

Gee-up Bob!

By Alec Rainbow

Anyone can roll a tractor, but it takes an expert to tip over a team of two horses pulling a single furrow plough.

One day back in the late 'twenties, Bob Trotter of Raupare had all but finished ploughing the front paddock, when his Scots blood persuaded him to go for an extra furrow beside the Raupare Drain.

So off he went, with Bluey the furrow horse on the inside, and Ponty outside him on the narrow strip beside the drain. A good furrow horse like Bluey stays in the cut sliced by the plough on its previous run; he won't waver, or the neighbours will criticise the crooked lines.

The drain was closer than Bob had thought, and the further he went the closer it got. But Bluey wouldn't budge, however

Ponty jostled to keep his balance. Finally he fell in. Followed by Bluey and the plough. Followed by Bob.

There was great skill in single-furrow ploughing, a knack in setting the tool. A notice could be "banbing away with the bloody spanners all day," says Bob, and still not set it right. The furrows wouldn't turn right over, and "you'd think a pig had been rooting in the paddock."

Plenty of plough pulling could give a horse sore shoulders, and Bob believed in a cure you won't find in "Horses and Stables," a standard manual of the day by Lieutenant-General Sir F. Fitzwygram, Bart. Back to the cure

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Whoa Bess!

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— when desperate for a leak, you did it in a bucket, waited for the mixture to cool, then swabbed it on the shoulders. Of the horse, that is.

Another horse which developed soreness in a different part of her body was Toby, a big draught mare, bay-coloured, that drew the plough for John McNab, a Twyford fruitgrower. A plough horse would sweat freely while working; at petal fall its body would be sprinkled with flower fragments and the animal could have waltzed directly into a blossom parade. But bees don't like sweat, they hate it.

Toby was ploughing under contract in Stephen Jarvis's orchard. As she turned the headland, the tip of her hames (the curved bar of a draught horse's collar) snagged a willow branch and brought a swarm of bees down on her back. She went crazy.

They managed to settle her down a bit, removed the harness, scraped the stings out with a hoop iron, slobbered her down with buckets of water and

dressed her skin with Reckitt's Blue. She survived. But it spoilt her looks, for she now was a skewbald, a grey patch on her rump where the bees had stung.

Toby's master, John McNab, had been able to prevent her bolting, one of the few dangers inherent in working horses. Though you can mangle yourself in many ways with a tractor, at least you can switch it off — a bolting horse must run itself out.

Stephen Jarvis had a gig horse called West, bought from Graham and Gebbie who ran the mails out to Maraekakaho, Kereru and Mangaohane. She was a lively mare, and Stephen was only once beaten on trips back from town, and then it was so dark, he didn't know who'd passed him.

Carting apple boxes into the orchard one day on a light wagon known as the "Four-wheeled Express," Stephen stopped off at the house. "She'll be right for a couple of minutes."

She wasn't. Something rattled the boxes, and away she went flat stick down the orchard, pulling hard left at the neighbour's fence, throwing 80 apple boxes among his trees and wrenching the shafts from

the wagon's body. They never let her stand again.

The neighbouring fruit-grower suddenly 80 boxes the richer was a Mr Robert Wylie, an ex-naval gentleman who always wore a tie to work. His horse was Nugget, a sturdy, short-legged beast with a rounded body, remembered as a Suffolk Punch, though his bay colour belies this. A Suffolk Punch is chestnut.

He was a "whoa and go" horse, a quick and jerky mover. At spraying time, if the tank was full, it splashed over as he started and it splashed over as he stopped. Should Mr Wylie be round the far side of the tree when Nugget moved off, he had to sprint back round to catch up, or the spray hose would tangle in the tree and rip from its fitting.

Being a naval man's horse, Nugget didn't just start and stop — he set sail and hoisted, and this to the tune of nautical commands: "Nuggety Nug! Hauly! Hauly!" and "Avast! Avast Nug!"

For all their faults and foibles, working horses are remembered with affection. "I loved the beggars," says Bob Trotter. Well, that's not exactly what he said.

When Bob's neighbour, Jim Tweedie ploughed with his four-horse team of Nugget and Prince, Bob and Bess he'd converse with them continuously: "I think you should talk to horses long enough, they'll know what you're talking about."

Try that on a tractor.