

### OX LOGGING

Following Stephen's call in the June newsletter for a piece on oxen or mules, I found myself in the ideal position to respond. In June I attended an international meeting organised by the German working cattle group and Kommern open air museum, near Cologne, Germany.

There is ongoing cooperation between Kommern Museum in Germany, the Weald and Downland Museum, Singleton, UK, and the Ecomusee, Ungersheim, Alsace, France. All are well worth a visit and all demonstrate working cattle.

So what exactly is an Ox? The usual definition is a castrated bull, used for work. As demonstrated at Kommern however, bulls and cows can also be used for useful work. Poorer farms with a few cattle could do just that and keep the added side benefit of breeding capability, or calves and milk.

Draught oxen have probably been used since at least 4000BC and there is a bewildering and inventive array of techniques to harness their power. In England the tradition has been to pair oxen in neck yokes with bows fitting from underneath the neck to hold the yoke in place. But there are many other possibilities.

Moritz, the nine year old Kommern museum ox, weighing 1.2 Tonnes, is wearing a simple yoke that fits across the forehead and is secured to the horns with straps. These yokes are typically made from wood or metal, with a leather pad for the forehead. They are quick to fit and quite small, simple and cheap.

**9 year old Ox in forehead yoke**



**Ox and bull team in double head yoke, typical of Alsace, France**



The tradition in Alsace is a head yoke fitted just behind the horns and secured under the horns and across the forehead with straps. A padded 'hat' stops any chafing.

For a number of reasons, horse collars do not work well with cattle. Firstly any collar must accommodate the relatively wide head and in most cases horns. Secondly, cattle do not have a broad chest area for taking up the draught and thirdly horse collars tend to interfere with the ox's mobile shoulders when working. Any collar for cattle has to move independently forward first with one shoulder, then with the other. A study in Germany in the 1930's led to the optimisation of cattle harnessing, resulting in the so called three-pad collar. This collar is in two separable halves. The two main pads pick up the draught from the shoulder blades, while the small third pad on top of the neck is mainly for positioning. A good example is shown over the page. Incidentally, having a calf 'tag along' as shown in this picture is an efficient way to accustom them to work.

**German three-pad collar****Philippe Kuhlmann hitching up a log**

Above, the team is standing patiently, while the single chain running from the middle of the yoke is fixed to a log.

The main logging demonstration was given by Philippe Kuhlmann, visiting from France with his Bull and Ox team. Philippe spent five years professionally logging with a single bull in the Massif Central. Now he runs a small farm, using his team for any heavy draught work.

As is usual, the team were mainly controlled by voice commands. However, because they had only been in training for a few months and there were a lot of visitors around, the halters were also used to guide, or just to be available in case of emergency.

Changing from pulling to 'pushing' a log, by turning the team around and positioning them one either side of the log, was also demonstrated. Philippe had used this technique before in exceptionally difficult terrain. The only way to get the logs out was to 'push' them over a precipice and pick them up later from the bottom. In that case the chain had a fixing which (hopefully) pulled itself out of the log on the way down, leaving the team standing safe and sound at the top.

**'Pushing' a log****Leading from the front**

One interesting difference to logging with horses is that there are no lines and the team is led from the front, or at the shoulder. That means the logger is well out of the way of the moving log. Perhaps this is a little safer in some cases, although the exact path of the log cannot then be easily seen.

Oxen generally have a slower pace than heavy horses. The European cattle breeds are also less tolerant of working in very hot conditions than horses. On the other hand a pair of oxen is probably quicker to yoke than a pair of horses is to harness and may be more affordable to buy, feed and care for. Oxen can be steadfast, determined plodders and slow to panic if something goes wrong.

So, which are best for logging – horses or oxen? Ask that question in the company of a group of ox and horse loggers and I suppose the resulting discussion would last well into the early hours (or at least until the beer ran out) and still not reach a conclusion. However, both sides could hopefully agree that either can efficiently extract logs even in quite inaccessible sites, with minimum damage to the forest floor, vegetation and wildlife. Both sides might even agree (towards the end of the evening perhaps) that whilst ‘magnificent’ is an adjective perfectly fitting for heavy horses, there is no denying that oxen are rather more, well, ‘humble’.

**Links:**

German working cattle group: [www.zugrinder.de](http://www.zugrinder.de)

Kommern, Weald and Downland and Ecomusee open air museum websites:

[www.kommern.lvr.de](http://www.kommern.lvr.de)

[www.wealddown.co.uk](http://www.wealddown.co.uk)

[www.ecomusee-alsace.fr](http://www.ecomusee-alsace.fr)

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**From Juliet Jessop:-**

**Your help is needed:**

We are in the process of building a base of industry knowledge that we feel will assist us at all levels in the progression of our profession.

Information such as number of professional loggers, numbers of horses involved in the industry, locations and key contacts worked for, volumes of timber extracted, etc etc. Tracking this information over time will paint the bigger picture of how our industry is growing, give us the ability to network more effectively, and will enable us to talk about what we do with a higher level of confidence, both to potential clients but also the wider public.

To be able to build this knowledge base, we will need your help and so we are putting together a quick survey that we would like you to complete. This will be emailed to you in the next few weeks and if you can spare 10-15 minutes to fill it in, it would be greatly appreciated. Your individual reply will remain confidential but will be added to others to build the bigger picture. Once all replies are in, we will compile a report that we will share with you so that you can start to use information in your own marketing if you so wish. We aim to have this initial phase completed by the end of the year. Many thanks in advance for your time and consideration.

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