

Worshipful Company of Farriers equine veterinary studies award 2024

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Hi there, I'm Rachel, a recently graduated vet from Bristol. Over the last week, I have been very fortunate to work with Alex Mercer AWCF Master Farrier in Lincolnshire. Having always grown up around horses, the saying 'no foot no horse' is known all too well and I was curious to learn more from those that make it their life's work.

During the first day we visited a variety of routine shoeing and trims. As we talked and I watched, I learned a lot about the variations of shoes that can be tailored to each specific hoof and horse's lifestyle. Work, intensity, duration, terrain and horse are all to be considered before shoe fitting. I noticed the most common shoe was a steel fullered concave, fitted to the individual. I found it interesting discussing the different opinions around toe clip and quarter clip shoes. Some say, although the quarter clip shoe enables the farrier to more dramatically bring back the breakover point, the effect of a fixed clip either side may encourage more growth through the toe. Others say although the toe clip is placed at the strongest part of the hoof wall, it may reduce the ability to set the shoe back under the foot, bringing the breakover dorsally. But there is no hard and fast rule, each shoe must be tailored to the specific foot with consideration of the whole horse.



I learned that a concave shoe is lighter weight, it has better traction and has 'self-cleaning' properties, so is generally a good option for sports horses. A wider, flat shoe may be more appropriate for dressage horses to reduce sinking in soft surfaces and reduce frictional forces when turning in small circles. These small differences may aid in prevention of tendon injuries that we know dressage horses are predisposed to.

On the second day, I travelled down to Warwick College with Alex, where he was teaching a group of final year apprentices. Here we had a lecture on lower limb radiographs and on materials before taking to the forge. I really enjoyed seeing the farrier assessment of radiographs and it reminded me of the importance of radiographic markers. For me, it highlighted how strong a



collaborative vet and farrier treatment plan can be. In the forge we practiced using a plastic welding gun to place steel staples across hoof cracks on a cadaver limb. I had never seen this treatment for hoof cracks, and it was so interesting to see the many materials and methods available to farriers. Alex and I then talked through conformational variations and watched the locomotion of a horse on the yard to discuss landing, loading and remedial farriery. At the end of the day, I spoke to the apprentices about the various veterinary diagnostics available for horses, such as nerve blocks, MRI scans and scintigraphy. I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to Warwick College and meeting the team of lecturers and apprentices there.



On Wednesday I became much more proficient at pulling off shoes. The practice, even of just understanding how to get a secure hold of a hindlimb, was extremely useful. We visited a horse with stringhalt and being a bit more patient and careful with horses affected by this condition, was important. In the evening, I had the chance to forge my own shoe! Very patiently guided by Alex's apprentice, Sultan, I managed to make a bar of steel somewhat resemble a horseshoe.

Although always admiring their work, I have a complete newfound respect for farriers in their craftsmanship and ability. The strength and skill required to forge a shoe, let alone fit it specifically to each unique hoof is incredible.

By Thursday I was able to practice nailing on shoes, a useful skill that may save farrier time in my future career. We visited some interesting cases. One of which had a dorsal wall resection of the hoof around four months ago, completed by Alex and a local veterinarian. We also saw a mature horse with incredible bilateral forelimb fetlock varus which Alex was able to create and fit shoes with lateral extensions. The extension enabled this horse to have added support on the lateral side of the hoof where most of the weight was transferred due to the conformation and allowed a better distribution of loading forces through it. We visited a cob with a recent history of laminitis where Alex had been working with veterinary radiographs to remedially shoe the pony. When shoeing those with evidence of rotation of the third phalanx, weight bearing must be distributed away from the toe and the breakover point moved palmarly. Use of a heart bar shoe can reduce pressure through the inflamed and damaged hoof wall lamellae, by taking some weight through the frog. The biomechanics and physics of remedial farriery is fascinating.



The image to the left shows lateral extension shoes on a horse with fetlock varus. The middle and right-hand images show laminitic radiographs and heart bar shoes on a cob.

By the end of the week, I have become much more confident with removing shoes, making an even hoof trim and visualising hoof balance. The highlight of my week was managing to locate a hoof abscess, much to the relief of myself and the mare. I have learnt so much and have been very grateful for the opportunity to learn from Alex, Sam and Sultan. I would encourage every vet student with an interest in equine to apply for the award, and if it is not possible, reach out to your local farrier and be eager to learn.

I'd like to give a huge thanks to Alex and Linda for organising and enabling this opportunity for me. I'd also like to thank Warwick College for welcoming me and for the advice Sam and Sultan have given me over the week. Alex is a credit to this profession and a fantastic teacher. I wish him all the best in his fellowship.