

# Irish horse breeding and the Irish Draught Horse, 1917-1978\*

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## I

### Introduction

**D**URING the last quarter of the nineteenth century strenuous efforts were made to collect and publish the pedigrees of many different types of horses in the British Isles. The inland transport system depended on railways, canals, and on horses. Some were used for heavy haulage, some as vanners, some for riding, many for agricultural and pack purposes. The first volume of the *General Stud Book*, which listed the pedigrees of many racehorses, was published in 1808, although the first part of the volume appeared in 1791. It had proved of immense value to the racing industry, and it was widely appreciated that similar stud books for other types of horses would also be of use. Furthermore, some people believed that the statement of a standard for different types of horses, combined with inspection of potential entrants to the stud book to ensure that they conformed to the standard, would lead to widespread improvements in the quality of horses. It was also appreciated that the interbreeding of horses of similar characteristics over a number of generations would result in the formation of a fixed type, or 'breed'.

In 1877 the Suffolk Stud Book Association, as well as that for the Clydesdale Horse, was established. These were the first stud book associations for heavy horses to be formed in the British Isles. They were followed in 1878 by the English Cart Horse Society of Great Britain and Ireland, which

was later named the Shire Horse Society. The first volume of the Clydesdale stud book<sup>1</sup> was published in 1878, to be followed in 1880 by the first volumes for Suffolk, and, in 1884 for Shire Horses. The Select Clydesdale Society of Scotland, a splinter group founded in 1883 that soon came to an end, also published a stud book in 1884.

The Hackney Stud Book Society<sup>2</sup> was formed in 1883 for '... the publication of a Stud Book for Hackneys, Roadsters, Cobs and Ponies'. The Cleveland Bay Horse Society was also founded that year, and both societies published the first volumes of their stud books in 1884. The next year The Hunters' Improvement and National Light Horse Breeding Society was 'Established to improve the Breed and promote the Breeding of Hunters and other Horses used for Riding or Driving, and for Military purposes'. The Society later published its *Hunter Stud Book* that, like most of the stud books already listed, included entries from Ireland. Before a stallion could be entered in the *Hunter Stud Book*<sup>3</sup> it had to be '... inspected and passed by a member of the Society nominated and approved by the Editing Committee', and it had to pass a veterinary examination. Mares were entered on different terms, although for many years one method of entry was by inspection, and that did not necessitate any knowledge of the pedigree of the mare.

Although The Hunters' Improvement Society required inspection of stallions before entry to the *Hunter Stud Book*, not all societies were so rigorous. The Shire Horse

\* The author thanks An Bord na gCapall for allowing him free access to their records, Mr Stuart G Daultrey for aid with trend surface analyses, Mr E. Buckmaster for drawing the final maps, and the referees for their constructive advice.

<sup>1</sup>K Chivers, *The Shire Horse*, 1976, pp 131 ff.

<sup>2</sup>T Ryder, *The High Stepper*, 1979, p 62.

<sup>3</sup>*Hunter Stud Book*, VI, p 1.

Society '... decided otherwise and the breed was developed almost solely by the system of gradually tightening the rules for pedigree'.<sup>4</sup> Other societies established Foundation Stock registers, as did the Welsh Pony and Cob Society in 1927. This enabled the pedigree of animals of non-Welsh parentage to be recorded.<sup>5</sup> By serving foundation stock mares and their progeny for three generations with registered Welsh sires, the offspring were progressively upgraded and finally qualified for entry in the *Stud Book*.

Although many stud book societies were formed in Britain during the later nineteenth century, none originated in Ireland. Instead, at the inaugural meeting of the Council of Agriculture, held on 29 May 1900 in Dublin, the chairman stated that the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, Ireland, was contemplating the formation of '... a Committee or a permanent Commission to deal with this important question of horse breeding'.<sup>6</sup> Later in the meeting Mr J J Molloy stressed that efforts should be made to improve the breeding of horses in Ireland. Five years later the Department '... offered to owners of stallions of the old Irish Draught type ... a premium of £50 for selected stallions',<sup>7</sup> and in 1911 the Department's annual *Register of Stallions* accorded Irish Draught Horses '... formal recognition by the listing of stallions under that designation'. In the same year the Department inspected 5040 mares at sixty different exhibitions and '... 264 were selected as eligible for prizes and for registration as Irish Draughts'.<sup>8</sup> Thus, unlike the breed and stud book societies founded in Britain, the book for Irish Draught Horses was established by the Government through the action of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction.

<sup>4</sup>Chivers, op cit, p 172.

<sup>5</sup>W Davies, *Welsh Ponies and Cobs*, 1980, p 24.

<sup>6</sup>C A Lewis, *Horse breeding in Ireland*, 1980, p 150.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p 165.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p 165.

## II

### *The Irish Draught Horse*

By the end of the nineteenth century there were at least two well developed types of horses in Ireland that were not assignable to any of the breeds already recognized and possessing stud book societies in Britain. These were the ponies of Connemara and the Irish Draught. The ponies<sup>9</sup> were the subject of an officially sponsored enquiry by Professor Ewart of Edinburgh University that eventually resulted in the foundation of the Connemara Pony Breeders Society in 1923. The first volume of the *Connemara Pony Stud Book* was issued in 1926.

The Irish Draught Horse was described by R G Carden in 1907 as

... a long, low build of animal, rarely exceeding 15.3 or 16 hands high, with strong, short, clean legs, plenty of bone and substance, short backs, strong loins and quarters ... slightly upright shoulders, strong necks and a smallish head. They had a good, straight, level action, without its being extravagant, could trot, canter and gallop. They were also excellent jumpers. ... No authentic information in regard to their breeding is now available, though, no doubt, many breeders carefully preserved the strain in their breeding studs for many years, but it may generally be taken that the original breeding of the 'Irish draught horse' was the result of the cross of the imported thoroughbred sires on the stronger of the well-bred mares of the country, which latter must have had an infusion of Spanish or Arabian blood in their veins.<sup>10</sup>

Whether horses of this type were confined to Ireland is debatable. In 1912 A W Anstruther in presenting a report of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries in Britain,<sup>11</sup> referred to '... the old breed of Welsh Light Cart Horses', which provided '... light-legged mares suitable for Hunter breeding'. The Board had initiated a scheme '... to preserve the native hardy breed and ensure its reproduction', but unfortunately the scheme, apparently, did not succeed.

<sup>9</sup>C A Lewis 'The Connemara Pony', *Irish Equestrian News*, 1980, p 30.

<sup>10</sup>R G Carden in Sir H de Trafford (ed) *The horses of the British Empire*, 1907, p 231.

<sup>11</sup>*Hunter Stud Book*, op cit, p 222.

## III

*The Irish Draught Horse Book*

In 1911, 1917-18 and 1919 the Department of Agriculture sent official inspectors throughout Ireland to examine mares submitted for registration as Irish Draughts. The Department believed that 'A lesson may be learned from the manner in which the various English breeds of live stock have been improved within recent times through the establishment of stud books and the formation of breed societies',<sup>12</sup> and had decided to found a stud book for Irish Draughts. During the four years over 7000 mares were inspected and 952 were passed as eligible for registration. Unfortunately, when the first volume of the *Irish Draught Horse Book* was published in 1918 it did not include details of any of the 264 mares passed in 1911 (out of a total horse population of 616,331) although it did list some of the 44 stallions registered in the year.

The Inspectors' Report for 1917 indicates the criteria that guided the choice of mares for registration.

In making our selections of mares, we adopted a good average standard of merit, and were particularly careful to exclude mares showing coarseness or signs of imported cart-horse blood. No well made mare that could be regarded as a good, useful farm animal of the clean-legged draught type was passed over without careful consideration.

Taken as a whole, the mares which we have recommended for entry in the Book are a good lot of animals, which can be regarded as an excellent foundation stock for establishing a breed of clean-legged draught horses really suitable to the requirements of the average Irish farmer.<sup>13</sup>

In view of the large number of mares inspected it seems reasonable to assume that the location of those accepted and registered as Irish Draughts fairly reflected the distribution of animals of Irish Draught type throughout Ireland. The first three volumes of the *Irish Draught Horse Book* record certain details of 678 of the 688 mares that the

Department's inspectors accepted for registration in their tours of 1917-19. Why no records exist of the remaining 10 mares is unknown. The *Books* usually record the name and official registration number of the mare, the name and address of its owner and, occasionally, of its breeder, the mare's colour, distinguishing marks, height, year of birth and, in most cases, limited information as to its pedigree. In a very few cases the foals produced by the mare, with the names of their sires, are listed. By assuming that the mares were located at, or adjacent to, their owners' addresses, it becomes possible to map the distribution and certain physical characteristics of Irish Draught mares in the 1917-19 period.

Although Volume Four of the stud book was apparently published, no copies are known to exist. Subsequent to the publication of that volume, no further publication was undertaken, although annual inspections of mares submitted for registration were made outside Northern Ireland by inspectors of the (Dublin) Department of Agriculture until 1974. Manuscript records were kept by the Department. Since 1975 inspection of mares has been undertaken by officials of Bord na gCapall (the Irish Horse Board).

Under the Horse Breeding Schemes of the Department of Agriculture records were kept by the Department of mares that obtained official subsidies for breeding purposes in the Republic of Ireland. Since 1975 the award of subsidies and the maintenance of records has been carried out by Bord na gCapall. In 1979, in co-operation with the Department of Agriculture in Northern Ireland, Bord na gCapall undertook registration of Irish Draughts as in the Republic. As a result the Bord listed Registered Irish Draught mares that visited a stallion registered under the horse breeding schemes for 1978, that is, mares that, if fertile, would foal in 1979. The Bord recorded the name and registered number of each mare, its owner's name and address, and limited information

<sup>12</sup>*Irish Draught Horse Book*, II, 1919, p 7.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*, p 8.

about the mare which usually included its height. It is thus possible to map the distribution and height characteristics of Registered Irish Draught mares used for breeding in 1978 and, by assuming that they fairly reflect the total Irish Draught mare population, to compare this information with that for Registered Irish Draught mares in 1917-19.

#### IV

##### *Methodology*

Addresses of mare owners were located and given co-ordinates that referred to a map of Ireland divided into a grid of 400-sq-mile units. It was assumed that mares were located at their owners' addresses, and 666 of the 678 mares registered in 1917-19 were thereby located as well as 1234 of the 1269 mares that visited a stallion in 1978. Unfortunately, partly due to incomplete information, it was not possible to locate all the mares. The number of mares per unit area was plotted and this provided distribution and density maps for the two time periods under consideration.

In order to establish the geographical pattern of the height of mares the height of all mares in each square for each time period was totalled and divided by the number of mares in each square to give an average height in hands. An arbitrary decision was made to utilize averages for squares containing eight or more mares, but not for squares with less than eight mares. The average heights for squares with eight or more mares were then plotted to provide comparable information for 1917-19 and 1978. They were also subjected to trend surface analyses, using the DUTSA (D Unwin Trend Surface Analyses) programmes, in order to establish whether or not the heights indicated a discernible trend across the country.

#### V

##### *The distribution of Registered Irish Draught mares*

Figure 1 shows that the greatest numbers of mares registered in the 1917-19 period were located in Counties Roscommon, Kilkenny, Meath-Westmeath, and Cork. All four areas had been important centres of the horse breeding industry in the late nineteenth century as is indicated by statistics relating to horse breeding schemes instituted by the Royal Dublin Society in 1887. In 1888 the Society stood a thoroughbred stallion at Dunmanway in Co Cork for the service of tenant farmers' half-bred mares. As many as 143 mares competed for the fifty nominations available to the sire, indicating the importance of horse breeding in the area. The highest number of applicants that year, incidentally, was at Portadown in Co Armagh, where 258 mares were inspected. In 1889, 1890 and 1891 the highest number of applications for service by a Society-approved stallion was in Meath-Westmeath and in Cork.<sup>14</sup>

The paucity of Registered Irish Draught mares in most of the Province of Ulster probably reflects the long-standing cultural connections of that area with Scotland, as well as the nature of agriculture in the eastern part of the Province. The urban areas of Belfast and Londonderry provided a market for heavy draught horses, which were needed for haulage. Furthermore, the Lagan of Donegal, the fertile coastlands of Co Londonderry, the fertile lands of the Lower Bann valley and the Ballymena area, north-east Down (especially around Newtownards), and the clay lands of Co Louth, were all major tillage areas with a marked specialization in potato production. The soils of these areas were, by and large, derived from glacial clays and tended to be heavy to work. As a result, farmers in Ulster preferred heavy horses to the lighter Irish Draughts, and it was only natural that they should favour

<sup>14</sup>Lewis, *Horse Breeding in Ireland*, p 26 ff.

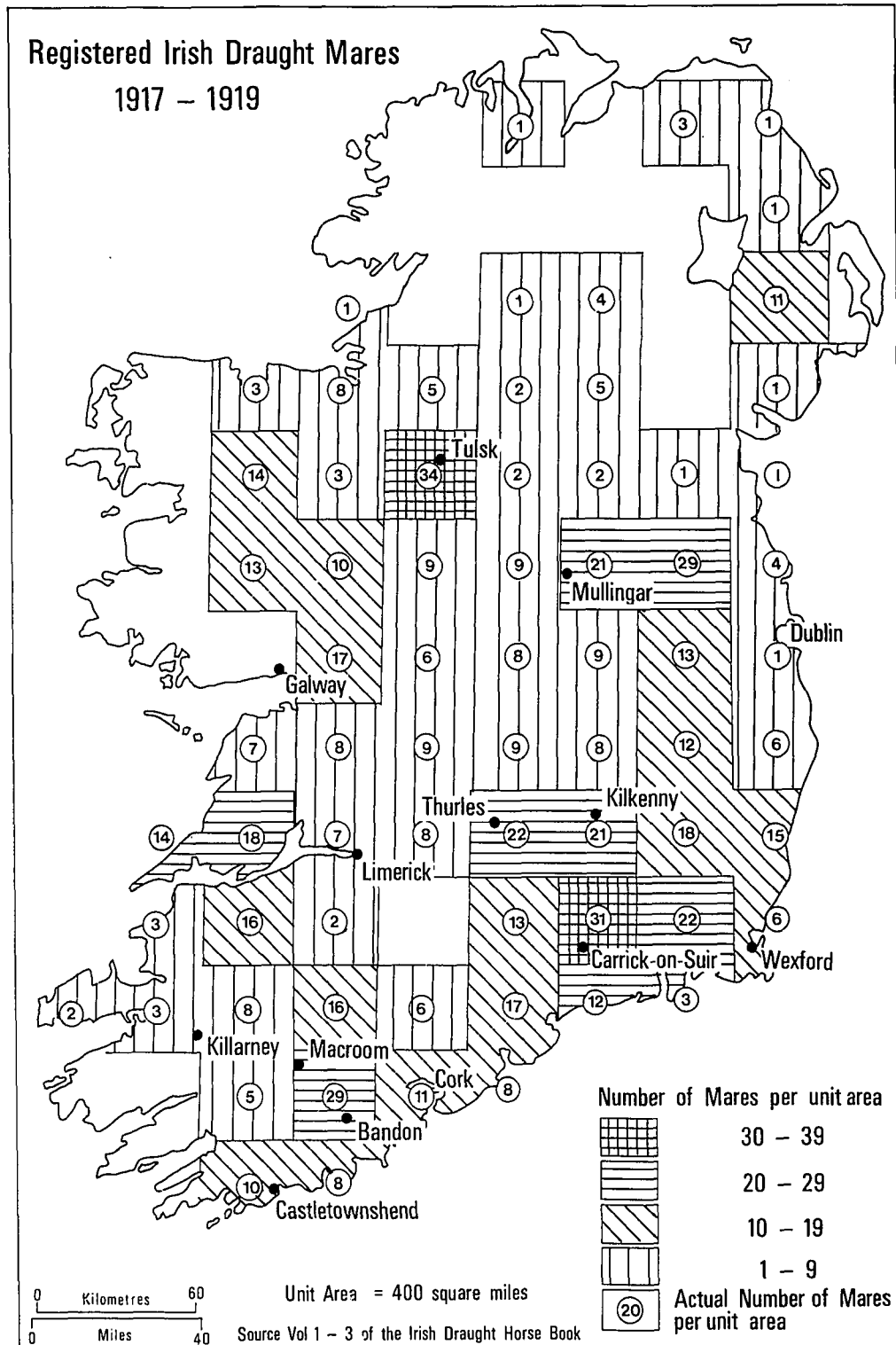


FIGURE I

The distribution of Irish Draught mares registered in the *Irish Draught Horse Book* in the 1917-19 period.

Clydesdales, a breed with its homeland in adjacent Scotland, than Shires (with an English homeland), or Percherons or other European mainland horses.

Although Clydesdale mares tended to be retained on the farms for work and breeding purposes, surplus geldings were sold. Many were bought for work in urban areas and considerable numbers were exported to Britain. Nevertheless the majority of horses in Ireland were used for agricultural work, and in 1897 it was stated that 88 per cent of horses in Ulster, 74 per cent in Leinster, 85 per cent in Munster, and 89 per cent in Connaught '... appear to be used for agricultural purposes'.<sup>15</sup>

Further south, in Co Dublin, intensive tillage required heavy draught horses, and Dublin itself provided a demand for thousands of heavy horses for haulage purposes. Although some city firms, such as Guinness, used massive Shire horses, most favoured Clydesdales, which were thought to be more active horses, capable of working at a faster pace than the Shires. Farmers in Co Dublin, like their more northerly counterparts, used Clydesdales extensively for farm work, selling the surplus animals for urban work.

The needs of Cork city for heavy draught animals were met by the production of Shire and Shire-type horses on farms surrounding the city. The use of this predominantly English breed probably reflects cultural and trading connections between Cork and England. Links between Cork and the home of the Clydesdale, in Scotland, were far more tenuous. Of course, it could be argued that Dublin also had strong connections with England, but Cork was far more isolated from the northern centres of diffusion of Clydesdales in Ireland than was the capital city. Because of the restricted size of Cork the market for heavy horses in that city was much smaller than that for Dublin, and was met mainly by the breeding of Shires on

farms north of Cork, particularly between the city and Watergrasshill.<sup>16</sup>

The importation of heavy draught horses into Ireland had been fostered by the Irish Government from as long ago as at least 1748. In 1730 Parliament passed an Act for the Encouragement of Tillage. Commissioners were appointed in order to implement the Act, and in 1748 they offered premiums for the importation of Black Horses into Ireland. Black Horses were the foundation stock from which Shire Horses and, to a lesser extent, Clydesdales, were to be bred.<sup>17</sup> The unprecedented growth of the human population of Ireland in the next hundred years tended to restrict the spread of heavy horses, since much work that might otherwise have been done on the land by horses, was done by humans. Thus, for example, teams of spadesmen dug many fields that might otherwise have been ploughed. The effects of the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the famine of 1847-50, and the consequent decline in agriculture, also militated against the widespread use of heavy horses. The annual proceedings of the Royal Dublin Society for the 1850s, for example, record fields being left to reseed themselves naturally, and some land even went out of production. In 1879 a major agricultural depression led to a further decline in the tilled area and, consequently, to a reduction in the need for heavy horses on the land.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century agricultural production began to revive in Ireland and, partly as a result, there was considerable importation of heavy horses from Britain. By 1904 this was causing official concern, and in that year the Department of Agriculture decided '... that no new sires of the Clydesdale and Shire breeds should be registered except for the province of Ulster, the counties of Dublin and Louth, and the district comprised within a radius of ten miles of the city of Cork. The

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p 121.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, p 173.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, p 18.

object . . . was to check the great impetus that had been given to the importation of Clydesdales and Shires; for most authorities agree that such sires, if too freely imported, will impair the reputation of Irish horses'.<sup>18</sup>

Although the decision of the Department of Agriculture not to register new Clydesdales and Shires for service under the Department's horse breeding schemes outside the stipulated areas did have some effect, the Department had no control over people who were prepared to keep such sires, without financial support from the Department, elsewhere in Ireland. Important tillage areas, like north Wexford and the vicinity of Carlow, needed heavy horses, and these were amply supplied by totally private enterprise. In 1920, when all but thoroughbred stallions used for racing or for the service exclusively of thoroughbred mares, had to be licensed, there were 2105 applications for stallions to be licensed. As a result, 1718 licences were granted, although only 471 stallions were registered that year for service under the Department's horse breeding schemes.<sup>19</sup> There were therefore many more heavy draught sires in Ireland than the Department's *Register of Stallions* might suggest, although by no means all of the stallions licensed were draught animals. Unfortunately, the records of stallion licences for the two years preceding the political partition of Ireland are not accessible, and might well no longer exist, so there is little reliable evidence for the location of heavy draught stallions other than those registered by the Department. By 1921 the Department had relaxed its rules slightly, and included in its *Register* Clydesdales that were located in the Carnew-Arklow area, Kildare, Laois, Offaly, north Kilkenny, three in Meath and three in Westmeath, as well as one in south Roscommon.<sup>20</sup>

Connemara, with its rocky topography and extensive peat bogs, and to a lesser extent

the bog-lands of Iveragh in Kerry provide country not suited to draught horses. Much of the tillage in these areas of marginal agriculture and stony fields was undertaken by hand at the turn of the twentieth century, and there was little need for plough horses. Furthermore, the roads of Connemara left much to be desired, although a regular coach service<sup>21</sup> was run from Galway to Clifden until at least 1906. There was limited demand, therefore, for draught horses and the needs of the inhabitants were catered for by the local ponies. In the 1920s those of Connemara, of which at least five types existed in 1900, were developed into the Connemara Pony, with its own society and stud book. Incidentally, the paternal and maternal grandsire of the first stallion to be registered in the *Connemara Pony Stud Book* was Prince Llewellyn. This was a Welsh Cob introduced to the region by the Congested Districts Board in the 1890s in order to improve the qualities of the local ponies.<sup>22</sup>

Western Mayo, particularly Erris, Belmullet and Achill, was also largely pony country. There were few roads in the area that were viable for wheeled traffic even towards the end of the nineteenth century, and pack ponies were used extensively into the present century. In 1897 Thomas Meleady, a Dublin horse dealer, described to the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the horse breeding industry in Ireland, the buying of ponies in that area. 'They used to call them Achill ponies.' The previous year Mrs Pattison had described '... endless strings of ponies, laden', in Achill.<sup>23</sup>

The southern coastlands of Cork, west of the Harbour, had been well provided with thoroughbred stallions of quality under the horse breeding schemes of the Royal Dublin Society in the 1890s. So had the area adjacent to the city, as well as eastern and northern parts of the county. There was, however, a

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, p 164.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, p 174.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p 173.

<sup>21</sup>*Viceregal Commission on Irish Railways*, 1906, map.

<sup>22</sup>B O'Sullivan in B Vesey Fitzgerald (ed) *The book of the horse*, 1946, pp 669-78.

<sup>23</sup>Lewis, op cit, p 118.

large area inland and to the west of Bandon in which there were no sires registered under the Society's scheme nor located there by the Congested Districts Board.<sup>24</sup> Thus, whilst many half-breds were produced in coastal, eastern and northern areas of the county, little official effort was made to ensure their production in the Bandon-Macroon region. It is not surprising, therefore, that Irish Draught rather than lighter half-bred, hunter-type, horses, existed in the Bandon-Macroon region, especially since the region was isolated from Clydesdale (and, to a lesser extent, Shire) influence.

The limestone lowlands of Co Limerick, south and south-west of the city, were important areas of thoroughbred and half-bred production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the first year of the Royal Dublin Society's horse breeding schemes, the 1888 stud season, 172 half-bred mares belonging to tenant farmers vied for the 50 nominations to the Society stallion posted to the county.<sup>25</sup> By 1896 16 thoroughbred stallions registered by the Society stood in the county.<sup>26</sup> Some belonged to major landlords, including the Earl of Dunraven, others to professional stallionmen. None of the stallions was located in the carboniferous shales plateau and escarpment country in the west and south-west of the county. The same locational pattern remained until the end of the Society's schemes, in 1903. When the Department of Agriculture's Inspectors sought mares of Irish Draught type in the Limerick-north Kerry region in the second decade of the twentieth century it was not surprising that they found them among the smaller and less fertile farms of the shale region of west Limerick, rather than on the limestone lowlands, where breeders specialized in the production of racehorses, carriage horses and hunters.

North Kerry, like lowland Limerick, had also been a region of thoroughbred influence under the Royal Dublin Society's schemes, and it is noticeable that few Irish Draughts were registered in that area in 1917-19. Of course, there was a major contrast between the farming types of the limestone lowlands and on the shale escarpment and boggy plateau. Whereas the lowlands, especially in Limerick, were mainly areas of pastoralism, the uplands were zones of mixed farming, where farmers tried to be self-sufficient and grow their own vegetables and save their own turf from the blanket bogs. Multi-purpose horses, such as the Irish Draught, were therefore essential in this region.

The midlands of Ireland are a more diverse area than is usually recognized. Whereas immediately south of Athlone there are extensive raised bogs and a desolate landscape, further south around Birr and in north Tipperary there are fertile farmlands. By comparison, much of the north midlands is ice-moulded depositional terrain. By the 1890s the area around Lorrha and Borrisokane in north Tipperary had developed a specialization in quality half-bred production. In 1898, for example, three thoroughbred stallions registered by the Royal Dublin Society stood in that restricted area,<sup>27</sup> and in 1921 two thoroughbreds and three half-bred sires registered by the Department of Agriculture travelled in that region.<sup>28</sup> Further north, towards Athlone, there appears to have been little specialization in production, although the area had been invaded from the east by the Clydesdale and other feathery type horses, often of coarse appearance. The Inspectors therefore found few Irish Draught type mares in the area, although the situation changed further north in Roscommon.

Youatt<sup>29</sup> drew attention to the quality of Roscommon-bred horses as long ago as

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, pp 100 ff.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, p 26.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, p 101.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, p 128.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, pp 168-9.

<sup>29</sup>W Youatt, *The horse*, 1831, p 61.

1831. He also made the relevant comment that: 'There are very few horses in the agricultural districts of Ireland exclusively devoted to draught. The minute division of the farms renders it impossible for them to be kept. The occupier even of a good Irish farm wants a horse that shall carry him to market, and draw his small car, and perform every kind of drudgery — a horse of all work; therefore the thoroughbred draught horse . . . is rarely found.'<sup>30</sup>

Like central and eastern Galway and Mayo, Roscommon formed part of a mixed farming area in the early twentieth century, in which up to 15 per cent of farmland was under arable cultivation,<sup>31</sup> necessitating draught horses. Nevertheless, few farms were large enough to provide sufficient acreage of arable to justify keeping heavy draught horses, and Irish Draughts were adequate to till the essentially light soils and suitable for more active roles.

The concentration of Irish Draughts in west Meath and around Mullingar is similarly explicable. While eastern and central Meath was largely a grassland area, devoted to cattle fattening, the west of the county contained many small farms and patches of tillage, where a multi-purpose horse was needed. For over a century thoroughbred sires had stood in the region, and it is likely that their influence was reflected in at least some of the Irish Draught type horses in the area. Both Meath and Westmeath were noted hunting countries, and the Secretary of the Westmeath Foxhounds reported to *Baily's Hunting Directory* that, for his country, 'A short, compact horse is the best'. In 1895, when 10 thoroughbred stallions were registered by the Royal Dublin Society in Westmeath, they were all between 15.3 and 16.05 hands high, similar to the heights of most Irish Draughts. Irish Draught mares are admirable for hunter production when put to thoroughbred sires, and the strong

market for hunters in the region may have influenced farmers to keep such mares.

The widespread distribution of Irish Draughts in south-eastern Ireland was also due to the demand for multi-purpose horses and to the strong market for hunters in that sporting region. The areas of broken topography, such as the Ahenny basin, north of Carrick-on-Suir, and the uplands east of Mullinavat, were areas of limited tillage and steep slopes. Horses that could trot to market under a cart, to such centres as Carrick, New Ross and Mullinavat, and that could also do other farm work, were prized. As a result Irish Draughts were favoured in these areas.

Unlike the uplands around Ahenny and Mullinavat, central Kilkenny and the Barrow and Nore valleys were mainly areas of half-bred production, although Irish Draughts, which usually had some thoroughbred blood in them, were also important. During the 1890s the greatest concentration of travelling thoroughbred stallions registered under the Royal Dublin Society's schemes was in this part of Ireland.<sup>32</sup> The more dissected areas of Kilkenny, west of the city, lay outside the main half-bred zone, and as Figure 1 shows, many Irish Draughts, which were suited to the needs of the farmer-miners of the Slieve Ardagh Hills, existed in that area.

County Clare has been noted for horse production since at least the seventeenth century,<sup>33</sup> and many thoroughbred sires stood for service in the south of the county under the Royal Dublin Society's horse breeding schemes of the 1880s and 1890s. The average farm size in that area is only about forty acres<sup>34</sup> so that few farms were large enough to warrant keeping heavy horses, yet most needed a horse of all work. The Irish Draught, with its modicum of thoroughbred blood, met that need.

By 1978, as Figure 2 shows, the distribution of Irish Draught mares had changed

<sup>30</sup>W Youatt, *The horse*, 1847, p 105.

<sup>31</sup>T W Freeman, *Ireland*, 1965, p 394.

<sup>32</sup>Lewis, *op cit*, p 17.

<sup>33</sup>C A Lewis, *Hunting in Ireland*, 1975, p 41.

<sup>34</sup>Freeman, *op cit*, p 386.

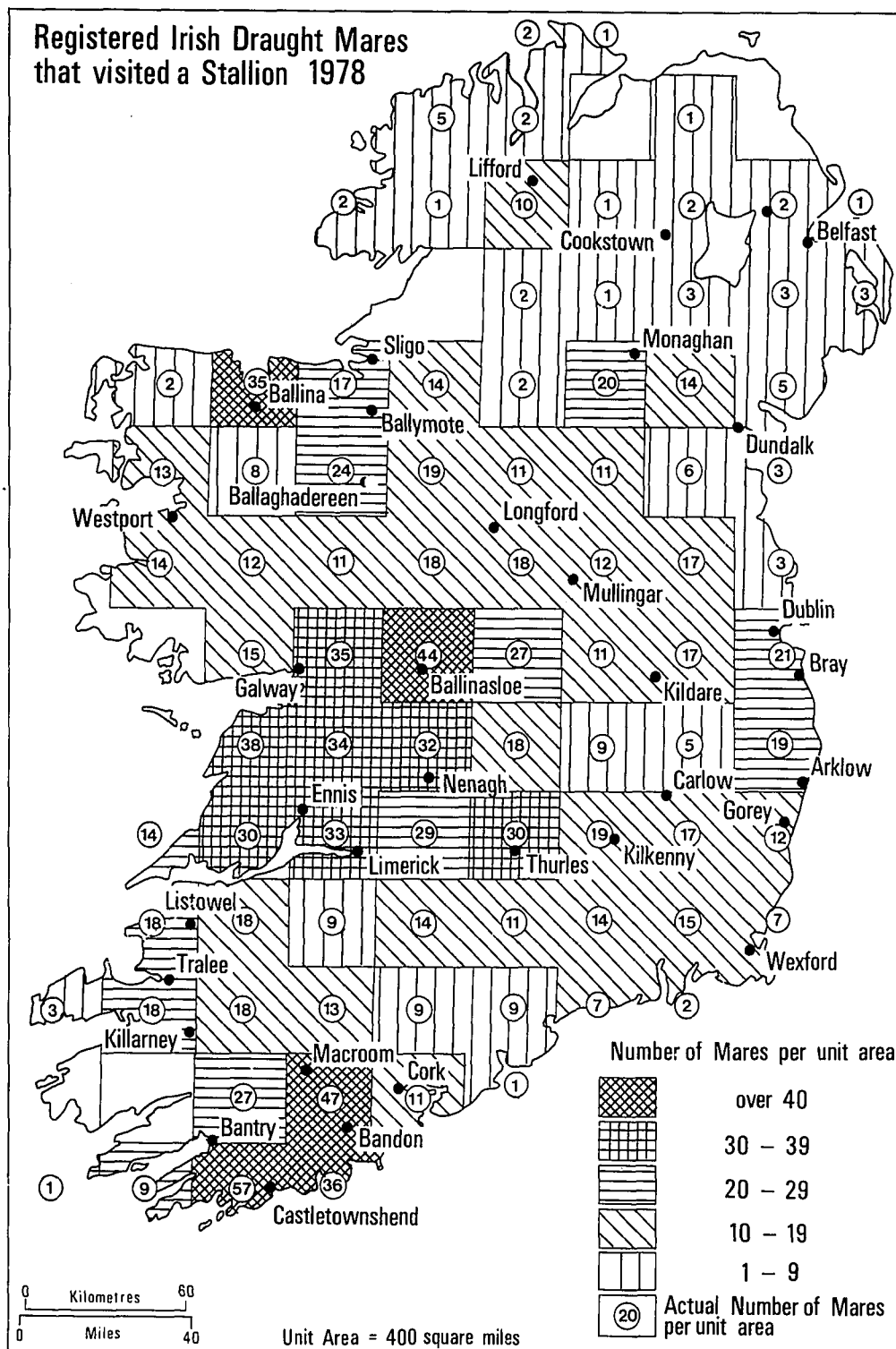


FIGURE 2

The distribution of Registered Irish Draught mares that visited a stallion under the official horse breeding schemes in 1978. (Source: breeding records of An Bord na gCapall.)

remarkably from that of 1917-19. The greatest densities were in that coastal zone in Cork in which half-bred production had been important earlier in the century. The Castletownshend area, in particular, now possessed the greatest number of Irish Draught mares in Ireland. The second greatest concentration was around Ballinasloe in Co Galway and in a zone that extended south to Thurles and Limerick and south westwards to include virtually the whole of Clare. The third concentration lay around Ballina in Co Mayo and in south Sligo. There were also important concentrations south of Monaghan and in the coastal zone between Dublin and Arklow.

The concentration in south central Cork probably reflects the continued but rapidly declining use of Irish Draughts for agricultural purposes; the strong hunting traditions of the area; the holiday caravan trade; the availability of suitable sires; and the foundation work of the Royal Dublin Society's schemes of the nineteenth century. There are more packs of hounds followed on horseback in Co Cork (twenty-one)<sup>35</sup> than in any other area of Ireland, which ensures an interest in the breeding of hunters. There is also a market for horses for the horse-drawn holiday caravan trade in the coastal areas, especially between Kinsale and Skibbereen. In 1979 six Irish Draught sires stood at stud in west Cork, as well as three half-breds and at least twenty-three thoroughbreds, giving breeders plenty of choice of sires within short distances of the breeder's home.<sup>36</sup> Finally, although farms in the region are among the most mechanized in the Republic,<sup>37</sup> some are managed by men to whom horsemanship is still a way of life and by elderly men who are not prepared to acquire the skills needed to handle tractors.

During the late nineteenth century many quality thoroughbred stallions were located in the coastal area of this part of Cork, and at

Bandon, under the Royal Dublin Society's schemes. It is likely that some of their descendants have subsequently been registered as Irish Draughts. As the market for working horses decreases, so it is likely that fewer Irish Draughts will be bred in the region in spite of the value of mares for brood purposes.

The great increase in Registered Irish Draughts in east Galway, Clare, and adjacent areas, may reflect an inefficient initial examination system, an actual change in the local type of draught horses, or the possibility that different criteria are now used to decide which animals to register. The annual horse fair at Ballinasloe each October provides a ready market, and attracts buyers from the whole of Ireland and from further afield. The predominance of small farms, restricted farm incomes and productivity (which has retarded the introduction of mechanization),<sup>38</sup> the elderly age of many farmers<sup>39</sup> and the undoubted prestige value of horse ownership, have all combined to ensure that this remains a major breeding area.

The fertile lowlands around Ballina and Killala have been a noted horse breeding area for at least two centuries. At present a number of families specialize in producing young horses for sale as hunters and showjumpers and some of the local veterinary surgeons are renowned local horsemen. There is thus an interest in horses in the region, plus a market for young horses. There are also at least five registered sires standing in the area, unlike the area immediately further south, in which there was only one registered stallion in 1979. Many farmers are also elderly, although this is also the case in much of the remainder of Mayo. The number of mares that visited a stallion in the Ballina area therefore probably reflects local cultural factors as much as any others. Nevertheless, the better quality of land in the

<sup>35</sup>Lewis, *op cit*, p 77.

<sup>36</sup>Register of approved stallions, *An Bord na gCapall*, 1979.

<sup>37</sup>D A Gillmor, *Agriculture in the Republic of Ireland*, 1977, p 73.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid*, p 74.

<sup>39</sup>J Scully, 'The development of western Ireland', *Ir Geogr*, 6, 1969, pp 1-13.

region as compared to the bog-lands of Erris to the west or the drumlin lands to the south, is important. So is the partly resultant history of colonization, in which Ballina and Killala were both foci for plantations in the past — for landlord families such as the Knox-Gores, who owned 22,000 acres in Mayo in the 1870s, spread an appreciation of quality horse production in the area.<sup>40</sup>

The decline of importance of the Ahenny and Mullinavat areas is probably a reflection of the increase in mechanization in those areas, combined with the realization that half-breds, which are better suited to hunting and showjumping, generally command higher prices than Irish Draughts. Many farmers are prepared to combine business and pleasure and produce showjumpers, quality hunters and point-to-pointers, all of which are more refined horses than the Irish Draughts. Bord na gCapall (the Irish Horse Board) has established horse sales at Gowran, north of the area but adjacent to it, and the sales attract international buyers. The local breeders are therefore well aware of the higher prices that half-breds command, and breed accordingly. Similar reasons, by and large, explain the decline in the numbers of Irish Draughts in the Mullingar-Meath area.

Agriculture in Northern Ireland is far more mechanized than in most of the remainder of Ireland, as is shown by the number of tractors per farmed area.<sup>41</sup> The necessity for work horses has therefore been greatly reduced, and although a number of farmers still breed Clydesdales mainly for show and other competitive purposes, few still bother with Irish Draughts. In 1917–19 a surprising number of Irish Draughts was registered in the Lurgan area. Mechanization has now ousted such animals and the only appreciable concentration of Irish Draught breeding mares in 1978 was in the broken country south of Lifford and partly in the Republic.

The concentration of mares south of Monaghan largely reflects the poor agriculture of that difficult drumlin area of small farms and, all too often, elderly farmers. Horses are still used on a few farms for work purposes, but they are being replaced by mechanization. By comparison, the relatively high number of Irish Draughts between Dublin and Arklow largely reflects affluence. They are mostly kept by people who earn the major part of their living outside farming, or who are well-established farmers. The number of Irish Draughts, like that of other 'pleasure horses', will probably increase in this area in the future.

## VI

### *The height of Registered Irish Draught mares*

The smallest mares to be registered as Irish Draughts in 1917–19 were 15 hands high. The largest were 16.2. In 1978 the smallest registered mare to visit a stallion was stated as 14.0 hands, the next smallest as 14.2 (although listed as 15.0 in the manuscript *Irish Draught Horse Book*). The largest mares were 17.0 hands. Yet, whilst individual heights varied considerably in both time periods, the average height of registered mares increased from 15.3 to 16.0 hands.

In 1917–19 the tallest mares, based on average heights for squares containing eight or more mares, were in south-east Ireland, around Mallow-Kanturk and immediately south of Belfast. They averaged 15.35 to 16.0 hands. The tallest individual mares existed in the vicinity of New Ross and in the lowlands of Wexford to the east. Towards the west and north-west, and in the Meath-Westmeath belt, heights declined so that the smallest mares, on average, were located in the vicinity of Castlebar in Co Mayo, where they were only 15.2 hands. Trend surface analyses, using DUTSA programmes, confirms that there was a definite gradient of

<sup>40</sup>J Bateman, *The great landowners of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1883, p 88.

<sup>41</sup>*Atlas of Ireland*, 1980, p 59.

heights in 1917-19 from highest in the Wexford area to lowest in Mayo.<sup>42</sup>

By 1978 the overall height of Registered Irish Draught mares had increased to almost 16.0 hands, and there was surprising uniformity of average heights throughout almost the whole of Ireland in which densities of eight or more mares per 400-square-mile unit occurred. Trend surface analyses no longer showed any appreciable gradient in heights across the country. This suggests that there is little environmental control of the size of mares. The variation in heights in 1917-19 probably reflected nutritional conditions and the breeding policies of farmers in Ireland as they produced animals for work in local circumstances. Now that the role of the Irish Draught is changing, breeders appear to be adjusting the size of mares to meet new market conditions. Instead of reflecting biogeographic controls, the 1978 mare population apparently reflected controlled breeding and probably improved management and nutrition aimed at existing market conditions.

<sup>42</sup>C A Lewis 'Height characteristics of Irish Draught mares', *Irish Draught Horse Yearbook* 1980, pp 16-22.

## VII

### *Conclusion*

The distribution of Registered Irish Draught mares has changed radically from a concentration in Roscommon and south of a line from Limerick to Kilkenny in 1917-19, to south central Cork, the area between Galway, Ballinasloe, Limerick and Thurles (including the whole of Clare), and that around Ballina, in 1978. Mares, on average, have increased in height by one inch and no discernible trend in heights exists across the country as it did in the earlier period. Instead of breeding Irish Draughts to suit local working conditions, which resulted in adjustment of heights to local environmental conditions in the 1917-19 period, by 1978 mares appeared to be increasingly bred to suit national and international market conditions. They are used as foundation stock for the production of hacking, hunting, and competitive horses, especially showjumpers. In 1917 Irish Draughts were still utilitarian working animals; by 1978 they were being adjusted to meet the demands of the leisure-horse market.