

= Shire horse =

The Shire horse is a breed of draught horse (BrE) or draft horse (AmE) . The breed comes in many colours , including black , bay and grey . They are a tall breed , with mares standing 16 hands (64 inches , 163 cm) and over and stallions standing 17 hands (68 inches , 173 cm) and over . The breed has an enormous capacity for weight pulling , and Shires have held the world records for both largest overall horse and tallest horse at various times . Throughout its history , the breed has been popular for pulling brewery wagons delivering ale to customers . This practice continues today , with the breed also being used for forestry , leisure and promotional pursuits .

In 1878 , the British organization now known as the Shire Horse Society was created , with the American Shire Horse Association beginning in 1885 . The breed was exported from Britain to the United States in large numbers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries , but popularity fell as mechanisation increased , reaching a low point in the 1950s and 1960s . Popularity began to increase again in the 1970s and after . However , population numbers are still considered to be at critical levels by both the UK @-@ based Rare Breeds Survival Trust and the US @-@ based American Livestock Breeds Conservancy .

= = Characteristics = =

Shire stallions may be black , bay or grey . They may not be roan or have large amounts of white markings . Mares and geldings may be black , bay , grey or roan . In the UK stallions may not be chestnut , but the colour is allowed by the US registry . Stallions must stand at least 17 hands (68 inches , 173 cm) high when mature , and they average around 17 @. @ 2 hands (70 inches , 178 cm) . Geldings stand at least 16 @. @ 2 hands (66 inches , 168 cm) high and mares at least 16 hands (64 inches , 163 cm) . Their average weight ranges from 900 to 1 @, @ 100 kg (2 @, @ 000 to 2 @, @ 400 lb) The head of a Shire is long and lean , with large eyes , set on a neck that is slightly arched and long in proportion to the body . The shoulder is deep and wide , the chest wide , the back muscular and short and the hindquarters long and wide . Not too much feathering is to occur on the legs , and the hair is fine , straight , and silky . Smaller Shires , under 17 hands (68 inches , 173 cm) , are generally preferred for working horses , while taller horses , especially those over 18 @. @ 2 hands (74 inches , 188 cm) , are used for show and promotional purposes . The breed is known for its easy @-@ going temperament . Shires have been identified to be at risk for chronic progressive lymphedema , a chronic progressive disease that includes symptoms of progressive swelling , hyperkeratosis , and fibrosis of distal limbs . The disease is similar to chronic lymphedema in humans .

The Shire has an enormous capacity for pulling weight . In 1924 , at a British exhibition , a pair of horses was estimated to have pulled a starting load equal to 45 tons , although an exact number could not be determined as their pull exceeded the maximum reading on the dynamometer . Working in slippery footing , the same pair of horses pulled 16 @. @ 5 tons at a later exhibition .

The largest horse in recorded history was probably a Shire named Mammoth , born in 1848 . He stood 21 @. @ 2 1 ? 4 hands (86 @. @ 25 inches , 219 cm) high , and his peak weight was estimated at 1 @, @ 524 kilograms (3 @, @ 360 lb) . At over 19 hands (76 inches , 193 cm) , a Shire gelding named Goliath was the Guinness Book of World Records record holder for the world 's tallest horse until his death in 2001 .

= = Breed history = =

Though oxen were used for most farm work into the 18th century , horses ' fit for the dray , the plough , or the chariot ' were on sale at Smithfield Market in London as early as 1145 .

The English Great Horse was valued during the reign of Henry VIII , when stallions measuring less than ' fifteen handfuls ' could not be kept , but the increasing role of gunpowder brought an end to the use of heavy horses in battle . Oliver Cromwell 's cavalry favoured lighter , faster mounts and the big horses began to be used for draught work instead . During the 16th century , Dutch engineers

brought Friesian horses with them when they came to England to drain the fens , and these horses probably had a significant influence on what became the Shire breed .

From this medieval horse came an animal called the Old English Black Horse in the 17th century . The Black Horse was improved by the followers of Robert Bakewell , of Dishley Grange in Leicestershire , resulting in a horse sometimes known as the " Bakewell Black " . Bakewell imported six Dutch or Flanders mares , notable since breeders tended to concentrate on improving the male line . Two different types of black horses developed : the Fen or Lincolnshire type and the Leicester or Midlands type . The Fen type tended to be larger , with more bone and extra hair , while the Midlands type tended to have more endurance while being of a finer appearance . The term " Shire horse " was first used in the mid @-@ 17th century , and incomplete records begin to appear near the end of the 18th century . The " Packington Blind Horse " , from Leicestershire , is one of the best @-@ known horses of the era , with direct descendents being recorded from 1770 to 1832 . This horse is usually recognized as the foundation stallion for the Shire breed , and he stood at stud from 1755 to 1770 . During the 19th century , Shires were used extensively as cart horses to move goods from the docks through the cities and countryside . The rough roads created a need for large horses with extensive musculature .

In 1878 , the English Cart Horse Society was formed , and in 1884 changed its name to the Shire Horse Society . The Society published a stud book , with the first edition in 1878 containing 2 @,@ 381 stallions and records dating back to 1770 . Between 1901 and 1914 , 5 @,@ 000 Shires were registered each year with the British registry . The first Shires were imported to the United States in 1853 , with large numbers of horses being imported in the 1880s . The American Shire Horse Association was established in 1885 to register and promote the breed . The Shire soon became popular in the United States , and almost 4 @,@ 000 Shires were imported between 1900 and 1918 . Approximately 6 @,@ 700 Shires were registered with the US registry between 1909 and 1911 . Around the time of World War II , increasing mechanization and strict regulations on the purchase of livestock feed reduced the need for and ability to keep draft horses . Thousands of Shires were slaughtered and several large breeding studs closed . The breed fell to its lowest point in the 1950s and 1960s , and in 1955 fewer than 100 horses were shown at the annual British Spring Show .

In the 1970s , the breed began to be revived through increased public interest . Breed societies have been established in the United States , Canada , the Netherlands , France , and Germany , and in 1996 the first World Shire Horse Congress was held in Peterborough . The first use within the breed of artificial insemination through frozen semen was with several Australian mares in 1997 . Between the 1920s and 1930s and today , the Shire has changed in conformation . The Clydesdale was used for crossbreeding in the 1950s and 1960s , which changed the conformation of the Shire and most notably changed the feathering on the lower legs from a mass of coarse hair into the silky feathering associated with modern Shires . At the peak of their population , Shires numbered over a million . In the 1950s and 1960s , this number declined to a few thousand . In the United States , the Shire population dropped significantly in the early part of the 20th century , and continued to decline in the 1940s and 1950s . Between 1950 and 1959 , only 25 horses were registered with the US registry . However , numbers began to increase , and 121 horses were registered in the US by 1985 .

The National Shire Horse Spring Show is still held annually and is the largest Shire show in Great Britain . Currently , the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy considers the population of the Shire to be at " critical " levels , meaning that the estimated global population of the breed is less than 2 @,@ 000 and fewer than 200 registrations are made annually in the US . The UK Rare Breeds Survival Trust considers the breed to be " at risk " , meaning that population numbers are estimated to be under 1 @,@ 500 . The Equus Survival Trust considers the breed to be " vulnerable " , meaning that between 500 and 1500 active adult breeding mares are in existence today .

= = Uses = =

The Shire horse was originally the staple breed used to draw carts to deliver ale from the brewery to the public houses . A few breweries still maintain this tradition in the UK . These include the

Wadworth Brewery in Devizes , Wiltshire , the Hook Norton Brewery , the Samuel Smith Brewery in Tadcaster , and Thwaites Brewery , which made Shire @-@ drawn deliveries from the early 1800s to the 1920s , then resumed service in 1960 , with deliveries continuing to be horse @-@ drawn to the present day . Several breweries have recently withdrawn their Shire horse teams , including the Tetley brewery in Leeds .

Today , the breed is also used for forestry work and leisure riding .