



What happened to the horses when the war ended?

Narrated by Matt Baker

Audio slideshow transcript

When the end of war was declared in 1918, millions of soldiers looked forward to finally returning home. But their horses and mules faced a far less certain future.

Only mounts that were owned by officers were guaranteed to return to Britain. The fate of the rest of the Army's horses and mules depended on their age and fitness.

After everything that they'd been through my great-grandfather, Tommy, was devastated to leave his mules, Nellie and Nancy behind in Belgium.

The healthiest and youngest animals were brought back to the UK - 25,000 remained in the British army while more than 60,000 were sold to farmers.

Horses and mules in the next class down were auctioned off to farmers on the continent for an average of £37.

The oldest and most worn out horses were sent to the knacker's yard for meat and fetched £19 – a necessary move when severe food shortages hit Europe at the end of the war.

Further afield, thousands of Australian horses were used by the British Army in India.

But the role of horses wasn't forgotten. The 'Old Blacks' – a team of six horses who survived the whole war – were chosen to pull the carriage of the Unknown Soldier to mark the Armistice in 1920.

A handful of others, like San Toy and Roger, retired to stables owned by The Horse Trust. San Toy had served through the Boer campaign and Great War, while Roger had been found wandering in No Man's Land – just like Joey was in War Horse.

But this wasn't the end of the war horse story. The RSPCA, which had helped the army care for horses in the war, opened 'The Animals War Memorial Dispensary.' It treated 6,000 animals in 1932 – and is still a working clinic today.

Donations from the public to the Blue Cross Fund and RSPCA meant they could rescue thousands of war horses left to a life of hard labour on the continent.

In the 1930s some rescue horses ended up at the Ada Cole Stables.

They still have the original ledger that documents the war horses rescued from the Belgian horse markets.

There are characters such as 'Blind Betty' and 'Golden Boy' 'an old charger who went through the last war'. Thankfully they had finally retired to a home fit for heroes.

[Images courtesy of Getty Images, National Army Museum, Mary Evans Picture Library, The Horses Trust, Redwings Horse Sanctuary]