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**The Creation of New Rural Economies  
through Place Based Consumption:  
Exploring the Geographies of Equestrian  
Pursuits Within the British Countryside**



Alex Franklin  
and  
Rhys Evans



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**Abstract**

The growth in the equine sector reflects a wider change in European rural economies. As rural societies and economies shift from a traditional overwhelming dependence upon productive activity – agriculture and forestry – to new rural economies based upon the direct consumption of environmental goods and services in location, we have seen new and traditional sectors of rural activity flourish or decline in response. Both the decline and the flourishing have direct and material impacts upon the production of rural landscapes. Our research leads us to assert that equine pursuits are one of these influential sectors – one which has been little examined. The equestrian sector will contribute to the production of new socio-natures, new rural economic opportunities, and will respond to the new regimes of rural regulation which are increasingly brought to bear on Britain's rural spaces.

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The Centre started work in October 2001 under the leadership of Professor Ken Peattie of the Business School, Professor Terry Marsden of the Department of City and Regional Planning and Professor Bob Lee of the Law School. The Centre exists to understand and promote the vital issues of sustainability, accountability and social responsibility, through research into key business relationships.

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## **1. Introduction**

In the twenty-first Century horses continue to make a major contribution to sustaining the rural economy. Whereas they once facilitated production on and of the rural landscape, they now facilitate the consumption of it. Whether approached from a narrow post-productivist, or a broader rural consumption point of view, the various equestrian pursuits have a common effect -- they offer farmers and land owners natural avenues towards rural diversification and participation in the consumption economy. In so doing, equestrian pursuits make a complex contribution to the restructuring of rural space. The term 'Equine Landscapes' is put forward by the authors as a way of encapsulating, within a single phrase, the multi-faceted dimensions of equestrianism and the associated range of impacts and effects that it can have, on both people and place.

Through the lens of Equine Landscapes we can see how social practices (with their concomitant economic, political and environmental implications) can structure the production of new spaces. These spaces are ones in which the embodied practices of equestrian activities are most comfortable – spaces of the movement, domicile, regulation and training of both horses and riders. Due to the economic growth potential of the sector, it is likely that these spaces will proliferate, creating new Equine Landscapes which occupy new niches in the UK countryside. We examine a particular Equine Landscape – that of Alex and Spring on Plodda Farm – in order to understand the factors which drive the decision-making behind the allocation of values in the equine sector as the first step in a process of imagining the broader impacts of a growing sector.

Further, the notion of Equine Landscapes offers a very productive lens through which to view the multiple scales of the production of space. Equine activities operate on a micro, meso and macro scale and it is the inter-working of activities at these different scales which gives them such power in the production of new spaces within the British countryside. Equine Landscapes are a product of the interactions of individuals with a mass sector. This paper illustrates this through the examination of the broader 'industry' and reflections on the activities of a single individual. It is through multiple articulations

of such activities that the impact of equine activities on the rural landscape and economy can be best illustrated. Aggregated up – such landscapes are produced iteratively, through the accretion of many individual actions – a sense of the role and impact of equine activities on the production of new rural spaces can be appreciated.

In financial terms alone, the equine industry is a significant contributor to the rural economy. Estimates indicate that it is currently worth some £3.4 billion per annum in England and Wales (*BHIC 2005*). The practices and regimes associated with equine pursuits all have an impact on access, uses and the aesthetics of the countryside they consume. Given the size and scale – and continuing growth – of this sector, the need for a comprehensive understanding of its structure, characteristics and its full range of impacts on rural space is self-evident. At the current time however, such a knowledge base remains both piecemeal in content and limited in nature. For example, an extensive and generally reliable documented evidence base does exist on the theory and practice of riding and of good ‘stable management’, yard management and equestrian instruction. No comparable knowledge set is available however, about the management of the sector as a whole from either a legal, financial, ecological, environmental, health and safety, or welfare perspective, to name but a few. At the same time, the spatial geographies of equestrianism are also little understood at either the local, regional, national or international level.

This paper is a direct response to the current vacuum surrounding the spatial geographies of equestrianism. It is written as the starting point to what the authors hope will be a long and rewarding journey of self-reflection and intellectual discovery in the course of mapping out many more of the complex matrices of actors (human and animals), interactions and impacts that account for modern day equestrianism. This paper is part of a much broader programme of research (*‘Equine Landscapes’ – part of an ESRC BRASS Research Centre work programme, ‘Landscapes of Consumption’*). The examination of equine geographies is limited here to an introduction to the characteristic features of the sector, and an attempt to ‘place’ equine activities within rural UK. The geographical spaces we focus upon are at the point where ‘urban’ meets ‘rural’ as it is here that some

of the greatest opportunities for the sector lie. This allows us to examine some of the connections between equestrianism and rural consumption more generally. An understanding of these connections is, as we attempt to show, an essential pre-requisite to appreciating both the current popularity and future development of equine-based pursuits in contemporary society more generally. It also provides an appropriate conceptual framework for understanding the social, economic and environmental implications of the sector for rural communities.

As a starting point for the discussion, we begin in Section 2 by reviewing the changing uses of rural space and the context which a rural consumption economy provides for a growth in equine pursuits. In Section 3 we give an overview and critique of current documented characteristics of the equine industry within England and Wales. The remainder of the paper is informed by a combination of empirical study, review of academic literature and, using a Case Study of Self, personal insight drawn from the author's (*Franklin*) own extensive experience of owning, riding and working with horses. The conclusions we reach are at this point initial ones and as part of this we suggest the further places that the analysis will be taken through the broader equine landscapes research project.

## **2. Rural Change, Spaces of Consumption and Equestrian Pursuits**

This section of the paper looks at the place of equine pursuits in the changes which are currently transforming the rural economies of the UK and Europe. Linking economic activity and the production of new rural spaces, it illustrates some factors behind the growth of equine pursuits in the rural UK and details the type of markets, consumers and economic activity it can bring in order to show the sector's power in the production of new spaces of rural consumption.

Across Europe, and particularly in the UK, rural places have faced a bewildering set of changes and challenges in the last few decades. The assertion of the importance of sustainable development is one such challenge. Another lies in the pressure to develop previously rural lands as populations grow and demographics and activities change. The

primary change however, faced by most rural economies has been the rebalancing of the relative importance of the production and the consumption sectors in rural economies. Common Agriculture Policy reform has directed rural subsidies away from the production of agricultural commodities for their own sake and is now increasingly directed towards mitigating some of the negative environmental effects of intensive farming through encouraging movement away from further intensification. Included in this change is the need for farm diversification – farmers often need to generate new sources of income to replace the production subsidies they have lost.

One very important source of new economic opportunities for farmers is new rural tourism. This includes the direct experience of unique rural environments through what has been called the ‘experience economy’. These activities include various types of outdoor recreation (from mountain biking to river boating) where the local landscape is a key element in the desirability of the package. Each of these activities involves consumers engaging in active pursuits which take place within a rural landscape. This type of economic activity delivers what can be called higher value-added tourism and offers the opportunity to derive new, quality income out of new activities in the rural environment. It also offers a chance to render economic gain from outdoor environments without having to directly harvest the biotic species which ‘creates’ that landscape, contributing towards building sustainability into the rural economy. What this economic change represents is, in fact, a re-valuing of key components of rurality – its peripherality and isolation and the landscapes which have been produced within it. Firstly, in a global economy of mass production, where increasingly, global brands deliver the same goods and services across nations, those goods and services which are unique and distinct have greater value. The very isolation and uniqueness of rural environments make them desirable in a new way because of their ‘distinction’. Secondly, peripheral rural landscapes are well placed to capture some of the increasing value attached to ‘naturalness’ in both aesthetics and concerns about lifestyle and health. This new and increasing value which they represent to urban consumers is one of the key drivers of the re-formulation of rural space in Western Europe.

This rise of consumption activity in rural spaces represents a change from the overwhelming dominance of the classic primary economic sector (producing commodities for transformation elsewhere) towards a new balance between production and consumption. The presence of this consumption spend in the rural economy empowers new formations of rural space – increasingly, spaces of beauty, of sustainability and of public consumption of ‘nature’ are rewarded with new cash flows which directly reflect new values laid over rural space. As this sector grows, so its influence on the production of rural spaces will increase and, in the same way that primary sector activity structured and created traditional rural spaces of farming and forestry, this activity will support the creation of new rural spaces of consumption.

Traditional studies of these changes in the rural economy have focused upon outdoor activities such as mountain biking, river rafting and boating and rural eco-tourism. To this list of influential activities can be added equine pursuits. As is illustrated in the industry review that follows, equine pursuits collectively represent a large spend in the rural economy. Further, horses and riders have special and unique requirements of rural space which attract substantial spend. The nature and increasing popularity of equine pursuits puts it in a strong position, we suggest, to compete successfully with other sectors for primacy in the consumption of rural space.

### **3. The Horse Industry: an overview**

Traditionally there has been little information published on the horse industry. The fragmented nature of the regulation of the sector (with multiple membership bodies) and the lack of attention from the central government conspired to assure little attention or interest at a senior policy level. At the turn of the century, however, this all changed with the introduction of three new landmarks in the governance of the horse industry. The first was the publication by DEFRA, in 2005, of the ‘Strategy for the Horse Industry of England and Wales (*BHIC 2005*)’. In many ways the launch of this Strategy represents the formal beginning of a new era in the positioning of the horse within British society. Increases in horse ownership and the corresponding change in their modern day use from ‘work horse’ to ‘hobby horse’ was a phenomenon which was already widely in evidence

by this point. However, prior to the preparation of the Strategy no reliable data was held which offered any sort of comprehensive overview of the size and key characteristics of the horse industry.

A substantial proportion of the evidence base for the 2005 Strategy was sourced from the Henley Centre document: ‘A Report of Research on the Horse Industry in Great Britain’ (2004). Jointly commissioned by DEFRA and the British Horse Industry Confederation this report enabled the 2005 Strategy to overcome the existing absence of any formal definition of the term ‘horse industry’ by creating this schema:

*“The horse industry is more varied than almost any other sector. Essentially, it can be divided into two parts: activities based on the use, possession or ownership of horses; and, suppliers of horse-related goods and services for those core activities” (BHIC 2005 p19)*

In some senses, the use of the term industry in this way is analogous to how the term ‘sector’ is used in other economic discussions. In this case it includes not only the commercial ‘industrial sectors’ which derive income from horse-based activities, but also the value generated by the many who do not participate in the more formal ‘industries’ such as competitions and trials. In this way it manages to take in the informal and ‘social’ values of the sector in addition to the strictly commercial values. It refers to a broad group engaged in a wide ranging set of equine pursuits.

*“The use of the term industry is intended to emphasise the national importance of these activities taken as a whole, and the many links between them, as well as the shared commitment of those who participate in them. It is not intended to exclude the many equine enthusiasts who are not engaged in these pursuits full-time, some of whom may not see themselves as part of an industry in the conventional sense, but rather belonging to a looser horse confraternity or primarily to a specialist equine group” (BHIC 2005 p19)*

The inclusion of such a wide range of activities and actors within the definition can be seen as both intentional and purposive. In particular, it has helped to ensure that the horse

industry is perceived not as, for example, just one component of the already existing multi-dimensional leisure industry, but rather as a significant sector in its own right; a sector of both substantial economic value and rapidly growing popularity in terms of individual engagement. It is estimated that some 2.4 million people currently ride, 5 million have an 'active interest' in the horse industry, and 11 million people have 'some interest' (DEFRA 2005).

The inclusive definition has further been used by DEFRA as the basis from which to launch a ten year vision for the Industry (BHIC 2005). This Vision will be achieved through the realization of eight Aims and an associated fifty Objectives. Somewhat reflective of the high number of Objectives, the Strategy Aims are wide ranging. They are informed by the need for: greater integration of and participation in, the sector; increases in skills and standards, economic performance, and social contribution of the sector; the promotion of sporting excellence; consideration of the environmental impact of the horse; and increases in access to off-road riding. The Vision itself is made up of a series of seven individual statements. The overall sentiment of growth is reflected in the first of these:

*"The industry will have further established itself as a significant business sector and be widely recognised as making a substantial contribution to national and regional, rural and urban economies, to the social and cultural life of the nation, and to a sustainable and well-managed environment"*

Included amongst the remaining statements are assertions about the need for equine activities to: 'no longer be perceived as exclusive, elitist or prohibitively expensive'; for the 'riders and drivers will have access to an extensive, high quality, safe and secure network of statutory and non-statutory off-road routes'; and that the 'equestrian sports will have a central place in the nation's sporting consciousness'.

The second landmark change in the governance of the horse industry was the introduction in 2004 of horse passports. This legislative change has the potential to make the task of governing and regulating the horse industry both more manageable and more precise. Under the 'Horse Passports (England) Regulations 2004' all owners are now required by

law to obtain a 'passport' for each horse they own. They are no longer able to 'sell, buy, export, slaughter for human consumption, use for the purposes of competition or breeding a horse which does not have a passport' (DEFRA 2004). The UK Legislation is in direct response to, but also goes beyond the requirements of, EEC Directives 93/623 and 2000/68. Primarily this is because, in England and Wales, the requirement for passports has been extended to all equids (horses, ponies and donkeys).

The decision to roll the passport scheme out to all equids in England and Wales is linked to the aspiration of DEFRA to create a 'National Equine Database (NED)' capable of providing accurate information on their total number and individual locations. It is hoped that this would overcome the current vacuum of information, with the 2005 Strategy, for example, itself based upon an estimated equid population which is "at least 600,000 and could total nearly 1 million". In particular, the Database would mark a turning point in the Government's ability (currently minimal) to monitor disease outbreaks. Obviously though, it would also greatly assist all future development of the equestrian industry in the context of rural development, tourism and recreation, health and safety, animal welfare, environmental health, land use and planning control, to name but a few.

Despite such a wide ranging estimate of current equid population, and associated lack of detailed evidence base for the horse industry more generally, in 2001, DEFRA introduced a third land mark change in the governance of the horse industry. They took the unprecedented step of creating the position of 'Minister of the Horse'. Although subsequently modified to 'Minister of the Horse Industry', and being a junior ministerial post which has changed ministerial hands a number of times, six years on this position remains in force. The Minister (currently (October 2007) Jonathan Shaw, MP) is supported within DEFRA by a small Horse Industry Team which is tasked with promoting:

*"the industry's sustainable contribution to economies and communities, in both rural and urban areas"*  
(DEFRA 2007).

The appointment of a dedicated Minister in England and with it, the public acknowledgement by the Government, of the potential value and long term significance of equestrianism to the socio-economic sustainability of both rural and urban space, reflects just how seriously the horse industry is starting to be taken.

#### **4. Locating Equine Geographies**

Preceding parts of this paper have pointed to the collective impact of equine activities on rural space. In this section we spend a moment reasserting the importance of geography, by looking at the spatially specific nature of equine industry growth. At the same time, we return our attention to some of the socio-cultural factors which appear to be facilitating the growth of this sector within contemporary society.

The cumulative might of the equine sector can be seen as being directed towards finding or creating the best spaces for equine activities out of the existing rural geographies in the UK. In some places they will be laid over historic equine landscapes such as the broads of Norfolk. In others they will actively engage with transforming non-equine landscapes into ones more suitable. It is important, though, not to regard all rural spaces as undifferentiated. An initial review of core characteristics and likely future growth areas within the equine sector, suggest that that not all rural spaces will enjoy a strong presence. There are important geo-physical and locational factors which influence this. Looking first at locational issues, a key factor appears to be the co-location of the stabling of the horse with spaces which are most commonly used for activities such as hacking or training, as well as the need to be spatially-contingent with competition venues. Also, because horses need to be active on a daily basis, the places where they are located must remain accessible to their owners on a daily basis – and, for the bulk of the sector, this means a peri-urban location. Secondly, horse-based activities can require extensive land uses and, in particular, space to pasture and in which to roam. Landscapes featuring a combination of open, relatively flat or gently undulating pasture land, which are easily accessible, but also a safe distance away from, main commuter routes, offer the most felicitous home to livery yards and their horse/human boarders.

From these two factors, then, it is likely that equine landscapes will take strongest hold in the marginal farming districts around urban centres – offering alternative and higher-value use of these lands by offering easy access to urban riders. Although equine pursuits can be found across the range of rural spaces, it is likely that by sheer numbers alone, these peri-urban spaces of rural transformation will be the most significant locations for these new equine landscapes. Evidence of this trend can also be found in other western European countries. The recent award, for example, by the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture of some 150,000 Euros for University-based research into the impact of equestrianism at the city's edge (*Eklund et al 2006*), reflects the seriousness with which this issue is being treated in Finland. Similarly, at a European level, the European funded 'Equine Life' research network (*Equine Life 2006; Vihinen 2005*) has similarly been tasked with extending and joining up the current marginal knowledge bases surrounding socio-environmental impacts of equestrianism on rural space.

Just as geography matters in mapping the equine landscapes of the twenty-first century, so too do consumer values. In order to appreciate the potential for growth within the equine sector it is important to look at the benefits which attract consumers to this activity. Although nearly all who participate will identify a 'love of horses' as the key motivator behind their activities, the sector delivers a number of important benefits which lie behind these consumers' choice of the activity. Discussion amongst equine enthusiasts participating at a recent equine seminar (*'The New Equine Industry – A Multidisciplinary Research Agenda' Vasa, Finland 2007*) concluded that in the advanced western economies at least, equine-based pursuits offer important benefits to those who need to manage a healthy work-life balance, delivering stress-reduction, freedom pleasure and excitement, and a manageable hobby. It offers an accessible level of physical activity and the opportunity to 'get outside' and experience a 'natural' environment. In addition to the specific health and well-being benefits offered by equestrian activities, they also deliver benefits which enrich the personal life of participants. Equine pursuits allow people to engage in embodied experience of nature-society relations through human-animal relations. They allow participation in a social community of like-minded others, offering a common system of symbolic exchange between members, complete with

systems and hierarchies of knowledge, symbols and names. And they offer learning opportunities for life – a system of knowledges as well as looking in greater detail at what some of the considerations might be which drive equine decision-making, we also attempt to illustrate some of these points about the personal values derived from equine pursuits. We do so by using a ‘case study of self’ methodology’ (*Franklin & Evans 2008*), looking at an individual’s experience of horse riding to tease out the precise details of what drives equine activity.

### **5. Case Study of Self: enacting value within equine space**

A Case Study of Self’ is based upon the use of auto-ethnography (*Neumann 1996, Ellis and Flattery 1992, Ellis et al 1996, Denzen 1992*). Underpinned by an authors’ extensive experience of applying research methods in the course of empirical study – and thus their understanding of the ‘rules’ of robust data collection - the research gaze is turned inwards, self-reflexively, to access the author’s (in this case, Franklin’s) extensive knowledge of equestrianism. The understanding of empirical research – and in a way, the credentials for using the ‘case study of self’ methodology - comes from almost 10 years of observing theory and applying it in practice (primarily through the professional role of Research Associate). The understanding of equines and equestrianism is drawn predominantly from direct experience of working with, caring for and riding horses for in excess of twenty years, with much of this time spent as a ‘horse owner’. In addition, triangulation is provided by author Evans’ lack of experience in the equine sector, questioning familiar assumptions and asking ‘innocent’ questions.

There are clearly numerous potential dangers and constraints in making one’s ‘self’ the subject of the research (*Pile and Thrift 1995*). Having addressed these weaknesses, however, there are also numerous advantages (*Franklin and Evans 2008, Evans 2005*). In particular, given the current deficit of academic texts on equestrianism, we adopt this style in the hope that it will provide the reader with plenty to think ‘with’, as well as ‘about’ (*Crang and Cook 2007*). Furthermore, in line with the principles of case study research more generally (*Yin, 1994*) it is not our intention that the narrative, set out below, should be regarded as explicitly representative of a wider population. Rather, the

‘case study of self’ technique gives us the opportunity to provide a very in-depth, grounded account of *one set* of spatial needs in the geographies of firstly, horse maintenance (the keeping of a horse) and secondly, horse use. In using the term ‘one set’, we also acknowledge the significance of the human-animal combination, to the account. The personal characteristics of the author’s involvement with equestrianism play a dominant role in influencing her choice of both equine maintenance and equine use. At the same time, the personal characteristics of the author’s horse often determine the suitability of the strategies for maintenance and use. Correspondingly, with each different horse-rider combination, wide variations can be found in the uptake of different forms of maintenance and use. By using one rider and one horse’s story we can begin to see the ways in which these individual characteristics structure both each partner and the ways they collectively interact with the world.

The narrative begins with a prelude which serves as an introduction to the personal circumstances which structure the uptake of the equine pursuits described. This is done for the rider and for the horse, and then, the horse and rider in combination. To facilitate the story telling, we revert to ‘first person’ (*and italics*) wherever material from ‘case study of self’ is being presented. By examining Alex and Spring’s individual case we can see how values are allocated to certain situations and conditions through the embodied practices of both the rider and horse.

*“My name is Alex. My horse’s name is Spring. Spring is a mare. Born in 1998, she is currently 9 years old and stands at a height of 16.2 hands high [162.5 cm]. She is grey in colour, which in practical terms means that she was born almost completely black, is currently ‘dappled’ with a mixture of dark and light grey colouring, and in her veteran years will turn white. I bought Spring directly from her breeder (a local farmer), as ‘just broken’, in 2003. I was introduced to her through word-of-mouth by a joint friend of both the farmer and myself. Spring is predominantly of Thoroughbred crossed with Warmblood breeding, out of a hunter brood mare, but with notable ancestry on both the Dam and the Sire’s sides. Her athletic breed, good temperament and physical fitness make her perfectly suited to both my own physique and my equestrian sport of choice – Eventing<sup>1</sup>”*

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<sup>1</sup> Eventing is an equestrian sport made up of three different disciplines: dressage (ground work, following a preset test), show jumping (a course of jumps constructed of coloured poles which can be knocked down) and cross country (a course of solid rustic fences, often incorporating ‘natural’ (albeit often man made)

*“I have been ‘horse mad’ for most of my life. I mean this in the sense that I see my involvement with horse-based pursuits and more particularly, my partnership with Spring, as being central to who I am. At the time of writing I am 30 years old. I have been involved with horses for some 22 years, having been introduced to the sport by my parents, who bought me my first pony (for a princely sum of £150 including tack) when I was eight years old. I see myself as a keen amateur competitor and I would describe Spring in the same terms. Professionally, I work full time as a Senior Research Associate at Cardiff University. Although the position allows me some degree of flexibility in my working week, it also requires that I be available for travel both nationally and internationally, staying away from home on a monthly and sometimes weekly basis”*

*“I live in the city centre, close to my place of work. I rent one room of my house out to a lodger, in order to cover the (almost equivalent) cost of keeping my horse on a livery yard. I do not currently have either the resources to buy an equestrian property within commuting distance of the city, or the time to be able to both look after my horse and continue pursuing a research career. Like many thousands of other professional middle-aged women therefore, I make owning, looking after and competing a horse possible, alongside a full-time career, by keeping my horse on a livery yard”*

This first segment of Alex’s story touches upon her personal circumstances. Her characterization of herself as ‘horse mad’ indicates the passion she (and, from observation, many others) brings to the field. Horses kept and ridden in this way are often the objects of their riders’ passion. Further narrative detail, if included, would reveal the depth of this passion and the extent to which she would go to support it. This is an important factor to keep in mind when looking at the sector in general – these animal/human pairings are the focus of intense affect and this affect drives subsequent behaviour in the field. This passion is affirmed in Alex’s case by the expertise she has accumulated over 22 years, and her dedication to competing as an amateur – something which, given the relatively few material rewards (there is little to be earned at this level, prizes consist of ‘rosettes’ and derisory prize monies for the few) illustrates the role of her passion in motivating her participation for so many years.

The introduction also supplies personal details about Alex’s work career and circumstance. The significance of this lies in her professional career with its demands, and the concordant freedom, both financial and in terms of time, to indulge her passion.

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features such as hedges, ditches and water). Eventing is perhaps best represented of all equestrian sports in the mass media at the moment in association with the participation of Zara Phillips.

Her career funds the mobility she needs to keep a horse when she lives in the city, and, as the passage below illustrates, also places limits on where she can keep it, particularly in terms of temporal access.

*“Following the purchase of Spring, she remained at livery on the breeder’s yard (also in close proximity to Cardiff) for approximately two years. Due, however, to a combination of the growing demands of my job and the fact that that livery yard catered only for ‘DIY’ customers, in 2005 I took the decision to move yards. When deciding on where to relocate her some two years ago, there was certainly no shortage of choice. There are approximately sixteen livery yards located within ten miles of the edge of Cardiff city. On paper many of these yards were able to meet my requirements. I needed a yard which could accommodate a high degree of flexibility in my level of attendance, often on a daily basis. Linked to this, the yard had to have good ‘turn out’ facilities for Spring, as well as good riding facilities for horse and rider, both on and off the property. It had to be located at a manageable distance from my home and place of work, but at the same time, be of a cost I could afford”*

*“Far harder to ascertain prior to relocation, though, were the yards that would also satisfy my priority for a place that would meet all the welfare and safety needs of Spring, but also facilitate a mental state of ‘happiness’. It would only be with experience and time that the rightness or otherwise of my choice would reveal itself. This is also the reason that livery yards often experience a relatively high turn over of tenants. Sometimes owners are forced to move their horses because of unrelated personal circumstances. Very often though, it is simply because they heard, through word-of-mouth, that ‘the grass is greener’ somewhere else. In my own case, however I believe that I have been fortunate enough to make the right choice. As I will try to explain, by illustrating in more detail, the conditions and rewards that come from being based at Plodda Farm<sup>2</sup>, this belief is supported by a range of both tangible and intangible factors”*

By recounting the story of her search for a new livery yard, Alex illustrates some of the important considerations behind a more general set of requirements. There are a number of considerations across a range of categories – from personal to Alex to personal to Spring. She looks for a place which is convenient to commute to from her job and home and one in which she can arrange for Spring’s care to be covered when she is away. She is also concerned with Spring’s experience, wanting appropriate types of landscape facilities (“good turn-out”), and other considerations which would make the horse safe and ‘happy’. For the two of them together, she needs appropriate spaces for ‘hacking’ and other riding activities. She seems to think she has found an ideal solution which

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<sup>2</sup> For purposes of anonymity, the names of both the livery yard and livery yard owner have been altered.

matches her and her horse's needs and in this next section goes on to detail what makes this so.

*“On average, the journey from house to horse takes 25 minutes by car outside of rush hour, but around 1 hour at times of peak travel. My preference, in the winter months particularly, when day light is limited, is to leave my house at 06.30 hours and attend to Spring before going to the office. Although somewhat dependent on the volume of rush hour traffic on the way back into the city, I am usually able to be at my desk by 09.00 hours. By contrast, in the summer months, when Spring is living out, I often do not arrive on the yard before 19.00 hours, returning from there directly to my home at around 21.30 hours”*

*“Although (with the inclusion of a long walk up a very steep hill) it is possible to commute to Spring by bus or train, as with most activities that take place within the rural arena, having Spring makes it essential that I own a car. When traveling to and from the yard in rush hour traffic, after a heavy day in the office, the journey can be a chore. However, the reward of being greeted by Spring at the end of the journey makes the amount of personal inconvenience seem minor in return for being able to own and look after Spring”*

*“Unlike some of the more commercial livery yards located close to the city of Cardiff, Plodda farm, where Spring is kept, is comparatively small in number of liveries. It contains a total of 15 stables spread across two yards, with a total size of holding of approximately 100 acres. The livery yard forms part of a working Welsh hill farm which is owned and run by a sheep farmer, Ffion, a lady who has successfully pursued a career working with horses and sheep for the majority of her life. Ffion possesses an equally extensive knowledge of stable management (the professional term for the good maintenance of horses) and, through her role as a farmer, the management of the natural environment. She owns and is proficient in the use of, a wide range of farm machinery. Ffion lives in the farm house, which is located adjacent to the livery yard. As is common of most farmers, she is rarely away from the farm overnight”*

Plodda farm exhibits almost stereotypical conditions for conversion to livery. Given the financial challenges facing the lamb sector, the opportunity to diversify into horse livery likely contributes to keeping the farm financially sustainable. And, given Ffion's own interest in horses, it is a natural avenue for her to make that knowledge contribute to the farm economy.

*“Keeping Spring at livery costs approximately £80 per month. For this sum I get a service which is tailored to my personal needs. On average I am away from Cardiff for one week in every month. During*

*these absences Spring's maintenance needs are attended to by Ffion in full<sup>3</sup>. When I am in Cardiff I generally attend to Spring once a day during the working week. It is for me to choose whether I wish to visit the yard in either the morning or the evening, with Ffion's only request being that I let her know (either directly, or by leaving a note on the yard message board) the day before. Then, on the weekends, I attend to Spring fully, which usually means visiting the yard twice each day. My livery arrangement with Ffion fluctuates, therefore, between full-time, part-time and Do-It-Yourself care, on a weekly and often, a daily basis. Additionally, Ffion also takes responsibility for arranging the visits of both the farrier and the vet, and then attending to their needs whilst they are at the yard, with out any requirement for me to be present"*

*"When I am away from the yard (and/or away from Cardiff), I know that Spring will be receiving as good a standard of care as if I were doing her myself. This is by no means always the case on livery yards. Ffion's extensive knowledge of equines and just as importantly, her attitude of treating the livery horses as if they were her own, is a service which is highly valued by all the clients on the yard. Ffion employs no staff (although she does have help from her son in running the rest of the farm) and takes full and direct responsibility for the care of all the horses when their owners are absent"*

The arrangements for the actual care reflect Alex's lifestyle and must be seen as key considerations in her choice of livery for Spring. The comment about the standard of care Spring receives when Alex is away is significant in that, although it concerns the horse's welfare and well-being, it also concerns the owner's own comfort and security. There are many absences between human and horse, many spaces of discontinuity in their partnership. Part of the value in good livery is that those absences are both seen to be, and actually covered for both horse and rider. Here, the most important factors oscillate between being somewhat generic to most horse-rider combinations and specific to the aforementioned structural characteristics of this horse-rider combination. At the same time, though, what counts as 'happiness' for horse, rider and horse & rider in combination is very much determined by the rider's own personal construction and set of values.

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<sup>3</sup> By this it is meant all accommodation, feeding and turn-out needs. Spring is not ridden by anyone other than Alex.

Alex describes the mechanisms of Spring's care:

*"Spring has her own stable on the main yard. The stable is 14x12ft in size, which is more than adequate for a horse of her build and height. She has a constant supply of water and is fed on a mixture of hard food (horse 'nuts' and chaff) and hay twice a day. The hay is briefly soaked prior to feeding to reduce any problems of dust. It is fed in a hay net. On the rare occasions that she does not consume all that is given to her, the remainder is removed, with fresh hay provided every time. The bedding in the stable is a combination of straw and rubber matting. Spring is mucked out in the morning, with any remaining clean bedding piled against the walls. She is then 'skipped out' (a less thorough form of mucking out) again in the afternoon, with the straw bed put down to cover the majority of the stable floor. Additional new straw is provided as necessary on a daily basis. The manure (including any waste hay and straw) from the stable is placed on a muck heap in a field adjacent to the stable yard. It is responsibility of the farmer to deal with the removal of the manure heap whenever it reaches an unmanageable size (which occurs, on average, every 6-9 months)"*

*"All of the feed and bedding for the livery horses is sourced by Ffion. The hard feed and also the straw are bought in bulk, whilst the hay is usually harvested directly from Ffion's own land. In line with modern farming practices both the hay and the straw are packed in large bails, which can only be moved by machine. There are a range of barns and out-houses on the farm, a number of which are used for the dry storage of the feed and bedding. They are located within easy access of the stable yard"*

Housing, feeding and cleaning are the basic components of daily horse care. Here we can see how they are structured in this instance. Although the arrangements for addressing these needs may vary, the needs remain paramount across all horses and all situations. In a manner reminiscent of human care, these are not tasks that are easily amenable to mechanization. Thus, horse care is labour intensive.

A stable where this care can be provided could theoretically be located anywhere where the built environment includes room to affect these services. What distinguishes good livery yards, however, is the external environment in which they are situated. In describing the 'turnout' landscapes, Alex touches on a number of key issues:

*"The horses are turned out across a total area of some 30 acres [12.1 hectares] of land. The turn-out area is split into three paddocks, with the horses divided into generally stable groups between these three*

*paddocks. The horses regularly share the paddocks with the sheep. The fields are fenced with a combination of wooden post-and-rail and wire sheep-netting. All of the paddocks have running water in the form of streams which pass through them. The terrain includes a mixture of slopes and flat land, with the grazing interspersed by patches of woodland and marsh land. The areas surrounding the main access gateways are built up with gravel, in order to reduce the amounts of mud during the winter months. Excessive mud in gateways is caused primarily by horses collecting close to the gate of their own accord and waiting there to be brought in to the stable”*

The terrain on which Spring and the other livery horses are turned out is unsuitable for the growth of arable crops or any intensive forms of livestock production due to its terrain. It is ideal, though, for horses, providing them with a stimulating environment, and also opportunities for shelter from heavy rain and shade from hot sunshine. The biodiversity of the terrain is sustained through Ffion’s management practice of grazing sheep alongside the horses. The different grazing strategies and techniques of the two species making them very effective grazing companions.

*“Being able to graze as part of a herd of horses is one of the distinct advantages of keeping Spring on a livery yard. I myself have no wish, time or money for more than one horse. By nature, however, horses are sociable, herd animals. They can often be hard to settle when kept on their own and Spring is no exception to this rule. In livery at Plodda, Spring has ‘her’ herd, with her favourites, friends and rivals. Indeed, being a dominant mare, she is very forthcoming in expressing that dominance in the field – something she seems to get away with”*

*“Just as Spring is able to enjoy the social benefits of being on a livery yard, though, so too am I. I am able to meet and converse with like minded ‘horsey’ people to my heart’s content. The usual conversations revolve around the goings on of the community of people and horses that make up the livery yard, interspersed on regular occasions by gossip concerning other local livery and competition yards. Although the majority of other owners/ riders connected to the horses on the yard are (middle aged, white, professional) women, the reasons they are involved in equestrianism, the particular forms of equine pursuit which they embrace, and following on from this, the types of horses that they own/ride, have wide variation. Another important focus of discussion includes the sharing of knowledge and tips about husbandry or riding”*

Given that herd animals in the wild express dominance hierarchies within the herd, this provides important satisfaction of instinctive behaviours for Spring. Horses are social

animals and the presence of a stimulating but safe environment for Spring to express this is of important to her, and to her owner. As is also recounted, though, the importance of social interaction is not confined to the horse. In describing her social interactions with the other women on the yard, Alex points to a series of valued interactions. There is the solidarity expressed by discussion of matters equine – the one factor which brings them all together in this place, despite their other differences. There is the gossip which again represents a ritualization of membership in the group. And there is the sharing of inside knowledge – tips, tricks, norms and practices – which marks the presence of a community of affect.

*“Spring’s exercise and training takes place both on and off the farm. In addition to her turn-out in the field, I ride her on a daily basis. All of the clients on the yard have access to an all-weather floodlit arena. I regard this as a valuable asset for facilitating specific pre-event training. In the winter months especially, it is also very useful for exercise in general, if low visibility makes it unsafe to ride on the roads outside of office hours”*

*“When riding off of the farm Spring’s training consists of a combination of road work (under taken at walk and trot only) and off-road work (under taken at walk, trot, canter and/or gallop, depending upon the terrain). Ffion’s farm is situated on the edge of an extensive area of (commonly owned) moorland, and (Forestry Commission-owned) woodland. Both are well served by a network of publicly accessible tracks. The mix of terrain and the view-sheds they afford make for premier horse riding country on the city’s edge. It provides relaxation and stimulation in equal amounts, for both of us. It also ensures that Spring and I are physically and mentally prepared for attending competitions. Interestingly, although horses are pack animals, if we encounter another horse and rider on a hack, Spring barely acknowledges more than their presence and just carries on her own way”*

Alex has shared her experiences with keeping her horse in livery. We have examined location and travel time; suitable farm landscapes; stabling, feeding and care; and important social factors for horse and rider. This last section focused on the remaining important consideration – the actual riding. Riding can be taken as exercise for fitness, as training for competition, and as a pleasurable activity with its own intrinsic worth. Some of the activity happens on the farm itself, especially training. But most riding takes place in the surrounding landscape – the hill above the farm, the forestry plantation around it, and the roads to the village below. Whether or not this experience is pleasurable to both

horse and rider depends upon a number of factors. These include the type of ground (moors, forestry paths, fields or roads), their location, and other users. Livery yards which satisfy all of these considerations will be the most successful.

The story of Alex's experience in finding a new livery yard for her horse gives us insight into one horse/rider pair's needs and of the conditions which satisfy them. The services and situations which answer those needs are the ones to which are attached the highest value for the pairing – services and situations which they will seek out and reward with their time, attention and spend. Although each individual combination of horse and rider will differ to degree and extent, the basic categories of access, care, community and riding apply across them all.

We have used a 'case study of self' approach in order to articulate two important features of contemporary equestrianism. Firstly, we want to communicate the extent, depth and the personal nature of the equine knowledges which influence choice. Following from this, we have attempted to convey the role played by the specific combination of horse and rider, seeing them as a unitary entity, a combination which *acts in space*, and which, combined, are the agent or *actants* which support the construction of an integrated network of equine spaces and thus, equine geograp.

## **6. Equine pursuits and changing rural economies**

Early indications are that the equine sector delivers a particular set of consumer groups/markets to those rural economies in the UK which are well-placed to serve as spaces of equine activity. Although the presence of upper-middle class consumers is somewhat overstated, owning and keeping a horse is not an inexpensive endeavor. The sector thus brings together consumers who have managed to find the disposable income to support their horses, who are willing to spend these funds on keeping their horse in good conditions and on using them in good situations. Further, equine consumers as a group do include professional and other high income/high status urban workers, but it is interesting to observe the heterogeneous nature of the participants in competitions and

other collective activities. Somewhat reminiscent of the furor over the Countryside Marches in the late 1990's (Evans 2001, Woods 2007), the love of equine pursuits attracts a rather diverse mix of working and professional people, creating the opportunities not only for alliances across class, but also between urban and rural residents. Regardless of class position, the horses' demands for quality care and keep mean that equine consumers must prioritize their equine spending. This delivers high quality consumers to a rural market.

In terms of the benefits equine activities bring to the rural employment market, several distinct features have emerged. The equine sector is, in some ways, labour intensive in that the animals require regular care several times a day, and that labour is reflected in the costs of livery. For the rural economy the equine sector not only delivers economic flow, but it directs it across a wide range of 'pockets' as there are limits on how effective economies of scale and mechanisation can be in this sector. Further, located, as many livery operations are, on existing farms they help sustain self-employment, thereby supporting the existing strengths of the UK rural economy in small to medium scale enterprises.

That Equine pursuits are growing in the UK is clear. And at the size they are at this present moment they constitute one of a number of powerful new consumption activities which will be inscribed upon the changing agricultural face of rural Britain. It is the central point of this paper that equine pursuits in the UK are powerful producers of new socio-natures, new rural landscapes. In particular the specifics of the way in which landscapes and values (of nature) are created and consumed in equine pursuits structure the resulting countryside, a countryside produced through the cumulative action of multiple spending, location and investment decisions. In addition the actual activities themselves have impacts, not only for the physical environment of trails and of livery yards, but also for the social (neighbours, communities) and built (road access, supply sources) environment in which they are embedded. Enrique Leff stated that, "the landscape should be regarded as the *articulation* of cultural, ecological, technological, and economic processes that come together to generate a complex, balanced, and

sustained productive systems open to a variety of options and development styles” (1993, p.60). Our experience with the geographies of equestrian activities suggests that it describes the situation very well. It is this *articulation* of the many different factors we have recounted which give equine pursuits the *power* to produce equine landscapes from existing rural countryside.

Given what we have found, the relative absence of equine pursuits from the Rural Studies map is surprising. Whereas mountain biking, rambling, rafting and other outdoor pursuits have been examined by geographers and others, equine pursuits have been relatively off the map. And, whilst mountain biking and rafting might be seen as new pursuits, rambling is certainly not. Like rambling, the equine sector is an old one, but unlike rambling, it has not yet been embraced into the heart of the rural policy community in the UK. This is no doubt in part due to the complicated legacies of the class system which still cling to some extent to equine pursuits. But in a large part it is because the sector itself has not acted in concert to re-place itself in the creation of a new rural Britain. As evidence of this, the Industry Foreword to the 2005 Strategy (BHIC 2005) begins with the statement:

*“Given the large number of people who ride horses or drive carriages, the larger number who work in horse-related businesses and the still larger number who have an interest in horses which stops short of active participation, some might imagine that **the horse industry constitutes one of the most influential pressure groups in England and Wales today**. They might also imagine that this **multi-billion pound industry** would be well able to co-ordinate its efforts, improve its economic efficiency and easily persuade new people into the sport...” (p8 - **emphasis added**)*

This statement is immediately followed with the acknowledgement that:

*“... Unfortunately they would be wrong in both their imaginings. As a community we have too long been punching beneath our weight and have lacked either the will or the wit to capitalise on the strength which comes from effective and wholehearted co-operation.”*

That this statement would focus upon a lack of strengthening the sector is an acknowledgement that, politically and economically, the equine sector is beginning to feel its growing power and potential, and is consciously attempting to influence the policies which shape and produce rural England. That it has not had more influence is, perhaps, surprising, and all too likely due to the political weaknesses described above. What our research indicates, however, is the potential of the sector to respond to changing economic regimes in the UK countryside, a response which has the potential to create new landscapes of a specific type of consumption, based upon the articulation of the horse-rider combination with their specific needs and desires.

## **7. Conclusions**

In the opening section of this paper, we discuss preliminary data on the size, extent and influence of the equine sector in the UK, and discuss its potential impact on rural development policy. We placed it at the beginning in order to emphasize its scope and economic power. But this collective power stems from the aggregation of individual stories such as Alex/Spring's and from the unique actant which is the horse-rider combination. The specifics of their story allow us to understand the general categories of what is important to these equine actants. We then speculate on the potential synergies between the situation of changing rural regimes in Europe and the potentials of the equine sector. Thus we have moved from the collective, to the individual and back to the collective again. We have seen how the horse-rider relationship is the constitutive core of equine landscapes, and we have seen how these individualities have organised themselves. Many questions remain, focusing on environmental, morphological, social and political implications, to name a few. At this stage, the main contribution of this paper is as an attempt to introduce equine geographies onto the rural development map by demonstrating both the unique constitution of the individual actants in the field, and the already existing collective power the sector wields. In doing so we have looked at the complex and often inseparable interrelationship between equines, people and place which allows us to speak of them as equine geographies.

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