

## 200 years of Waler history & my aspirations for them in 10 minutes...

### What is the breed's connection to central Australia?

- At the time Australia was colonised there was a renaissance in horse breeding around the world, so we had access to the best of the best, and only the toughest of those survived the arduous sea journey. Horses came to us from where there were established shipping routes, we ended up with horses from the UK, Chile, India, Indonesia and Timor and we mixed them together to create what became known as 'a horse bred in the colony of New South Wales' (which was NSW & Queensland initially), later shortened to 'Waler'.

The gene pool in Walers is documented as the broadest in the world, including South American breeds such as Garrano, Galiceno, Criollo and Paso Fino, the old drafts (Belgian/ Cream/ Clydesdale/ Suffolk/ Shire/ Percheron), coaching breeds like Cleveland Bay, original Arabians, Welsh and Timor Ponies, and more: check out our website [walerdatabase.online](http://walerdatabase.online) for a romp through the history of horse breeds that were around at the time.

- Law and order was provided by the British but soon handed to local authorities to develop their own conscription-based militia, so we had many well trained and well mounted troops readily available by the time of the Boer War in 1899. By the 1840s we were already exporting our home bred horses, establishing new trading routes and facilitating diplomatic relations with our trading partners. That trade kick-started our economy and flourished for over 100 years, petering out from the late 1940s. Buyers for India, in particular, purchased thousands at a time, leading to the establishment of the ports we know today (Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart and Fremantle) and the railways that serviced them. Brisbane became the largest export port for horses, quickly recognising the huge potential of the trade and investing in the necessary infrastructure, facilitating the development of other trade.

At the time of WW1, the last major conflict where horses were used, we had on hand thousands and thousands of horses well suited to the role of a cavalry horse, so well regarded as far back as the 1850s that they became the main mount in India, and UK regiments were sent to India unhorsed and brought home mounted on Walers.

- Central Australia quickly became a significant hub for breeding horses for the India trade, with the establishment of vast tracts of land under pastoral lease. Many NT and SA stations were leased for the sole purpose of horse breeding, that tough country facilitated the development of a strong and sensible horse, and your life depended on your horse.

Different stations started to specialise in breeding the different types required, with some focusing on the heavier draft breeds to create the best artillery horse such as those bred at Jinka and Jervois stations, and others breeding more look-at-me types for officers such as those from Mt Riddock, with the bread-and-butter horses being the trooper's horse, coaching/hunter types such as those bred at The Garden.

- When the demand for horses declined with the advent of mechanisation, breeding enterprises declined accordingly, with horses left to roam the vast tracts of largely unfenced land unmanaged. Keeping horses for sport and leisure started to be affordable with the growth of the middle class by the 1950s, and the old-fashioned horse was seen as too utilitarian, so horse imports recommenced (such as the Quarter Horse and Appaloosa from America), the Waler almost disappearing by the 1960s.
- By the 1980s only the remnant survivors of Government TB eradication policies remained but interest in our horse history, from the families of Light Horsemen in particular, was developing. In the mid-1980s horses were rescued from meat works saleyards in Alice Springs and in SA by a dedicated handful of advocates and transported to Victoria and NSW to establish domestic breeding programmes along with a breed association and studbook. Listen to the ABC podcast 'Janet Lane and Ros Sexton's quest to save the Waler horse' to learn more about that time.

Research and advocacy by a handful of private individuals continues and in 2019 horses from Todd River Downs (now a Land Trust) were captured and brought into breeding programmes in Victoria.

Whilst claims abound of all brumbies being descendants of Walers, in fact by now most are interbred with modern genetics of horse and are far removed from that original old-fashioned horse. This is

especially the case outside the remote parts of the NT and WA, with central Australia remaining a key location where Walers are likely to be sourced as that is where the first horses for these vast breeding programmes were brought to and where the most difficult terrain continues to provide a natural barrier to the likelihood of more modern breeds of horse turning up there.

### What do I want to see happen with the breed?

- Walers are a rare breed and without urgent help they will remain rare and indeed at risk as domestic populations diminish or are polluted by breeding for fashion rather than staying as true as practicable to the old-fashioned horse, introducing congenital faults along the way. We are fortunate enough to still have the chance to preserve the broadest equine genetics in the world that resulted from our need for many thousands of tough and sensible horses.

Walers have genes from many old horse breeds, some no longer in existence, such as Roadsters and Lincolnshire Blacks, some extremely rare such as Suffolk Punches and Cleveland Bays, and some from breeds remaining today that are very different to their original form, such as Clydesdales where breeding for looks more than for work has introduced some inherent genetic problems from which there is no going back.

- We need to raise broader awareness of Walers and their contribution to the colonisation of Australia by educating and informing the general public and enlisting their help. Where there is awareness, it is often confined to military contribution, but Walers contributed with excellence to most aspects of Australian endeavour. Just think of any piece of infrastructure you can: how did it get there? With the assistance of horse, camel and donkey.

For example, did you know that we got shiploads of horses and donkeys from Chile in the mid-1800s? We do hear about the camels and their Afghan handlers, but the same thing happened with the horses and donkeys and their handlers from Chile. Or that the port of Newcastle rivalled Sydney as a horse shipping port due to its rail network used for coal as well as the coal needed to power the steamships which were used in those days?

- Walers were a huge success story at home and overseas, shining a light on our developing nation and facilitating trade and diplomacy. We have so much to be proud of and personal stories from this time if shared can remind us of what has been achieved before and help sustain the energy and aspiration needed for a bright Australian-made future.
- Public engagement with the breed will help build relevance and create more opportunity for them to participate today's world.

### Why should we preserve the breed?

- The Waler horse was made in Australia, an invention bought about by necessity. We needed mega horse-power to develop the nation and it had to be Australian made to cope with the tough conditions: climate, feed, terrain, and a mammoth task list. A unique to Australia breed, with a well-established track record and global profile.

We have disease-free wild roaming populations still available, the least inbred of any breed in the world. Every breed needs an injection of proven and broad ranging genes from time to time to ensure the ongoing health of the population, we still have this equine resource where most other countries do not. Some will know of our disease-free camel exports to the Middle East for example.

They are also ideal candidates for the growing practice of conservation grazing such as found in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Wild horses graze the grass higher and less intensively than domestic animals, and control weeds such as Buffel grass which chokes out native grasses and waterways.

- As most who have any awareness of the Australian Light Horse contribution in WW1 will know, the horses did not come home. Over 137,000 served with our troops alone; 40,000 in action over a single day culminating in the Battle of Beersheba. None of the old Lighthorsemen or their families forgot the horses left behind. There is a bond with the breed that creates a sense of responsibility to preserve the Waler: they served with excellence in peace and in war.

My personal experience over the last 17 years of public engagement with displays of horses and information is of a deep interest and

respect, many have personal stories. Walers are acknowledged as being a significant part of our story, they are not forgotten.

There was a time when Walers were a part of our everyday life, at the very least every Australian child should have the opportunity to meet one, and they won't if we don't advocate for the future of the breed.

### How can we do this?

- Our website [walerdatabase.online](http://walerdatabase.online) lists known Walers that started the breed society studbooks (and their offspring), and covers breed information, colonial horse history, current Waler stories, conservation genetics, and our projects to save the endangered Waler pony and the Timor Pony. Free, publicly accessible information which also provides opportunity for anyone with knowledge and connection to the breed to contribute to.

Photographs are a key feature, to remind us of what these old-fashioned horses actually looked like and did. We treasure historical family photographs and stories as they provide lived history and testimony of the relationship so central to our development.

- Research and DNA testing of wild captured horses to identify likely breed ancestry (primarily via Texas University or privately funded research projects at Sydney University such as our Timor Pony project) so additional source areas can be located (most likely in the toughest country in the NT & WA where modern breeds of horse have not penetrated and brumbies have not all been removed).

Parentage DNA testing (readily available in Australia) to remove risk of in-breeding in breeding programmes and subsequent degradation of the gene pool.

- Widen the pool of those working on the Waler project so it can gain momentum and ultimately endure, as age is catching up with current key contributors. So much knowledge has already been lost since the first wave of Save the Waler activity in the mid-1980s, and so much more is now possible in terms of research and electronic sharing of information.

- Find jobs for Walers, without which rare breeds disappear. Jobs such as equine assisted therapy for example, they could make a big impact on those who have served Australia, as the Walers also served. Managed conservation grazing in National Parks. A presence at racecourses and training stables to fill roles such as course steward's horses and lead horses for youngsters in training. Leisure riding mounts especially for children starting out or adults returning to riding, or plain old-fashioned family companions.

Even return to horse exports to assist horse breeds elsewhere by infusing populations with disease free, old fashioned, hardy, sensible genes!

- Ideally establish large sanctuaries in tough country so wild horses can continue to pass on the prized characteristics of hardiness and good sense to domesticated populations, as once domesticated those characteristics quickly diminish. This is urgent as generic brumby eradication programmes continue.