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HORSE SLAUGHTER IN AN ENGLISH ABATTOIR

18 September 2007

THE FOOTAGE

The enclosed footage was filmed covertly by Animal Aid at Potter's abattoir, Taunton during August 2007. It shows a succession of apparently fit and healthy horses being shot in the head with a rifle and then butchered for human consumption. It is the first time that such scenes have been filmed in Britain and made public.

One of the horses arrived seriously injured and - after a long delay - was shot while lying in a yard. We will be calling on the Meat Hygiene Service to investigate this incident with a view to bringing a prosecution under cruelty legislation (see below). Another horse looked as though she could be pregnant. Among the slaughtered animals were children's ponies and young healthy-looking Thoroughbred race horses.

THE ABATTOIR

Lawrence J Potter (South West) Ltd describes itself in the company's latest annual report as being engaged in the 'elective euthanasia of equines and export of horsemeat'. Stephen Potter, a director of the company, was reported in The Observer (1 October, 2006) as saying that his establishment killed 'some 3,000 [horses] a year'. He added that 'only 100 [horses] a year came from racing'. About 20 of the roughly 50 horses we filmed over just two days and one evening were Thoroughbreds.

BACKGROUND

For the past eight years, Animal Aid has investigated the horse racing industry, publishing a series of detailed reports exposing the oppressive regime to which Thoroughbreds are subjected. Hundreds of horses are raced to death every year and thousands of 'surplus' animals are slaughtered or otherwise destroyed.

While Thoroughbred bloodstock sales are an integral part of the multi-billion pound racing industry, there is also a lucrative private sales market in horses and ponies used for show jumping, dressage, cross-country, hunting and hacking, as well as those employed by riding schools. No matter what their background, there is always the likelihood that a horse will meet his or her end in a slaughterhouse, with the meat sold abroad for human consumption.

NOTES ON THE FOOTAGE

Injured mare on the ground

The severely injured chestnut mare, who is seen lying on the ground, arrived at Potter's Abattoir at around 8 p.m. on Tuesday, 14th August 2007. This was likely to be after the killing line had been closed for the day. A considerable time elapsed before the horse was shot. Animal Aid has called on the Meat Hygiene Service to investigate whether the delay in putting her out of her misery was due to the time it took Potter's employees to re-start the slaughterline, on which she could be promptly butchered after being shot. The law states that, for meat to be deemed fit for human consumption, an animal must be bled immediately after being shot or stunned. But there is also a statutory obligation to despatch a seriously injured animal without delay.

The injured mare had been isolated from the rest of the horses in a separate horse trailer, which was towed by the larger wagon. On arrival at the yard, the trailer in which she was contained was unhooked and left standing close to the slaughter room doors. The wagon was then driven away and the horses were unloaded into the barn. After some time, the wagon returned and re-hooked the trailer containing the injured mare. At this point, the Animal Aid undercover team heard a commotion coming from the rear of the trailer as she was being unloaded. Some 10 minutes passed, during which time the trailer and wagon were moved out of view. Our undercover operator was now able to film the mare lying in the yard. The period of time from the trailer arriving at Potter's to when we first filmed the mare on the yard floor is estimated to be 40 to 45 minutes.

The length of time she is captured on film before being killed is 7 minutes 11 seconds. This is in addition to the unrecorded 40-45 minutes when she was on the trailer or lying in the yard. After being shot, she was not inspected for signs of life. Instead, she was bulldozed by a JCB, then shackled and hauled into the bleeding and cutting building.

The wagon and trailer were driven by the man who was later seen shooting the horse. The second man in the sequence appears to be checking the horse's passport for identification purposes. He could be a vet or a member of Potter's staff.

The law governing horse slaughter

The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations (WASK), requires that animals who have experienced pain or suffering during transport or following arrival at the slaughterhouse should be 'slaughtered or killed immediately' (WASK, Schedule 3, Part II, 4). Additionally, an animal who is unable to walk when he or she reaches the slaughteryard should not be 'dragged to its place of slaughter or killing but (a) slaughtered where it lies; or (b) if it is possible, and to do so would not cause any unnecessary pain or suffering, transported on a trolley or moveable platform to a place of emergency slaughter or killing where it is then slaughtered or killed' (WASK, Schedule 3, Part II, 5).

The Food Standards Agency's Meat Industry Guide (2006) is more emphatic on this point: 'For welfare reasons (e.g. injury or an animal unable to walk without pain or unassisted), it may become necessary to slaughter an animal immediately on arrival at a slaughterhouse, without unloading it from the means of transport.'

DEFRA further stipulates that, should Official Veterinarians 'see animals arriving at a slaughterhouse which show evidence of welfare problems arising on farm or during transport, they will report the incident to the appropriate enforcement body which will take the necessary follow-up action'.

Mare who looked as though she could be pregnant

The mare identified as such in the film looks as though she could be pregnant. She arrived on a lorry with two other horses who were killed before her. Legislation states that heavily pregnant animals may not be transported.

The casual manner of the killing of the 'pregnant' horse is evident in the banter between the slaughterman and the horse handler. 'Watch the racing yesterday? Authorised [Europe's top race horse and the Derby winner] won. Frankie Dettori was on him', the slaughterman says, while positioning the horse for the rifle shot to the head.

No obvious inspection followed to determine if the horse is dead, and we can see no vet on the scene, either.

'Frankie won on him, on Authorised', the slaughterman continues, as he removes the bridle from the head of the floored horse.

The mare is shackled for sticking (bleeding), at which time her hind legs are seen to jerk before she is hoisted across the floor and into the bleeding and sawing room to have her head severed and skinned.

Behind the closed door, what sounds like a second shot rings out. Was this the sound of an unborn foal being killed?

Notes on other horses

The breeds and types of horses at the abattoir barn waiting to be killed are mixed: The Piebald Cob - a typical riding school pony - stands beside a Chestnut Thoroughbred, while a number of former pet Welsh Ponies intermingle with Hunter types.

The small grey Welsh Section Pony - the most popular of all children's ponies - is taken in a cold, calculated manner to her death. This is a typical example of abandonment of a pet whose useful days are over. It occurs when a child loses interest in riding or wants a bigger

The freeze-marked big black cob, also killed in the film, was typical of a riding school horse. He had, perhaps, given pleasure to hundreds of children and their proud parents over the years.

Animal Aid identified more than 20 Thoroughbred horses who were killed on those three dates in August. Only two appeared injured: one looked to have an off-fore tendon injury that was bandaged, and he carried a deep cut on his hindquarters. The other (details above) was the seriously ill horse who should not have been travelling in that condition. The remaining Thoroughbreds looked young, fit and healthy.

OTHER ISSUES

- The attitudes of both the Official Veterinarians and members of the workforce at the abattoir ranged from diffident to jocular.
- There appeared to be no systematic inspection of the shot horses, by a vet or any other employee, to see if they were dead prior to bleeding.
- There are alternatives to abattoir killing that all horse owners should be aware of: euthanasia by a vet; being killed by bullet in the horse's paddock; sanctuary via a care centre with a loan programme; or committing to the welfare of a horse throughout his or her natural lifespan.

CONCLUSION

The horses shown being killed in the Animal Aid undercover footage came from owners who either dealt directly with the abattoir or who didn't know or care that their animals would end up in that establishment. What all former owners have in common is the transient use of their animal. They feel that their responsibility is relinquished once the horse or pony is of no further use to them.

The fundamental problem at the heart of the horse slaughter scandal that we have uncovered is that these animals are bred to excess. They are produced for commercial

reasons, by both the Thoroughbred racing industry and by those servicing the pet horse and pony market. When an animal is no longer useful, he or she is often simply disposed of. This is the fate of thousands of healthy horses and ponies every year.
