Probably the most dramatic occurrence in the history of veterinary practice was the disappearance of the draught horse. It is an almost incredible fact that this glory and mainstay of the profession just melted quietly away within a few years. And I was one of those who were there to see it happen.

When I first came to Darrowby the tractor had already begun to take over, but tradition dies hard in the agricultural world and there were still a lot of horses around. Which was just as well because my veterinary education had been geared to things equine with everything else a poor second. It had been a good scientific education in many respects but at times I wondered if the people who designed it still had a mental picture of the horse doctor with his top hat and frock coat busying himself in a world of horse-drawn trams and brewers' drays.

We learned the anatomy of the horse in great detail, then that of the other animals much more superficially. It was the same with the other subjects; from animal husbandry with such insistence on a thorough knowledge of shoeing that we developed into amateur blacksmiths – right up to medicine and surgery where it was much more important to know about glanders and strangles than canine distemper. Even as we were learning, we youngsters knew it was ridiculous, with the draught horse already cast as a museum piece and the obvious potential of cattle and small animal work.

Still, as I say, after we had absorbed a vast store of equine lore it was a certain comfort that there were still a lot of patients on which we could try it out. I should think in my first two years I treated farm horses nearly every day and though I never was and never will be an equine expert there was a strange thrill in meeting with the age-old conditions whose names rang down almost from medieval times. Quittor, fistulous withers, poll evil, thrush, shoulder slip – vets had been wrestling with them for hundreds of years using very much the same drugs and procedures as myself. Armed with my firing iron and box of blister I plunged determinedly into what had always been the surging mainstream of veterinary life.

Alfred Wight had similarly undertaken a programme of education that placed much of its attention on the horse. In his final year at the Glasgow Veterinary College he gained some practical experience working at the busy Glasgow practice of Professor Willie Robb. A renowned horse specialist, Robb, like his fellow professors, had lived through the days when heavy draught horses were a familiar sight in both the city streets of Glasgow and the rural pastures of Yorkshire.

Alf, however, had had little experience of horses prior to his studies and was all too aware he still had a huge amount to learn when he finally graduated as a veterinary surgeon in 1939. After five years of ‘a slow and painful assimilation of thousands of facts’, as James Herriot puts it in If Only They Could Talk, he feels as if he knows nothing, like an ‘astronomer looking through a telescope at an unknown galaxy’. He wasn’t always plagued with such doubt and in the same book he reminisces about his seventeen-year-old self, when after just one lecture in animal husbandry, he felt he ‘really knew about horses’ and was thus keen to try out his new-found expertise.

I could hardly believe my luck when I saw the horse. It was standing outside the library below Queen’s Cross like something left over from another age. It drooped dispiritedly between the shafts of a coal cart which stood like an island in an eddying stream of cars and buses. Pedestrians hurried by, uncaring, but I had the feeling that fortune was smiling on me.

A horse. Not just a picture but a real, genuine horse. Stray words from the lecture floated up into my mind; the pastern, cannon bone, coronet and all those markings – snip, blaze, white sock near hind. I stood on the pavement and examined the animal critically.

I thought it must be obvious to every passer-by that here was a true expert. Not just an inquisitive onlooker but a man who knew and understood all. I felt clothed in a visible aura of horsiness.

I took a few steps up and down, hands deep in the pockets of the new riding mac, eyes probing for possible shoeing faults or curbs or bog spavins. So thorough was my inspection that I worked round to the off side of the horse and stood perilously among the racing traffic.

I glanced around at the people hurrying past. Nobody seemed to care, not even the horse. He was a large one, at least seventeen hands, and he gazed apathetically down the street, easing his hind legs alternately in a bored manner. I hated to leave him but I had completed my examination and it was time I was on my way. But I felt that I ought to make a gesture before I left; something to communicate to the horse that I understood his problems and that we belonged to the same brotherhood. I stepped briskly forward and patted him on the neck.

Quick as a striking snake, the horse whipped downwards and seized my shoulder in his great strong teeth. He laid back his ears, rolled his eyes wickedly and hoisted me up, almost off my feet. I hung there helplessly, suspended like a lopsided puppet. I wriggled and kicked but the teeth were clamped immovably in the material of my coat.

There was no doubt about the interest of the passers-by now. The grotesque sight of a

man hanging from a horse's mouth brought them to a sudden halt and a crowd formed with people looking over each other's shoulders and others fighting at the back to see what was going on.

A horrified old lady was crying: 'Oh, poor boy! Help him, somebody!' Some of the braver characters tried pulling at me but the horse whickered ominously and hung on tighter. Conflicting advice was shouted from all sides. With deep shame I saw two attractive girls in the front row giggling helplessly.

Appalled at the absurdity of my position, I began to thrash about wildly; my shirt collar tightened round my throat; a stream of the horse's saliva trickled down the front of my mac. I could feel myself choking and was giving up hope when a man pushed his way through the crowd.

He was very small. Angry eyes glared from a face blackened by coal dust. Two empty sacks were draped over an arm.

'Whit the hell's this?' he shouted. A dozen replies babbled in the air.

'Can ye no leave the bloody hoarse alone?' he yelled into my face. I made no reply, being pop-eyed, half throttled and in no mood for conversation. The coalman turned his fury on the horse. 'Drop him, ya big bastard! Go on, let go, drop him!'

Getting no response he dug the animal viciously in the belly with his thumb. The horse took the point at once and released me like an obedient dog dropping a bone. I fell on my knees and ruminated in the gutter for a while till I could breathe more easily. As from a great distance I could still hear the little man shouting at me.

After some time I stood up. The coalman was still shouting and the crowd was listening appreciatively. 'Whit d'ye think you're playing at – keep yer hands off ma bloody hoarse – get the poliss tae ye.'

I looked down at my new mac. The shoulder was chewed to a sodden mass. I felt I must escape and began to edge my way through the crowd. Some of the faces were concerned but most were grinning. Once clear I started to walk away rapidly and as I turned the corner the last faint cry from the coalman reached me.

'Dinna meddle wi' things ye ken nuthin' aboot!'

Five years later and a newly qualified James Herriot has recently arrived in Darrowby and is eagerly awaiting his first call-out without Siegfried. The phone rings and it's Lord Hulton's farm manager, Mr Soames, who explains he has a valuable hunting horse with colic. James's hopes for a straightforward case are dashed: not only is colic in horses notoriously tricky, but he must also deal with Soames, who is a prickly

character.

James, nonetheless, has no choice but to steel himself for the visit, the well-thumbed pages of Common Colics of the Horse hovering in front of him ‘phantom-like’ as he drives to the farm.

I opened the door and went inside. And I stopped as though I had walked into a wall. It was a very large box, deeply bedded with peat moss. A bay horse was staggering round and round the perimeter where he had worn a deep path in the peat. He was lathered in sweat from nose to tail, his nostrils were dilated and his eyes stared blankly in front of him. His head rolled about at every step and, through his clenched teeth, gobbets of foam dripped to the floor. A rank steam rose from his body as though he had been galloping.

My mouth had gone dry. I found it difficult to speak and when I did, it was almost in a whisper. ‘How long has he been like this?’

‘Oh, he started with a bit of belly ache this morning. I’ve been giving him black draughts all day, or at least this fellow has. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s made a bloody mess of it like he does everything.’

I saw that there was somebody standing in the shadows in the corner; a large, fat man with a head collar in his hand.

‘Oh, I got the draught down him, right enough, Mr Soames, but they haven’t done ’im no good.’ The big man looked scared.

‘You call yourself a horseman,’ Soames said, ‘but I should have done the damn job myself. I reckon he’d have been better by now.’

‘It would take more than a black draught to help him,’ I said. ‘This is no ordinary colic.’

‘What the hell is it, then?’

‘Well, I can’t say till I’ve examined him, but severe, continuous pain like that could mean a torsion – a twisted bowel.’

‘Twisted bowel, my foot! He’s got a bit of belly ache, that’s all. He hasn’t passed anything all day and he wants something to shift him. Have you got the arecoline with you?’

‘If this is torsion, arecoline would be the worst thing you could give him. He’s in agony now, but that would drive him mad. It acts by contracting the muscles of the

intestines.'

'God dammit,' snarled Soames, 'don't start giving me a bloody lecture. Are you going to start doing something for the horse or aren't you?'

I turned to the big man in the corner. 'Slip on that head collar and I'll examine him.'

With the collar on, the horse was brought to a halt. He stood there, trembling and groaning as I passed a hand between ribs and elbows, feeling for the pulse. It was as bad as it could be – a racing, thready beat. I everted an eyelid with my fingers; the mucous membrane was a dark, brick red. The thermometer showed a temperature of a hundred and three.

I looked across the box at Soames. 'Could I have a bucket of hot water, soap and a towel, please?'

'What the devil for? You've done nothing yet and you want to have a wash?'

'I want to make a rectal examination. Will you please bring me the water?'

'God help us, I've never seen anything like this.' Soames passed a hand wearily over his eyes then swung round on the big man. 'Well, come on, don't stand around there. Get him hot water and we'll maybe get something done.'

When the water came, I soaped my arm and gently inserted it into the animal's rectum. I could feel plainly the displacement of the small intestine on the left side and a tense, tympanitic mass which should not have been there. As I touched it, the horse shuddered and groaned again.

As I washed and dried my arms, my heart pounded. What was I to do? What could I say?

Soames was stamping in and out of the box, muttering to himself as the pain-maddened animal writhed and twisted. 'Hold the bloody thing,' he bellowed at the horseman who was gripping the head collar. 'What the bloody hell are you playing at?'

The big man said nothing. He was in no way to blame but he just stared back stolidly at Soames.

I took a deep breath. 'Everything points to the one thing. I'm convinced this horse has a torsion.'

'All right then, have it your own way. He's got a torsion. Only for God's sake do something, will you? Are we going to stand in here all night?'

‘There’s nothing anybody can do. There is no cure for this. The important thing is to put him out of his pain as quickly as possible.’

Soames screwed up his face. ‘No cure? Put him out of his pain? What rubbish is this you’re talking? Just what are you getting at?’

I took a hold of myself. ‘I suggest you let me put him down immediately.’

‘What do you mean?’ Soames’ mouth fell open.

‘I mean that I should shoot him now, straight away. I have a humane killer in the car.’

Soames looked as if he was going to explode. ‘Shoot him! Are you stark raving mad? Do you know how much that horse is worth?’

‘It makes no difference what he’s worth, Mr Soames. He has been going through hell all day and he’s dying now. You should have called me out long ago. He might live a few hours more but the end would be the same. And he’s in dreadful pain, continuous pain.’

Soames sank his head in his hands. ‘Oh God, why did this have to happen to me? His lordship is on holiday or I’d call him out to try to make you see some sense. I tell you, if your boss had been here he’d have given that horse an injection and put him right in half an hour. Look here, can’t we wait till Mr Farnon gets back tonight and let him have a look at him?’

Something in me leaped gladly at the idea. Give a shot of morphine and get away out of it. Leave the responsibility to somebody else. It would be easy. I looked again at the horse. He had recommenced his blind circling of the box, stumbling round and round in a despairing attempt to leave his agony behind. As I watched, he raised his lolling head and gave a little whinny. It was a desolate, uncomprehending, frantic sound and it was enough for me.

I strode quickly out and got the killer from the car. ‘Steady his head,’ I said to the big man and placed the muzzle between the glazing eyes. There was a sharp crack and the horse’s legs buckled. He thudded down on the peat and lay still.

While Soames stares at the body of the horse in disbelief, James explains that Siegfried will carry out a post-mortem in the morning to confirm his diagnosis. Soames is now furious and threatens to sue James over the whole affair, convinced that the young vet has made a grave error. James heads back to the surgery, worried that he may have scuppered his career before it had even started, although he still feels that he had no option but to put the horse out of its misery. The next morning, however,

Siegfried informs him that the post-mortem had indeed shown torsion of the bowel, meaning James had taken exactly the right course of action and that, if anything, Soames had taken too long in sending for a vet.

Despite the advent of tractors, there were still plenty of young and healthy horses in the Yorkshire Dales who needed the services of vets like James. The area even had its own breed, the strong and hardy Dales pony. Spring was a busy time for foaling, followed by docking and castration in May and June. Docking removed part of the tail, a procedure usually carried out on heavy draught horses to prevent it getting caught in harnesses or carriage equipment. The castration of year-old colts was a job Alf never enjoyed, principally because in the 1940s castrations were often performed on a conscious, standing horse, with the aid of just local anaesthesia. The actual procedure is fairly simple but vets were obviously vulnerable to injury should a horse prove non-compliant. ‘It’s dead easy to remove the testicles from a horse,’ Alf frequently said. ‘The real skill lies in persuading him to part with them!’

The real-life experiences of Alf and partner Donald Sinclair bore testament to the dangers and occasional mayhem that ensued when treating horses. While performing a castration, Donald narrowly escaped a nasty injury when the horse kicked the knife he was holding out of his hand, so that it sailed through the air, missing his head by inches. Alf applied a chloroform muzzle to anaesthetize the horse which promptly bolted into a field. Alf was ‘hanging on grimly to the head rope’ as it crashed through a fence into a garden.

Not unsurprisingly, in If Only They Could Talk the young James Herriot is apprehensive whenever he is sent to perform a castration or delicate equine surgery, knowing that, while he is competent in his work, he perhaps lacks the innate skills to tame an unruly horse.

Out of ten jobs nine would be easy and the tenth would be a rodeo. I don’t know how much apprehension this state of affairs built up in other vets but I was undeniably tense on castration mornings.

Of course, one of the reasons was that I was not, am not and never will be a horseman. It is difficult to define the term but I am convinced that horsemen are either born or acquire the talent in early childhood. I knew it was no good my trying to start in my mid-twenties. I had the knowledge of equine diseases, I believed I had the ability to treat sick horses efficiently but that power the real horseman had to soothe and quieten and mentally dominate an animal was beyond my reach. I didn’t even try to kid myself.

It was unfortunate because there is no doubt horses know. It is quite different with cows; they don’t care either way; if a cow feels like kicking you she will kick you; she doesn’t give a damn whether you are an expert or not. But horses know.

So on those mornings my morale was never very high as I drove out with my instruments rattling and rolling about on an enamel tray on the back seat. Would he be wild or quiet? How big would he be? I had heard my colleagues airily stating their preference for big horses – the two-year-olds were far easier, they said, you could get a better grip on the testicles. But there was never any doubt in my own mind. I liked them small; the smaller the better.

One morning when the season was at its height and I had had about enough of the equine race, Siegfried called to me as he was going out. ‘James, there’s a horse with a tumour on its belly at Wilkinson’s of White Cross. Get along and take it off – today if possible but otherwise fix your own time; I’ll leave it with you.’

Feeling a little disgruntled at fate having handed me something on top of the seasonal tasks, I boiled up a scalpel, tumour spoons and syringe and put them on my tray with local anaesthetic, iodine and tetanus antitoxin.

I drove to the farm with the tray rattling ominously behind me. That sound always had a connotation of doom for me. I wondered about the horse – maybe it was just a yearling; they did get those little dangling growths sometimes – nanberries, the farmers called them. Over the six miles I managed to build up a comfortable picture of a soft-eyed little colt with pendulous abdomen and overlong hair; it hadn’t done well over the winter and was probably full of worms – shaky on its legs with weakness, in fact.

At Wilkinson’s all was quiet. The yard was empty except for a lad of about ten who didn’t know where the boss was.

‘Well, where is the horse?’ I asked.

The lad pointed to the stable. ‘He’s in there.’

I went inside. At one end stood a high, open-topped loose box with a metal grille topping the wooden walls and from within I heard a deep-throated whinnying and snorting followed by a series of tremendous thuds against the sides of the box. A chill crept through me. That was no little colt in there.

I opened the top half door and there, looking down at me, was an enormous animal; I hadn’t realized horses ever came quite as big as this; a chestnut stallion with a proud arch to his neck and feet like manhole covers. Surging swathes of muscle shone on his shoulders and quarters and when he saw me he laid back his ears, showed the whites of his eyes and lashed out viciously against the wall. A foot-long splinter flew high in the air as the great hoof crashed against the boards.

‘God almighty,’ I breathed and closed the half door hurriedly. I leaned my back against the door and listened to my heart thumping.

I turned to the lad. ‘How old is that horse?’

‘Over six years, sir.’

I tried a little calm thinking. How did you go about tackling a man-eater like this? I had never seen such a horse – he must weigh over a ton. I shook myself; I hadn’t even had a look at the tumour I was supposed to remove. I lifted the latch, opened the door about two inches and peeped inside. I could see it plainly dangling from the belly; probably a papilloma, about the size of a cricket ball, with a lobulated surface which made it look like a little cauliflower. It swung gently from side to side as the horse moved about.

On walking back to the house to ask for soap and water, he discovers no one is in so is forced to return – in something of a gleeful gallop – to his car. A few weeks later, however, he is called back in to perform the dreaded procedure.

Stepping out of the car, I felt almost disembodied. It was like walking a few inches above the ground. I was greeted by a reverberating din from the loose box; the same angry whinnies and splintering crashes I had heard before. I tried to twist my stiff face into a smile as the farmer came over.

‘My chaps are getting a halter on him,’ he said, but his words were cut short by an enraged squealing from the box and two tremendous blows against the wooden sides. I felt my mouth going dry.

The noise was coming nearer; then the stable doors flew open and the great horse catapulted out into the yard, dragging two big fellows along on the end of the halter shank. The cobbles struck sparks from the men’s boots as they slithered about but they were unable to stop the stallion backing and plunging. I imagined I could feel the ground shudder under my feet as the hooves crashed down.

At length, after much manoeuvring, the men got the horse standing with his off side against the wall of the barn. One of them looped the twitch onto the upper lip and tightened it expertly, the other took a firm grip on the halter and turned towards me. ‘Ready for you now, sir.’

I pierced the rubber cap on the bottle of cocaine, withdrew the plunger of the syringe and watched the clear fluid flow into the glass barrel. Seven, eight, ten cc’s. If I could get that in, the rest would be easy; but my hands were trembling.

Walking up to the horse was like watching an action from a film. It wasn’t really me

doing this – the whole thing was unreal. The near-side eye flickered dangerously at me as I raised my left hand and passed it over the muscles of the neck, down the smooth, quivering flank and along the abdomen till I was able to grasp the tumour. I had the thing in my hand now, the lobulations firm and lumpy under my fingers. I pulled gently downwards, stretching the brown skin joining the growth to the body. I would put the local in there – a few good weals. It wasn't going to be so bad. The stallion laid back his ears and gave a warning whicker.

I took a long, careful breath, brought up the syringe with my right hand, placed the needle against the skin then thrust it in.

The kick was so explosively quick that at first I felt only surprise that such a huge animal could move so swiftly. It was a lightning outward slash that I never even saw and the hoof struck the inside of my right thigh, spinning me round helplessly. When I hit the ground I lay still, feeling only a curious numbness. Then I tried to move and a stab of pain went through my leg.

When I opened my eyes Mr Wilkinson was bending over me. 'Are you all right, Mr Herriot?' The voice was anxious.

'I don't think so,' I was astonished at the matter-of-fact sound of my own words; but stranger still was the feeling of being at peace with myself for the first time for weeks. I was calm and completely in charge of the situation.

'I'm afraid not, Mr Wilkinson. You'd better put the horse back in his box for now – we'll have a go at him another day – and I wonder if you'd ring Mr Farnon to come and pick me up. I don't think I'll be able to drive.'

My leg wasn't broken but it developed a massive haematoma at the point of impact and then the whole limb blossomed into an unbelievable range of colours from delicate orange to deepest black. I was still hobbling like a Crimean veteran when, a fortnight later, Siegfried and I with a small army of helpers went back and roped the stallion, chloroformed him and removed that little growth.

I have a cavity in the muscle of my thigh to remind me of that day, but some good came out of the incident. I found that the fear is worse than the reality and horse work has never worried me as much since then.

Horse work also involved a considerable amount of dentistry. A horse that cannot chew properly rapidly loses condition so any problems with teeth require prompt attention. Years of grinding could leave sharp spikes on teeth which needed to be rasped (filed down) or clipped off to prevent them catching on the tongue or cheek. It was also commonly thought that 'wolf teeth' – small teeth in front of the first molars – hindered chewing and required knocking out, although James is less convinced of the

benefits of this procedure.

As a result, veterinary practices had an array of medieval-like instruments to grind, shear off and knock out the teeth of their equine patients, including, as James Herriot writes, ‘vicious forceps with two-feet-long arms, sharp-jawed shears, mouth gags, hammers and chisels, files and rasps; it was rather like a quiet corner in the Spanish Inquisition’.

In If Only They Could Talk, James is called in to look at a couple of aged horses belonging to John Skipton at Dennaby Close. He, like many Dalesmen, has grown attached to the majestic beasts that once toiled by his side and he has cared for them well beyond their working years. The character of John Skipton was based on a client of the Thirsk practice, John Sowerby, who typified the type of hard-working, decent farmer who had lived a life of hard graft labouring alongside men and horses rather than machines.

As James arrives, old Mr Skipton effortlessly hoists a pitchfork of hay over his shoulder and sets off at a brisk pace. James, lugging his wooden box of instruments, staggers across the large estate, far down to the river where two horses stand in the autumn sunshine.

‘They’re in a nice spot, Mr Skipton,’ I said.

‘Aye, they can keep cool in the hot weather and they’ve got the barn when winter comes.’ John pointed to a low, thick-walled building with a single door. ‘They can come and go as they please.’

The sound of his voice brought the horses out of the river at a stiff trot and as they came near you could see they really were old. The mare was a chestnut and the gelding was a light bay but their coats were so flecked with grey that they almost looked like roans. This was most pronounced on their faces where the sprinkling of white hairs, the sunken eyes and the deep cavity above the eyes gave them a truly venerable appearance.

For all that, they capered around John with a fair attempt at skittishness, stamping their feet, throwing their heads about, pushing his cap over his eyes with their muzzles.

‘Get by, leave off!’ he shouted. ‘Daft awd beggars.’ But he tugged absently at the mare’s forelock and ran his hand briefly along the neck of the gelding.

‘When did they last do any work?’ I asked.

‘Oh, about twelve years ago, I reckon.’

I stared at John. ‘Twelve years! And have they been down here all that time?’

‘Aye, just lakin’ about down here, retired like. They’ve earned it an’ all.’ For a few moments he stood silent, shoulders hunched, hands deep in the pockets of his coat, then he spoke quietly as if to himself. ‘They were two slaves when I was a slave.’ He turned and looked at me and for a revealing moment I read in the pale blue eyes something of the agony and struggle he had shared with the animals.

‘But twelve years! How old are they, anyway?’

John’s mouth twisted up at one corner. ‘Well, you’re t’vet. You tell me.’

I stepped forward confidently, my mind buzzing with Galvayne’s groove, shape of marks, degree of slope and the rest; I grasped the unprotesting upper lip of the mare and looked at her teeth.

‘Good God!’ I gasped. ‘I’ve never seen anything like this.’ The incisors were immensely long and projecting forward till they met at an angle of about forty-five degrees. There were no marks at all – they had long since gone.

I laughed and turned back to the old man. ‘It’s no good, I’d only be guessing. You’ll have to tell me.’

‘Well, she’s about thirty and gelding’s a year or two younger. She’s had fifteen grand foals and never ailed owt except a bit of teeth trouble. We’ve had them rasped a time or two and it’s time they were done again, I reckon. They’re both losing ground and dropping bits of half-chewed hay from their mouths. Gelding’s the worst – has a right job champin’ his grub.’

I put my hand into the mare’s mouth, grasped her tongue and pulled it out to one side. A quick exploration of the molars with my other hand revealed what I suspected: the outside edges of the upper teeth were overgrown and jagged and were irritating the cheeks while the inside edges of the lower molars were in a similar state and were slightly excoriating the tongue.

‘I’ll soon make her more comfortable, Mr Skipton. With those sharp edges rubbed off she’ll be as good as new.’ I got the rasp out of my vast box, held the tongue in one hand and worked the rough surface along the teeth, checking occasionally with my fingers till the points had been sufficiently reduced.

‘That’s about right,’ I said after a few minutes. ‘I don’t want to make them too smooth or she won’t be able to grind her food.’

John grunted. ‘Good enough. Now have a look at t’other. There’s summat far wrong with him.’

I had a feel at the gelding’s teeth. ‘Just the same as the mare. Soon put him right, too.’

But pushing at the rasp, I had an uncomfortable feeling that something was not quite right. The thing wouldn’t go fully to the back of the mouth; something was stopping it. I stopped rasping and explored again, reaching with my fingers as far as I could. And I came upon something very strange, something which shouldn’t have been there at all. It was like a great chunk of bone projecting down from the roof of the mouth.

It was time I had a proper look. I got out my pocket torch and shone it over the back of the tongue. It was easy to see the trouble now; the last upper molar was overlapping the lower one resulting in a gross overgrowth of the posterior border. The result was a sabre-like barb about three inches long stabbing down into the tender tissue of the gum.

That would have to come off – right now. My jauntiness vanished and I suppressed a shudder; it meant using the horrible shears – those great long-handled things with the screw operated by a crossbar. They gave me the willies because I am one of those people who can’t bear to watch anybody blowing up a balloon and this was the same sort of thing only worse. You fastened the sharp blades of the shears on to the tooth and began to turn the bar slowly, slowly. Soon the tooth began to groan and creak under the tremendous leverage and you knew that any second it would break off and when it did it was like somebody letting off a rifle in your ear. That was when all hell usually broke loose but mercifully this was a quiet old horse and I wouldn’t expect him to start dancing around on his hind legs. There was no pain for the horse because the overgrown part had no nerve supply – it was the noise that caused the trouble.

Returning to my crate I produced the dreadful instrument and with it a Haussman’s gag which I inserted on the incisors and opened on its ratchet till the mouth gaped wide. Everything was easy to see then and, of course, there it was – a great prong at the other side of the mouth exactly like the first. Great, great, now I had two to chop off.

The old horse stood patiently, eyes almost closed, as though he had seen it all and nothing in the world was going to bother him. I went through the motions with my toes curling and when the sharp crack came, the white-bordered eyes opened wide, but only in mild surprise. He never even moved. When I did the other side he paid no attention at all; in fact, with the gag prising his jaws apart he looked exactly as though he was yawning with boredom.

As I bundled the tools away, John picked up the bony spicules from the grass and studied them with interest. ‘Well, poor awd beggar. Good job I got you along, young

man. Reckon he'll feel a lot better now.'

Alongside looking after heavy draught horses, many of which have seen years of farm labour, James and Siegfried also treat a variety of ponies, riding horses and thoroughbreds. Their real-life counterparts, Donald and Alf, were also frequently asked to judge at local horse shows, an unenviable task, often causing resentment among those without rosettes. On attending such events, Donald advised: 'Be friendly but firm. Thoroughly examine every animal . . . and keep the car engine running!'

Call-outs to racing stables were also part of the job: Yorkshire has had a long association with horse racing and there are still nine racecourses in the county, including in Thirsk itself. Of the two vets, Siegfried is the horse specialist just like Donald Sinclair who was the Thirsk Racecourse Veterinary Surgeon for over forty years.

Like Alf, James proves himself a very capable equine vet but visits to racing stables often prove challenging. The patients are valuable animals and James is always compared unfavourably with his senior partner Siegfried who is a well-known figure in the racing fraternity and very comfortable in that world. In Vets Might Fly, James must visit a racing stable where he is given a distinctly hostile reception.

Even now I can recall the glowering face of Ralph Beamish the racehorse trainer, as he watched me getting out of my car.

'Where's Mr Farnon?' he grunted.

My toes curled. I had heard that often enough, especially among the horse fraternity around Darrowby.

'I'm sorry, Mr Beamish, but he'll be away all day and I thought I'd better come along rather than leave it till tomorrow.'

He made no attempt to hide his disgust. He blew out his fat, purpled cheeks, dug his hands deep in his breeches pockets and looked at the sky with a martyred air.

'Well, come on, then.' He turned and stumped away on his short, thick legs towards one of the boxes which bordered the yard. I sighed inwardly as I followed him. Being an unhorsey vet in Yorkshire was a penance at times, especially in a racing stable like this which was an equine shrine. Siegfried, apart altogether from his intuitive skill, was able to talk the horse language. He could discuss effortlessly and at length the breeding and points of his patients; he rode, he hunted, he even looked the part with his long aristocratic face, clipped moustache and lean frame.

The trainers loved him and some, like Beamish, took it as a mortal insult when he

failed to come in person to minister to their valuable charges.

James goes on to examine three horses, Mr Beamish dismissing all of his diagnoses. When James attempts to take the third horse's temperature, Mr Beamish stops Harry the stable lad lifting one of the horse's fore legs, enabling it to raise its two hind feet and thrust them into James, who sails backwards through the door. Stretched out on the concrete, he struggles for breath.

There was a moment when I was convinced I was going to die but at last a long wailing respiration came to my aid . . . Mr Beamish, on the other hand, showed no interest in my plight; he was anxiously examining the horse's hind feet one after the other. Obviously he was worried lest they have sustained some damage by coming in to contact with my nasty hard ribs.

Having recovered from the unfortunate incident, James is then alerted to another horse that has started to choke and wheeze alarmingly, as if on the verge of death. After a hasty examination, James diagnoses oedema of the larynx, caused by the allergic condition urticaria. He injects adrenaline into the jugular furrow and within fifteen minutes the filly is almost back to normal in what appears to be a miraculous recovery. Beamish looks on with amazement, while James walks back to his car 'riding on a pink cloud with all the tension and misery flowing from me in a joyful torrent'. It's an event that typifies how veterinary work can in a moment transition from despair to triumph, prompting Mr Beamish to put his face to the car window and utter: 'Mr Herriot, I've been thinking . . . you don't have to be a horsey man to cure horses, do you?'

The Darrowby practice also has a long line of assistants who share the load when it comes to horse work. In Every Living Thing, Siegfried, who has always embraced new ideas and contraptions, sends the latest assistant John Crooks out to test a new electrical treatment on a horse belonging to Darrowby's lord of the manor.

John had his own ideas about treatment and wasn't afraid to express them. One day Siegfried found the two of us in the operating room.

'I've been reading about this Inductotherm. Revolutionary new treatment for strained tendons in horses. You just wrap this electric cable round the leg for a certain time every day and the heat clears up the strain.'

I gave a non-committal grunt. I seldom had any ideas and, in fact, was constitutionally opposed to any change, any innovation. This trait, I knew, irritated my partner intensely so I remained silent.

John, however, spoke up. 'I've read about it, too, but I don't fancy it.'

‘Why not?’ Siegfried’s eyebrows went up.

‘Smacks of witchcraft to me,’ John said.

‘Oh, rubbish!’ Siegfried frowned at him. ‘I think it sounds perfectly rational. Anyway, I’ve ordered one of the things and I’d like to bet it’ll be a big help to us.’

Siegfried was the horse specialist so I didn’t argue, but I was very interested to see how the thing worked and we soon had the opportunity to find out. The Lord of the Manor of Darrowby, usually called the Squire, kept his horses in some stables at the foot of our street, a mere hundred yards away, and it seemed like fate when he reported a case of strained tendons.

Siegfried rubbed his hands. ‘Just what we wanted. I’ve got to go over to Whitby to inspect a stallion, so I’ll leave it to you to handle this case, John. I’ve got a feeling you’ll think the treatment is a great advance.’

I know my partner was looking forward to saying ‘I told you so’ to the young man, but after a week of the treatment, John still wasn’t impressed.

‘I’ve been winding this thing round the horse’s leg every day and hanging about for the required time, but I can’t see any difference. I’m having another session this afternoon, but if it still isn’t any better I’m going to suggest a return to the old treatment.’

Around five o’clock that afternoon, with heavy rain sweeping along on the wind, I was drawing up outside the surgery when I froze in my seat. I was looking out at something terrible. Several of the Squire’s men were carrying a body down the street. It was John. As I got out of the car they bore him into the house and deposited him at the foot of the stairs. He seemed to be unconscious.

‘What on earth’s happened?’ I gasped, looking down in horror at the form of my colleague draped over the lower steps.

‘T’yoong man’s electrocuted ’isself,’ one of the men said.

‘What!’

‘Aye, it’s right. He were soaked wi’ rain and when ’e went to connect up the machine to the plug, ’e must have got his fingers on the live metal. He started to yell, but ’e couldn’t let go. He went on yellin’, but I were hangin’ on to the horse’s head and I couldn’t help ’im. He sort of staggered about, like, and at t’finish he fell over the horse’s hind leg and that broke ’is grip on the thing or I think he’d have been a goner!’

‘My God! What can we do?’ I turned to Helen who had appeared from the kitchen. ‘Could you phone the doctor,’ I cried. ‘But wait a minute, I think he’s coming round.’

John, stretched out on the stairs, had begun to stir, and as he peered up at us through half-closed eyes, an amazing flow of colourful language began to pour from him. He went on and on and on.

Helen stared at me, open-mouthed. ‘Just listen to that! And he’s such a nice young man, too!’

I could understand her astonishment, because John was an upright, very correct lad who, unlike most vets, did not swear. However, he had a wonderful store within him because some of the words were new even to me, which was surprising considering that I grew up in Glasgow.

After a while the torrent slowed down to an unintelligible mumble, and Siegfried, who had just come in from his round, began to ply him with neat gin which, I believe, is contraindicated in these cases.

There is no doubt that John could have lost his life but, mercifully, as the minutes passed he recovered steadily until he was able to sit up on the stairs. At last, as we adjured him to take it easy and stay where he was, he shook himself, got up, drew himself up to his considerable height and faced Siegfried.

‘Mr Farnon,’ he said with great dignity, ‘if you ask me to operate that bloody apparatus again I shall tender my resignation.’

And so that was the end of the short career of the Inductotherm.

When horses provided the power on farms, veterinary surgeons were often required to investigate lameness, which nine times out of ten was caused by problems with the feet. They had the tools and training required to remove horseshoes, which they frequently did, although occasionally they had to call in the experts if a large horse was proving particularly troublesome.

In Every Living Thing, James calls in the local expert in the form of blacksmith Denny Boynton to help with Farmer Dickson’s big Clydesdale who has ‘gravel’, a local term for infection of the foot.

‘Right,’ I said, ‘let’s have a look at it.’ I ran my hand down the leg and was reaching for the foot when the horse whickered with anger, turned quickly and lashed out at me, catching me a glancing blow on the thigh.

‘He can still kick with that bad foot, anyway,’ I murmured.

The farmer took a firmer grip on the halter and braced his feet. ‘Aye, he’s a cheeky sod. Watch yourself. He’s given me a clout or two.’

I tried again with the same result and, at the third attempt, after the flailing foot had narrowly missed me, the horse swung round and sent me crashing against the side of the box. As I got up and, grimly determined, had another go at reaching the foot, he reared round at me, brought a fore foot crashing on my shoulder, then tried to bite me.

The farmer was an elderly man, slightly built and he didn’t look happy as he was dragged around by the plunging animal.

‘Look,’ I said, panting and rubbing my shoulder, ‘we’ve got a bit of a problem. I have to bring Denny Boynton out to another gravelled horse near here this afternoon. We’ll call in about two o’clock and treat this chap. He’s got a shoe on, anyway, and it’s a lot easier to do the job with a blacksmith.’

Farmer Hickson looked relieved. ‘Aye, that’ll be best. I could see we were goin’ to have a bit of a rodeo!’

As I drove away, I mused on my relationship with Denny. He and I were old friends. He was a bit younger than I and accompanied me regularly on horse visits. In the fifties, the tractor had more or less taken over on the farms but some farmers still liked to keep a carthorse and took a pride in them. Most of them were big, docile animals and I had always had a strong empathy with them as they plodded patiently through their daily tasks, but that one back there was an exception.

Normally I would have taken the shoe off without much trouble before exploring the foot. All vets did courses in shoeing early in their education and I carried the tools with me, but I would have had some fun trying to do that with Hickson’s animal. It was a job for Denny.

Denny Boynton is one of the few blacksmiths to have survived in the area. At one point nearly every village had a forge and a town like Darrowby would have had several. ‘But with the disappearance of the draught horse,’ as James Herriot puts it, ‘they had just melted away. The men who had spent their lives in them for generations had gone and their work places which had echoed to the clatter of horses’ feet and the clang of iron were deserted and silent.’ Alf Wight based Denny on the Thirsk blacksmith Billy Keel, who was entirely fearless when it came to horses, even fierce stallions, but was bizarrely anxious around little dogs.

James heads to the Boynton smithy in Rolford village, where Denny is found bent over the foot of a strapping hunter, his father hammering the glowing metal on the anvil.

James explains he needs help with Hickson's horse, warning him of his wildness, although knowing that Denny had dealt with dangerous horses since childhood – 'I had seen him again and again pushing big, explosive animals around effortlessly as though they were kittens.' Denny is happy to help, untroubled by what James has in store for him.

The farmer gripped the halter tightly and smiled uncertainly at Denny as he came in. 'Watch 'im, lad. He's a funny sod.'

'Funny, is he?' The young man, hammer dangling from his hand, grinned and stepped close to the horse, and the animal, as though determined to prove the words, laid back his ears and lashed out.

Denny avoided the flying foot with practised ease and gave a demon king's laugh, throwing back his head. 'Aha! You're like that, are ye? Right, ya bugger, we'll see!' Then he moved in again. I don't know how he kept clear of the horse's repeated attempts to injure him, but within a minute he caught the claw of his hammer in the iron shoe in full flight and pulled it towards him. 'OK, ya big bugger, I've got ye now, haven't I, eh?'

The horse, on three legs, made a few half-hearted attempts to pull his foot away as Denny hung on and chattered at him but it was clear that he realized that this new man was an entirely different proposition. Denny, with the foot on his knee, reached for his tools, muttering threats all the time and as I watched unbelievingly, he knocked up the clenches, drew out the nails with his pincers and removed the shoe. The horse, motionless except for a quivering of the flanks, was totally subjugated.

Denny displayed the sole for my inspection. 'Now, where d'you want me, Mr Herriot?' he asked.

I tapped along the sole until I found a place which seemed tender. To make sure, I squeezed at the place with the pincers and the animal flinched.

'That's the spot, Denny,' I said. 'There's a crack there.'

The young farrier began to cut away the horn with expert sweeps of his sharp knife. This was a job I had done so often by myself, but it was a joy to see an expert doing it. In no time at all he had followed the crack down and there was a hiss then a trickle of pus as he reached the site of the infection. It was one of the most satisfactory things in veterinary practice because, if the abscess is not evacuated, it causes the most acute agony for the animal. Sometimes the pus can work up under the wall of the hoof until it bursts out at the coronet after a long period of pain, and in other cases I have seen horses having to be put down when all attempts to relieve the infection have failed and the poor animal was laid groaning with a hugely swollen foot. Such memories from the

old carthorse days always haunted me.

Nothing of that was going to happen this time and my relief was as strong as always. ‘Thanks, Denny, that’s great.’ I administered antibiotic and anti-tetanus injections and said to the farmer, ‘He’ll soon be sound now, Mr Hickson.’

Then Denny and I set off for our next appointment. As we drove out of the yard I looked at the young blacksmith. ‘Well, you certainly dealt with that wild horse. It was amazing how you quietened him.’

He leaned back in his seat, lit another cigarette and spoke lazily. ‘Nobbut a bit daft, ’e was. It was nowt. There’s lots like ’im – silly big bugger.’