

## All things bright and beautiful, all.....

The Sod Jobber

**Y**ES, I LOVE 'EM ALL. From the greatest to the least I'm an animal lover. The days when I took pot shots at those sparrows ill-advised enough to clutter our Birmingham garden are as long gone as my attendant zits. Now I delight in feeding the birds.

Then there are the gerbils which have given us hours of pleasure. Rather a shame I took them to school one day and Gerry Gerbil got sat on by a careless trainee angel - gerbilus compressus R.I.P.

Who could resist a cuddly hamster? My class christened ours Kami: apparently something to do with its habit of rushing headlong over the edges of school tables.

Cats are lovely, everything from Henry the Black Killer, to Smudge, the pure white moggy up our road who can't work out why birds always seem to spot him in the shrubbery.

Then there are dogs: Bess the soulful old labrador with a penchant for dead rabbits and cow pancakes, or Polly the demented terrier who took the Evenlode in her stride. Don't, however talk to me about Jack Russells.

Only three dogs have ever bitten me, all of them Jack Russells. Once on the hand, once on the ankle and once in the classic Canines Against Postmen position. Brought tears to my cheeks! (n.b. Bit of schoolboy humour: what do you get if you cross a small dog with a Scottish meat ball? A Jock Rissole!.....groan)

Animal lovers or not, we've all got to draw the line somewhere. My line stops at horses.

Pity really, when the Wychwoods are seemingly infested with them. Forget the third car, the P.C. or Maximilian's mountain bike, we'll get a new Dobbin.

Now don't misunderstand me - I don't dislike horses. Twenty-two years ago I actually sat on one. I've nothing against their riders. Sleek ponytails, red cheeks, laughing eyes and those hugsome stretchy trousers. Girls don't look bad either. No, what I object to are their habits.

Don't go jumping to conclusions. Having spent large dollops of last weekend forking manure around our shrubs I can't complain about their outcomes. Misdirected maybe, but valuable none-the-less. No, my grumbles concern where they go and what they do to our paths.

You can virtually guarantee that horses are shrewdly positioned on any road used by commuters. Late for work and blasting along from Field Assarts to Minster Lovell in my tin box and there's Hermione on her pony.

Everyone has a right to the road, but why take Dobbin out for an outing at rush hour when we commuters fancy nothing but an earful of Classic FM and a slab of pony pie? Smiling sweetly, we slow down and edge our cars into the furthest ditch.

Young riders acknowledge our descent from eighty to seventy, older ones take it for granted. Foot back on the accelerator, we ponder for the umpteenth time on the horse rider's lack of consideration for us kings of the road.

But seriously, why not take to the bridleways?

Therein lies the second problem. Have you seen what horses do to paths? A stroll through Bruern Woods in November will leave you in little doubt. So what's wrong with a bit of mud? A bit? Now I know why all ramblers dress in gunge green. But at least walkers can pick their way between equine sumps.

Does Dobbin care about my running shorts? Entering the woods like an accelerating Persil advert I emerge totally plastered in ooze, muck, grime and filth. And it's all their fault.

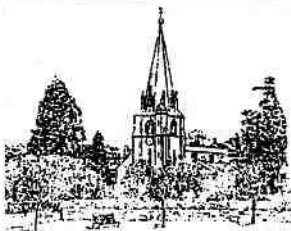
What must my adoring public be thinking when they see mud trickling down the backs of my fetlocks? It's more than a man can stomach.....and running with my mouth open, that can be a real problem! No. I'm afraid the equation is unanswerable: path+walkers = good running, path+horses = bucket of cold water outside the back door when I return.

Would that was the end of it, but have you seen what happens to these same paths in summer? The strings of mud which cross Bruern Woods in winter cement into solid craters of earth, each crater uttering a siren call to my running shoes. I lurch from pothole to pothole, ankles screaming their protest, looking for all the world like a hamstrung hippo after a night out with the lads.

I'm hardly a picture of fleet-footed svelteness as it is, but hurl me down the ribbon of pitfalls which here passes for the Oxfordshire Way and any pretensions of grace disappear in a cloud of hot air.

Animal lover I may be, but when I retire I'll buy a knackers yard with my pension and celebrate its opening with a feast comprised entirely of horse d'oeuvres.

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