During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, horses were the primary source of power for agriculture, transport, warfare, and mining. In shale mines, horses and ponies were used to haul hutches around the pits to where they needed to go, and often spent their entire lives underground. However, some mines, such as Philpstoun No. 6, were easier to access and ponies would be walked up each night and allowed to graze before returning underground the next morning. Others would only be brought up annually to be shown in the West Lothian Agricultural Society’s Show where they would often win prizes and great acclaim for their respective mines.

Shale mines had larger working spaces and roadways than those found in coal mines, allowing heavy Clydesdale horses, as well as smaller ponies such as the Fell and Shetland, to be put to work. The horses were generally well looked after, with underground stables, food, and overall welfare maintained by an ostler and routinely inspected by the S.S.P.C.A.

It was essential that the stables and food for the animals posed no threat to fire safety and the lives of the miners:

‘They were fed oats and bran, and they weren’t allowed any long hay... it was all chopped... in case of fire... the horses were bedded down with moss litter, and fed on short hay.’

Mr John McRinner, ostler at Tottlywells No. 1 mine
Boys as young as 14 began their working life in the shale mines as pony drivers. Their duties included the driving and supervision of the horses as they hauled full and empty hutches around the pits. Many built up strong relationships with their horses. Some were regarded as large pets with almost ‘human-like’ qualities, and a strong asset to the teams working underground. Other miners had less affection for their four-legged friends as they believed human lives were valued less than a pony’s by the shale companies:

‘They [the Company] were more worried about losing a pony or engine or something, they had to buy them to replace them, they didn’t have to buy a human being. I’m no joking, that’s the truth!’

Mr J. Docherty, Niddry Castle Oil Works

With the large increase in electrical motors being employed in mines just prior to the start of WWI, ponies were gradually phased out. Over the 17 year period from 1913 to 1929, the number of ponies at work in Scottish mines dropped from 5,744 to 1,750; less than a third. In some of the newer pits there was not even as much as a single pony underground.
However, some mines, such as Philpston No.6, were easier to access and ponies would be walked up each night and allowed to graze before returning underground the next morning. Others would only be brought up annually to be shown in the West Lothian Agricultural Society’s Show, where they would often win prizes and great acclaim for their respective mines.

A prize-winning “pit pony” at the West Lothian Agricultural Society Show.

Image of a group of pit ponies exhibited at West Lothian Agricultural Society’s Show, June 1929.

Reference Collection: R10-000264

It was essential that the stables and food for the animals posed no threat to safety and the lives of the miners.

“They were fed oats and bran, and they weren’t allowed long hay… it was all chopped… in case of fire… the horses were bedded down with mess litter, and fed on short hay.”

Mr. John McRitchie, ostler at Tadlywells No. 1 mine.