on the 23/06/1918 William wrote to Colonel Ryder asking for more men or strong tall boys to take the places of those men who have left during the last few months.

Whilst William Robson may have been struggling for manpower, other Depots were trying to use the methods used at Purton so that horses needn't be transported. On the 15/06/1918 No4 Remount Depot, Arborfield wrote expressing gratitude for a recent visit. It goes on to mention that they are getting their equipment sorted in the hope that one of Williams sons might come up for a few days to assist in the training. Another letter dated 24/09/1918 showed that Remount Depots were still being established. The letter from Tidworth mentions having the go ahead for the Engineers to start on the stables, mentioning that hopefully Herbert could come and help for a while whilst being put up in the Officers Mess.

04/07/1918      Report of veterinary inspection. 83 horses 29 mules.

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## Employment of Prisoners of War Account.

TELEPHONE No. 4.

Telegraphic Address :

"VALUOFF," TROWBRIDGE.

Date. 23rd May 1918

Folio No. 244/51

Name W. H. Robson Esq.

Address Purton,

Swindon

NOTE.—All remittances must be made payable to **Wilts War Agricultural Executive Committee**, crossed and sent to

**W. T. Howes,**  
Castle House,  
Trowbridge.



Dr. to the WILTS WAR AGRICULTURAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

1918

### Particulars of Work done by Prisoners of War.

	£	s.	d.
<u>21<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub></u> Acres Ploughed @ <u>2<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub></u> per acre ... ..	<u>26</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>3</u>
Acres Cultivated @ _____ per acre ... ..			
Acres Dragged @ _____ per acre ... ..			
Acres Harrowed @ _____ per acre ... ..			
Acres Drilled @ _____ per acre ... ..			
Acres Rolled @ _____ per acre .. ..			

*as per Contract dated 4th May 18.*

*By cheque*

27/5/18

W. T. Howes

£ 26 11 3

Hours worked \_\_\_\_\_ men @ \_\_\_\_\_ per hour

## PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.

The German Spring offensive had caused further requirements to bolster Army numbers, despite both Basil and Herbert being discharged from the Army back in 1914 it appears that they were now being considered for call up. A letter dated 20/07/1918 from the War Office asks William Robson to support the proposition for the continued employment of his sons in Purton by showing the number of horses that have passed through the Depot since the beginning of the War.

In a letter dated 09/08/1918 Williams continued frustration concerning the Depot is clear, he writes to Colonel Ryder in Bath;

Dear Colonel Ryder

With reference to you letter of the 8<sup>th</sup> from the War Office, I regret to say that my sons are unable to accept the proposition stated therein, and it is impossible to carry on here, even with a reduced number of horses on account of the shortage of labour. I am afraid there is nothing else for it, but for us to give up the work entirely.

Under the defence of the realm act, all civilians employed were required to be recorded. In the Robson papers I found one such certificate for the Purton Remount Depot, in accordance with regulations all employees 16 years of age or older are recorded. The date of the certificate is unknown Basil Robson is not listed, and with further research to the names included, the certificate is believed to be dated August / September 1918.

### DEFENCE OF THE REALM REGULATION 41a

### D.R Form 17

**EMPLOYER;** W H Robson (farmer) and H M H Robson (Superintendent, horse Depot).

**NAME:** ROBSON Herbert Mayo Hick.

**ADDRESS:** Manor Hill, Purton.

**EXEMPTION:** Army discharge, totally unfit for Military Service.

**STATUS / AGE:** Single, aged 32.

**EMPLOYED SINCE:** 1904.

**EMPLOYED AS:** Superintendent horse Depot.

**NAME:** SCOTT George Albert.

**ADDRESS:** Manor Hill cottages, Purton.

**EXEMPTION:** Grade III, man on work of National importance.

**STATUS / AGE:** Male, aged 45.

**EMPLOYED SINCE:** 1892.

**EMPLOYED AS:** Foreman.

**NAME:** ILES John.

**ADDRESS:** Lydiard Hill cottages, Purton.

**EXEMPTION:** Army discharge, totally unfit for Military Service.

**STATUS / AGE:** Married, aged 40.

**EMPLOYED SINCE:** 1903.

**EMPLOYED AS:** Sheppard and cowman.

**NAME:** TITCOMBE Richard Cyril.

**ADDRESS:** Greenhill, Wootton Bassett.

**STATUS / AGE:** Single, aged 16.

**EMPLOYED SINCE:** 1915.

**EMPLOYED AS:** Carters and grooms.

**NAME:** TITCOMBE H.

**ADDRESS:** Greenhill, Wootton Bassett.

**STATUS / AGE:** Single, aged 16.

**EMPLOYED SINCE:** August 1917.

**OCCUPATION:** Jobman.

**EMPLOYED AS:** Carters and grooms.



## PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.

**NAME:** ALDRIDGE E T J.  
**ADDRESS:** Greatfield, Wootton Bassett.  
**STATUS / AGE:** Single, aged 17.  
**EMPLOYED SINCE:** Mar 1918.  
**OCCUPATION:** Jobman.  
**EMPLOYED AS:** Carters and grooms.

**NAME:** MATTHEWS W J.  
**ADDRESS:** The Butts, Purton.  
**STATUS / AGE:** Widower, aged 61.  
**EMPLOYED SINCE:** June 1917.  
**OCCUPATION:** Handler.  
**EMPLOYED AS:** Carters and grooms.

**NAME:** HEDGES Albert Frederick.  
**ADDRESS:** Melville House, Purton.  
**EXEMPTION:** Medical certificate, deaf and dumb.  
**STATUS / AGE:** Single, aged 29.  
**EMPLOYED SINCE:** April 1917.  
**OCCUPATION:** Jobman and groom.  
**EMPLOYED AS:** Carters and grooms.

**NAME:** BOLTON Henry.  
**ADDRESS:** The Hyde, Purton.  
**STATUS / AGE:** Widower, 74.  
**EMPLOYED SINCE:** April 1918.  
**OCCUPATION:** Farm labourer.  
**EMPLOYED AS:** Carters and grooms.

**NAME:** DUNN William George.  
**ADDRESS:** Blacksmith, Station road, Purton.  
**EXEMPTION:** Tribunal certificate.  
**STATUS / AGE:** Married, aged 28.  
**EMPLOYED SINCE:** 1913.  
**OCCUPATION:** Shoeing Smith and breaker, also Village Blacksmith.

**NAME:** FLETCHER Henry John.  
**ADDRESS:** Pond house, Lydiard Millicent.  
**STATUS / AGE:** Married, aged 62.  
**EMPLOYED SINCE:** 1915.  
**OCCUPATION:** Builders foreman.  
**EMPLOYED AS:** Carpenter.

Another Army form (undated) records the numbers and ages of those employed. The section regarding Military men employed at the establishment is completely blank, the lower section for civilians records the following details;

GRADE / OCCUPATION	NUMBERS / AGES
Chief	3 (aged 28, 30 and 41 or above)
Foreman	1 (aged 22)
Chief brake driver	1 (aged 24)
Expert Shoeing Smith	1 (aged 27)
Grooms	10 (5 below 16 years, 1 aged 21, 24, 26, 39 and 41 or above)
Carter	1 (aged 41 or above)

The form also records that 2 women are employed as "Lady riders".

## PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.

Colonel Kennedy Shaw who went to France in June 1917 wrote to William Robson in February 1919 asking for his help in securing a horse that was being returned to England.

Dear Mr Robson

I wonder if I might ask you to do me a kindness in memory of the days we have worked together in the past? I expect you know that any Officer who has ridden a horse out here is allowed to have it sent home to England to be put up for sale at auction and notice of the sale is sent to the Officer or his representative so that he may have a chance of buying it, if the trade don't run it up to much! I am sending home a brown pony about 14.3, which I want to get hold of and am notifying the War Office to send notice of the date of the sale to you. It will probably come up at Tattersall's - though it may be at Salisbury or Bristol but probably Tattersall's - sometime in March, but of course the date is uncertain. Could you or one of the boys go up to the sale and buy it for me and get it boxed to DINTON station on the L&SW Ry (London & South Western Railway) and wire to my wife at Teffont when it is coming? I believe they brand a number on the hoof before sale & notify you the number, or else it will have my name clipped on the saddle patch. The pony is a little brown mare, unworked and has a nick in her ear. She looks a miserable object, only fit for a Gypsy cart and you'll wonder why I bother about her but I'll tell you one day when we meet. I expect she will go for something under £20, the less the better, but I will go to £35 (thirty-five) for her and then I wouldn't ??? her for another season? or two. I don't expect to see home for another six months, as we are so busy de-commissioning thousands of horses which we can't sell fast enough to keep pace with the rate the men are going at. But I want this pony to get home and have the summer at grass so I am bothering you. I don't want to lose her and I know you'll buy her as cheap as anyone for me. Of course you will let me know any expenses you are put to & I will pay you. With very kindness and to all the family, sincerely yours.

Kennedy-Shaw

The vast majority of horses that departed for French ports never saw the shores of England again, numbers vary but it is estimated of the one million horses and mules used by the Military during the Great War around 75,000 returned. Other recorded figures show that between the Somme in July 1916 and the Armistice in November 1918, the British Army recorded 58,090 horses killed and 77,410 wounded by gunfire; 211 were killed and 2,220 wounded by poison gas. In all an estimated 250,000 animals died in Service, many more would be added to this figure without the work of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps. The animals endured the same horrendous conditions and suffered the same injuries as the men around them. It is a sad fact that huge numbers of horses were sold to French civilians for small fees, effectively cheap meat in a country struggling to recover after 4 years of War, cheaper for the Army to sell on for meat than to keep in fodder and stables, we might not like to think about it in that way but that is the cold truth.

It was not possible to date when the work at Purton was completed, and impossible to account for all the animals that passed through Purton during the Great War, but from the documented evidence available in the Robson papers, many hundreds of animals, mostly problematic, came under the Purton Remount Depots control. From the paperwork I can confirm at least 571 horses and 97 mules.

Despite extensive research the Depot at Purton was not found recorded anywhere. Reference was found for similar "special" establishments near Chester and at Elsenham Hall Paddocks in Essex, both of which were described as catering for horses and mules suspended from service as "incurably vicious". To date the Robson papers form the largest detailed known record of these special Depots. The owners of the archive hope, like me, that interest is raised and in the future the work carried out by William, Herbert, Basil and his team of civilians is viewed with the same respect as other Village Military links to the Great War.

During my research for the Purton Military lists I found that **BASIL ROBSON** arrived in France during September 1918, his MIC records French Red Cross (DVR). Another letter in the Robson papers dated 13/11/1918 recorded "I am sorry to hear Basil is back ill again, but was afraid he wouldn't stand it", so Basil was recalled for Military Service, although the concerns from his 1914 medical discharge appear to have been correct.

**EDWARD SELBY** was found listed in the Memorial book as Royal Field Artillery and also on the 1918 voters list for Purton Parish (a NM).

**HAROLD F SUTTON** was found to have enlisted on the 11/12/1915 and transferred to the Army reserve the following day. He was mobilized on the 18/10/1918 into the Machine Gun Corps but immediately hospitalized due to influenza. He was demobilized on the 17/12/1919.

## PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.

**J A SCOTT** is possibly Albert John Scott found on the 1918 voters list (a NM), **H J RUMMING** is believed to be Henry John Rumming recorded in the Memorial book with the 2/4<sup>th</sup> Wiltshire Regiment and on the 1918 voters list (a NM).

The images on the following pages show some of the tags attached to the animals that were transported to the Depot in Purton, again their use as with the other images throughout this chapter has been granted by the archive owners.

Description of Horse or Mule	Despatched from	Destination	Remarks
L.D.	Remount Depot, Templecombe	Mr. W. H. Roberts Purton	
Signature of Officer			

Description of Horse or Mule	Despatched from	Destination	Remarks
Unbroken Horse.	TEMPLECOMBE DEPOT.	Mr. Roberts Purton	
Signature of Officer			

Description of Horse or Mule	Despatched from	Destination	Remarks
Horse No. 36 Mare Brown H. J. R. L. P. H. J. R. L. P. H. J. R. L. P. H. J. R. L. P. H. J. R. L. P.	Veterinary Hospital Swaythling	Robson's Breaking Establishment PURTON	for training Dangerous.
Signature of Officer			

Description of Horse or Mule	Despatched from	Destination	Remarks
R1	Remount Depot, Templecombe	Mr. W. H. Roberts Purton	
Signature of Officer			

*Horse No 36*

*44*

*Tracts: Tets in Harners.*

*"Rears", "Difficult to manage", not much vicious*

*From Dangerous horse*

*CECIL ALDIN,*

*D.R.O.*

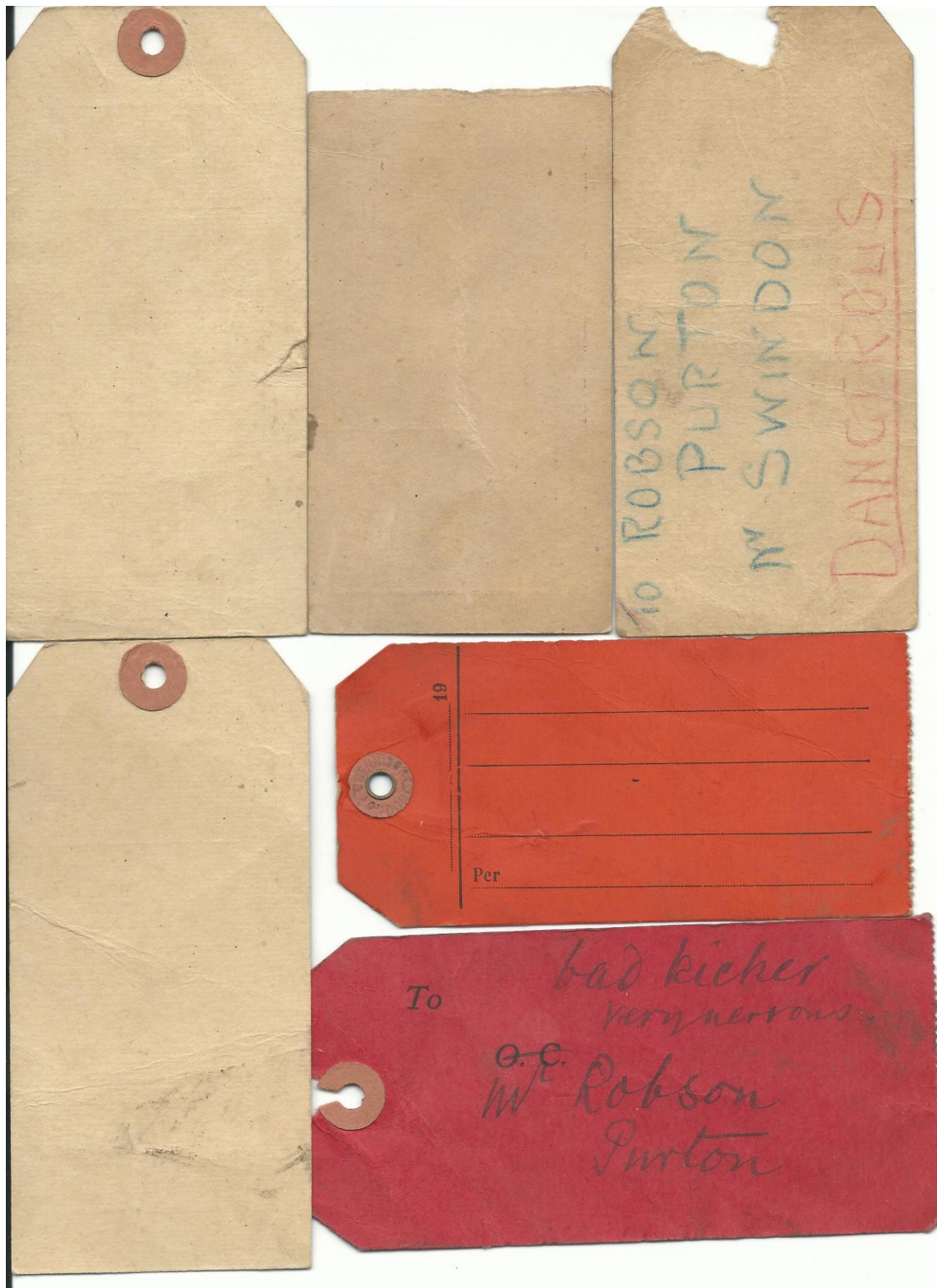
*The Kennels*

*Reading*

*Berks.*



PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.





# PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.

Description of Horse or Mule.	Despatched from.	Destination.	Remarks.
No 116 Bay, 4. 3rd C Bde Horse	C.I. 44th Bde	Purton (Mr. Robson)	
Signature of Officer.			
19 Horses	60 Remounts Tollstone Contracting Station	W.H. Horse Purton	Vicious
Signature of Officer.			
60 REMOUNT DEPOT, "C" LINES, BULFORD.			
Signature of Officer.			
1 Mule 1st Hand Collar			
SQUADRON REMOUNT DEPOT ROMNEY, DANTS, ARMY SERVICE CORPS			
Mr Robson Horse Training Establishment Purton			
Dangerous Not to be trusted Vicious Biter			
Signature of Officer.			
Mule No 69 No 351 Co: asc	Bulford	Robsons Breaking Est Purton	Kicks, Bites, very dangerous in stable It refuses to work
Signature of Officer.			



**PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.**





**PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.**





PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.





1. <u>Mule</u>	Description of Horse or Mule.	Despatched from.	Destination.	Remarks.
J. Arth Jones Remount Depot Worcester.			Mr Robson <u>Purton</u> .	Wild and <u>vicious</u> .
Signature of Officer.				

1. <u>Horse</u> .	Description of Horse or Mule.	Despatched from.	Destination.	Remarks.
R.I.		J. Arth Jones Remount Depot Worcester.	Mr Robson <u>Purton</u> .	This horse is very humourous, and very bad to shoe.
Signature of Officer.				

H.D. Bay Gelding 5 (H.78)	Description of Horse or Mule.	Despatched from.	Destination.	Remarks.
		STRENSHAM Depot	W.H. Robson Esq <u>PURTON</u>	Temp- 101 Bolts (further particulars by letter)
Signature of Officer.				

1. <u>Mule</u> .	Description of Horse or Mule.	Despatched from.	Destination.	Remarks.
J. Arth Jones Remount Depot Worcester.			Mr Robson <u>Purton</u> .	Wild and <u>vicious</u> .
Signature of Officer.				

1626 L.D.I. <del>W.D.I.</del>	Description of Horse or Mule.	Despatched from.	Destination.	Remarks.
		REMOUNT DEPO SHERBORNE.	Mr H. Robson <u>Purton</u> & <u>Claver</u> G. 11. 12	Wild with scars from R.F.A 3 1/6
Signature of Officer.				

"C" SQUADRON REMOUNT DEPO SHERBORNE ARMY SERVICE CORPS	Description of Horse or Mule.	Despatched from.	Destination.	Remarks.
			Mr Robson <u>Purton</u> .	Dangerous Not to be trusted <u>Vicious Biter</u>
Signature of Officer.				

Description of Horse or Male.	Despatched from.	Destination.	Remarks.
1. <u>hunder</u>	J Arkh Jones Remont Depot Worcester.	Mr Robson <u>Purton</u> .	Wild and <u>vicious</u> .

Description of Horse or Mule.	Designated from.	Destination.	Remarks.
1. <u>Horse</u> .  R.I.	J. Arthur Jones Remont Depot Worcester.	Mr. Robson  <u>Purton</u> .	This horse is very humorous, and very bad to shoe.

Description of Horse or Mule.	Despatched From.	Destination.	Remarks.
H.D. Bay Gelding 5 (H.78)	STRENSHAM Depot	W.H. Robson Esq PURTON	Temp- 101 Bolts (further particulars by letter)

Description Type or Male.			
Detailed Form.			
Destination.			
Remarks			

"C" SQUADRON  
REINFORCEMENT DEPOT  
ARMY SERVICE CORPS  
UNITED STATES ARMY

A. P. Roason  
Horse Training  
Establishment  
Purton

Dangerous  
Not to be trusted  
Vicious Biter

Signature of Officer.

Description of Horse or Mule.	1626 L.D.I. <del>1626</del>
Detached from.	MOUNT DEPOT SHERBORNE.
Destination.	Wm. H. Robson Purim Station G. W. T.
Remarks.	Laid with harness from R. F. A 3 1/6

Signature of Officer.

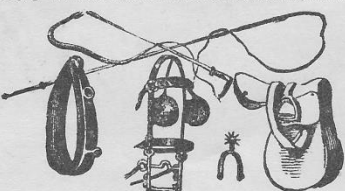
Description of Horse or Mule.	Despatched from.	Destination.	Remarks.
1. <u>Mule.</u>			
1. <u>Artillery</u> <sup>Remont Depot.</sup> <u>Worcester.</u>	In Robson <u>Purton.</u>	Wild and <u>Vicious.</u>	

*Voluntary signature of Officer.*

# PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.

7, NEWPORT STREET, SWINDON

*m* 19



**Dr. to F. Davis,**  
Practical Saddle and Harness Maker.

ALL STABLE REQUISITES KEPT IN STOCK.


Portmanteaus Leather Bags and all Fancy Leather Goods Repaired and Renovated.

Telegrams: ROUSE, Wootton Bassett.

125, High Street,  
Wootton Bassett, 1916

*M. W. H. Robson Esq*  
Bot of *J. Rouse,*  
Rope, Twine, Sacks,  
Waterproof Covers, Rick Sheets and Tarpaulin Manufacturer.  
5 PER CENT. CHARGED ON ALL OVERDUE ACCOUNTS.

		£ s d
	To ac rendered	7.14.3
Oct: 28	4 Best Halters	5 -
Nov: 21	3 Rolls Coir yarn	6 -
Dec: 6	3 Dzs mangle reins	18 -
	1 Dzs Common Halters	6 -
Dec: 9	1 P plough line	2 6
	4 short ropes @ 3/-	12 -
	1 Dzs C Halters	6 -
	1 Roll Coir yarn	2 -
	1 Dzs Halters reins	6 -
" 12	2 Dzs Jarred Halters reins	14 -
Jan: 10	6 Best Halters	7 6
		<u>11.19.3</u>

 Paid by cheque  
Clk 6/17  
*Joseph Rouse*  
with thanks


The Robson papers also contained many receipts and bill statements (see the Civilian section for a selection). F Davies in Swindon and Rouses in Wootton Bassett supplied many essential items for the Remount depot.

Telegrams: ROUSE, Wootton Bassett.

125, High Street,  
Wootton Bassett, 1917

*M. W. H. Robson Esq*  
Bot of *J. Rouse,*  
Rope, Twine, Sacks,  
Waterproof Covers, Rick Sheets and Tarpaulin Manufacturer.  
5 PER CENT. CHARGED ON ALL OVERDUE ACCOUNTS.

		£ s d
Bill of goods		22 6 4
Aug. 2	12 Best Leather eye Halters	18 -
	2 Steel Lined Whips	2 6
Aug 22	6 Dzs, 5 ft Halters reins	19 6
	@ 3/3 per doz	
		<u>24 6 4</u>

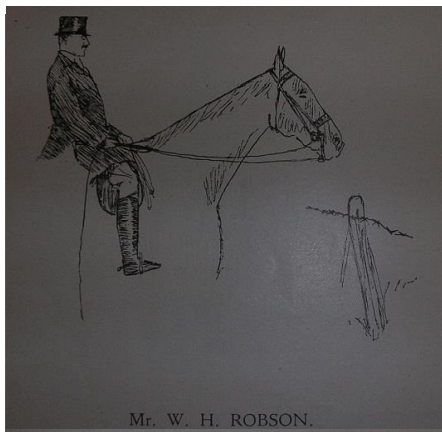
 Paid by cheque  
Sep: 3/17  
*Joseph Rouse*  
with thanks



## PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.



The photograph above is believed to show William Robson (Bowler hat). The photograph to the right was found with the Robson papers. He remains unidentified at the moment, wearing uniform identified as an Officer with the Royal Wiltshire Regiment.



The 2 drawings of the Robson`s appeared within a publication for the Vale of the white horse hunt.

The photo that follows was given to me by Purton Resident Mr Scott at Bentham. It shows Bonny at Pry Farm who was owned by Mrs Flo King (*Nee Scott*). Bonny was requisitioned in 1914 for War work.



**PURTON WAR HORSES, REMOUNT / BREAKING DEPOT.**

