

Waler horses in an educational setting: Salesian College, Rupertswood

Utilising our heritage rare breed Waler horses on your farm and in your equine programme provides a unique opportunity to bring Equine studies to a whole school environment. I strongly believe the Walers are very well suited to an educational environment and that developing this connection will bring a much-needed opportunity to reconnect the horses with the community, to ensure that every Australian child's right to meet a Waler horse is secured into the future.

Below is an initial look at the links that could be made across VCE and VET subjects, from an outsider's perspective of course! Each idea can be explored at varying year levels and taken outside the school where appropriate to provide real life experience and purpose. I know of no other project like this one and it would be so symbolic at Rupertswood to initiate what could one day be more mainstream in appropriate schools: day-to-day engagement with our living history.

VCE

Agriculture: use of the Waler horse in the past to develop the land and finding a relevance for them today as practice turns back to more gentle handling of stock, coupled with the price of fuel, along with general versatility on the farm for work and pleasure.

Students could research Rupertswood Farm history to discover what horses were used on the farm and how they were used.

Biology: genetic diversity of the Waler horse – the most genetically diverse horse breed due to its origins of using any, and all, breeds of horse that survived a journey to Australia to breed a horse suited to Australian conditions. (Refer CSIRO Publishing Australian Journal of Zoology, 29/10/13 Microsatellite analysis of genetic variability in Waler horses from Australia, Khanshour et al).

Did Rupertswood Farm breed for their private Lighthorse unit, where did they source Walers and what type were most sought after and why?

Business/ Management: identifying possible partnerships to secure the future of the Walers, how to manage the future of the breed by working with the Shrine for example, the Clarke Family?

Students could identify potential partnerships/funding and work up business cases to put forward. Also basic Farm Management Plans to integrate Walers into the Farm and curriculum.

Computing: recording old blood line horse data in a multi-linked database to build a stud book (example Lipizzaner studbook, hundreds of years of work to secure the breed now reflected in a modern interface for current breeders).

Students could research and record the Rupertswood horses to try and build an historical studbook, the structure of the database and its linkages could be simple or complex depending on year level.

History: Walers were an integral part of our history – development, social, military.

So much potential here to discover Rupertswood history and to document Waler history more generally, especially efforts to preserve the breed once commercial breeding stopped in 1948.

English: strong oral history potential to explore, along with poems and stories especially military.

There will be many personal connections to Walers within the school community, my experience of interacting with the public who see my horses shows that lots of families have a personal story back in their history, and not just confined to military.

Health and Human Development: Walers were part of everyday life back when horsepower was all that was available for work, pleasure and transport. Can they find a new role in our community working with children, the aged, the disabled, war affected, mentally ill, addicted, criminal, the list goes on? (see Redgum Walers working with War Veterans example).

Outreach programmes could be developed so that students not only visit the elderly for example, they bring a Waler along with them and document oral history.

Media: the story of the Walers is a strong and broadly engaging tale of our development and history, and fresh stories will emerge to build on the establishment of a stud book in the mid-1980s, as new potential sources of Walers are found (listen to the ABC podcast with Janet and Ros to get the vibe).

Anzac Day is an obvious promotion opportunity each year for the Walers at Rupertswood, 31/10/17 is the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Beersheba (the last great cavalry charge in history), Australia All Over, social media pages, so much to explore & experiment with (strong topic/photogenic horses).

Outdoor and environmental studies: integrating horses with the land, caring for both: how was it done in the past and how can it be done better now?

A Farm Management plan could be developed to support building horse numbers and activities: incorporating key indicators and timeline milestones.

Psychology: horse therapy is relatively mainstream in European schools, and although in its infancy here its potential is well documented and demonstrated (check out the Candlebark example).

Students could research current thinking about the impact of the horse on human behaviour, they are the only animal that can recognise human emotion at a distance; it is their ability to provide a mirror to human emotion that makes them such a powerful psychological tool.

Systems and Technology: explore the development of a database to drive an online studbook, building up to it becoming an educational resource which documents history with web links and horse/people profiles, forum pages for broader engagement.

Potential for lots of projects to tackle a need to bring multiple data sets and stakeholders together by utilising technological tools, from a basic practical Rupertswood environment of Farm horses/care plans/training plans/event plans right through to the complex structures of a studbook and interactive Waler resource.

Texts and traditions: war poetry and songs of the era are there to be found and brought to a new audience, along with various attempts to document the history of the horse in Australia and the Walers more specifically (ie Australia on Horseback by Cameron Forbes, or Bill the Bastard by Roland Perry), and more modern ballads which turn up around Anzac Day.

Various styles of writing covering Walers in our history are covered by writers from poet A.B.Paterson (The Last Parade) to songwriter Eric Bogle (As If He Knows), through to the interview style ABC podcast Conversations with Richard Fidler (Janet Lane and Ros Sexton's quest to save the Waler Horse) to current day ballads such as 'What Happened to the Horses' by Prousty.

Visual communications and design: explore the promotion of the breed to an educational and general audience, with great scope for photography and development of storyboards and internet offerings for varying audiences (from primary children trying to understand the concept of war through to the Australian public discovering for the first-time the sacrifice of the Walers).

Students can work on any number of projects and the Walers make wonderful subjects!

VET

Agriculture: at its most practical, using Walers as the horse of choice on the Rupertswood farm day-to-day, as once was the case on every Australian farm.

So much for students to learn here, along with the Walers, who are a great all round horse, easy to keep, easy to be around, and easy to train. Bringing them back to Rupertswood would be such a strong profile building story too.

Business: managing a whole Farm enterprise, potentially a Waler breeding and training programme to meet Farm needs.

A great opportunity to build business plans from the ground up as the Waler/Equine project establishes at the Farm. This would introduce students to the business world in a very practical way.

Conservation and land management: caring for both country and horse, which requires careful research and management to minimise the impact of the horses on the land and to maximise the health and well-being of the horse herd.

Solid learning opportunities to establish the carrying capacity of the land in good seasons and in bad and how best to manage existing vegetation/pasture around new requirements for horse housing and facilities. Getting it wrong can lead to very bad outcomes for the land as well as the horses, we are surrounded by examples of this as horse hobby farms abound along with insufficient knowledge and planning, bringing horse ownership into some disrepute as so much land degradation is evident.

Community services: Walers in the community will resonate loudly and broadly, a real feel and do good opportunity for the whole school.

Walers can provide a unique new dimension to the place the school can find in its community, just facilitating broader access to these horses could kick off any number of community service programmes; one example could be getting the aged out and about – one look at a Waler and students will find stories just emerge. From Anzac Day to everyday, Walers inspire connections.

Desktop publishing: Desperately needed to raise the profile of the Walers is a website resource with embedded studbook and public forum to provide a place for collecting Waler history, pictures and anecdotes to bring them into the 21st century. A rich source for publishing leaflets, newsletters and other materials promoting the Walers at Rupertswood, and more generally.

Such an interesting and far reaching project for students, and so important for the future of the Walers, many Waler oriented topics can be explored and brought to life for varying audience levels and types, from purely photographic to the more research documented, and everything in between.

Equine industry: using Walers as the horse of choice at Salesian College will provide opportunity to breed, educate and utilise Walers as they once were, securing their relevance for today and in the future. Showing and competing with them would be so valuable in broadening their exposure within the horse world.

There are existing Waler studs that could be researched/ visited to compare or contrast with other equine industries such as flat (thoroughbreds) or harness racing (standardbreds). There are Walers competing in all disciplines, from endurance through eventing to show jumping and dressage, albeit hard to find as they are a rare breed. Time to change that! I reckon they are the future stars of the fast-growing new discipline 'Working Equitation'; right size, right temperament.

Information technology: from studbook to educational resource to cataloguing photos, Walers provide great scope to utilise today's technological tools.

It's hard to imagine how the logistics of shipping thousands of horses overseas to war or for export to other armies was handled without information technology! A project could be to try and recreate the process using today's tools, this would surely demonstrate the power of the computer vs paper documentation; or otherwise! Imagine if the records had been hacked allowing the transport ships or fodder supply lines to be easily targeted, food for thought beyond the practical contribution information technology can make. Building a studbook is a robust database project too.

Interactive digital media: strong potential to build a resource to provide a home for our Waler history and future, no tool could not have fun with the Waler story and the horses themselves.

Check out Enoch Waler on Facebook to get a feel for what that medium can facilitate. I can see animations, Waler life on the Farm cartoons, so much to work with that already conveys personality and charm just by knowing some of the Waler story and looking at the characters.

Laboratory skills: DNA mapping is key to preserving the old bloodline Walers as they were commercially bred for export up to 1948. Testing is important to understanding the nutritional values of the pasture that horses have access to, the worm burdens that they may be carrying, the vitamins and minerals that may be in over or under supply.

Understanding the genetic make-up of the Walers and the soil, water and pasture values of the Farm is key to breeding and keeping a healthy herd, in any Farm situation.

Small business: working up a business plan to establish a small Waler stud at Salesian College would be a useful enterprise in both an educational and a practical sense. It would provide such a good opportunity to become self-sufficient in suitable horses.

Students could research and discover that the Walers are a very small business in the equine industry. They are a rare breed and under duress from lack of care in existing breeding programmes, morphing from well-bred Walers into Waler Sport Horses, all within the one studbook. A small business case-study would most likely conclude that they are at risk, not due to any single deliberate act but simply by insufficient planning, implementation and control despite best efforts from the two incorporated Waler breed Associations: The Waler Horse Society of Australia, and Waler Horse Owners and Breeders Association Australia Inc.

How would students handle the challenge of preserving our heritage breed?

Sport and recreation: Walers are the original all-purpose horse, bred to do anything for their riders/handlers at home and at war. Sensible, well conformed and nice to be around, they provide a unique horse experience that took generations to breed and that we are lucky to still have, for now.

Students will discover that Walers are a joy to be with, they represent what horses used to be like, indeed had to be like as they determined how successfully and safely you could work your land, travel to your destination, and generally co-exist. You were nothing without a good horse, and the Waler was bred to be the best 'good horse' for Australian conditions (the Holden car of the horse world).

I strongly believe that the Walers will be an asset to the whole school community, not just participants in the Equine and VET programme generally. They will be a positive, productive investment in the future of the school and its farm, and in the future of the Walers themselves.