

Returning to Riding. Part 1, Training Harry  
by Greg Glendell

I had not ridden regularly for many years, but took up riding again recently. In early 2013 I bought Harry; an un-backed 15 hh chestnut Crabbett Arab gelding. Harry's registered name is Magic Magnet, by Ibn Silver out of Bint Magnetta; born 1<sup>st</sup> June 2009. He lives out with a rescue pony, Dobbin; neither is stabled but both have access to a barn.

As a companion parrot behaviourist, I'm familiar with learning theory and a scientific approach to behavioural work, but most of this has been done with birds not horses. I have never had any formal training in riding, but learnt informally many years ago on my friends' horses. I am still not familiar with the language commonly used by many horsey folks and find terms such as 'being firm' and 'discipline' etc. both vague and anthropomorphic. Like most, if not all animals, horses seem incapable of making intentional or malicious errors, so notions of 'discipline' seem irrelevant.

Harry is very inquisitive. While I was still working on finishing various jobs in his barn, he would frequently come to see what I was up to, inspecting the tools I was using. I generally encouraged these investigations and would show him new things as I worked near him. Before starting any formal training sessions, I asked Harry to come when I called his name. This seemed preferable than having to 'catch him up' from the field. Within 3 days, using food rewards, Harry's recall was quite reliable. He would also come without seeing me, so long as I used the same cue, a whistling call and saying 'Harry, come here!' After some routine vet's checks and settling in for a few months, Harry proved to be sound and ready to be backed.

#### Training problems

Harry had never seen road traffic, or been ridden, or saddled, though he had worn an in-hand bridle with a nylon bit. So, I was in at the deep end, and needed help to start training him. I went to various horse events and spoke with other horse riding friends about training methods. I booked a trainer who used conventional methods which relied on negative reinforcement, even during basic groundwork. After a few minutes of this I could see Harry was not happy, so I ended the session. I had to check myself and what I was doing. When working with any animal, the first thing to ask ourselves, is not 'Will this work?' but 'Is this right; is it humane?' These conventional methods were failing this test. I felt I had let Harry down, but how does one apologise to a horse!

I sought help from several equestrian societies here in the UK. But none seemed to either accept or understand learning theory. Instead, they relied on traditional aversive methods for most training. Sadly, this also seemed to be the case with many horse welfare groups. Indeed, watching other trainers at work, it seemed horses were being trained while in their barely-controlled flight response. This seemed an eminently dangerous practice with such large powerful animals.

Eventually I made contact with a few equestrians who were clearly familiar with more humane training methods, and took up their suggestions. McGreevy and MacLean's book, *Equitation Science* seemed very good, but still too reliant on aversive stimuli. Emma Lethbridge's *Knowing Your Horse* was very good, as was Mark Hanson's

*Your Hidden Horse.* So at least I knew there were horse-friendly methods used by some equestrians. These training problems prompted me to look into other aspects of traditional horse care as well. I could not find a scientific case for shoeing, (but plenty against!) nor having to use a bit. So I thought it best for Harry to be ridden barefoot, bitless and with minimal contact. Harry's training was to be based on positive reinforcement wherever possible. Negative reinforcement would be as mild and brief as possible. Positive punishment was to be avoided. I also wanted to avoid Harry getting too excited or fearful while being asked to learn new things, as I felt a calm approach would make things much safer, particularly when I would eventually be riding in traffic. To teach walk, trot, stop, go back etc, I used mild negative reinforcement via the lead rope on his head collar, paired with a verbal cue, for the action asked for. Within a few weeks he learnt to accept verbal cues only on most occasions. Unlike my work with birds, horses seem to be very poor at generalising from novel experiences. I could get Harry used to novel objects in the yard, like traffic cones and moving wheelbarrows etc., but these same objects 100 yards down the road would be treated with suspicion. Only repeated exposure in different locations seemed to work.

#### First outings.

Next, Harry was introduced, in-hand, to local quiet lanes and traffic, while led in his head collar. Walks were up to 12 miles long, 3 to 5 days a week. He was walked along routes I would eventually be riding him, accompanied by my partner and the 'experienced' Dobbin, also on a lead rope. This process took nearly two months before he would consistently and calmly accept most vehicles. Later, still in hand, he was introduced to larger, faster traffic a few miles away. This was carried out by gradual exposure to large vehicles in a 30mph zone along a stretch of the A38. Initially he was asked to stand and view these from a distance he found comfortable. If he remained reasonably calm (head not raised) he was rewarded using food and praise. His distance to heavy traffic was slowly reduced over a few weeks, at a pace determined by his level of acceptance. Following this he was walked along this road, in-hand, first with Dobbin, then alone. Occasionally we had a few scary moments. While Harry is not perfect in heavy traffic, he is pretty good. This desensitisation to heavy traffic, *prior to riding* has been extremely valuable.

#### Introduction to tack.

Using food rewards Harry was asked to accept wearing his tack. Training sessions were short, usually about 5 minutes, but sometimes several times a day. This process took about a week. The bridle used was a Dr Cook's cross-under bitless. The saddle was shown to Harry, so he could smell it and explore it with his muzzle to get used to it. Then it was placed on his back, without the girth and he was asked to stand still for a few seconds, after which he was rewarded with a carrot and verbal praise and the saddle removed. Later these periods were extended, and the girth fastened loosely, later still the girth was tightened, and stirrups were introduced. Unwanted behaviours were rare. But on two occasions Harry showed some inclination to mugging. Here, I walked out of his sight so he could not earn any rewards for a short time (negative punishment).

#### Backing

This seemed like a major challenge (for me!) since I had never backed a horse before. But Harry's progress had so far been rapid, and he remained calm in training sessions.

I had a friend help me who held his reins while he was placed next to a mounting block. I then asked Harry to 'Stand' (remain motionless for a few seconds), while I put some pressure from one foot in a stirrup, or leant on him, belly flop style, over the saddle. I did this from both his nearside and offside. In later sessions, I got astride him and remained in the saddle for a few seconds only; dismounted and rewarded him with food and verbal praise. Later still I rewarded him while mounted. My helper then led him around the yard, while I was on board. Sometimes he would fidget prior to me getting on him. In this case, I walked away and left him tied up alone, returning to try again a few minutes later. I refused to get on board, or give rewards if he moved. Now, when asked to 'Stand' he stands like a rock to be mounted from either side, wherever we are.

I wanted to be able to ride him in walk and trot, before riding him along the same quiet lanes he'd already been used to while in hand. So the following steps were done in the yard and his field. Since he was used to responding to verbal requests when in hand, he still accepted these when ridden. So I combined gentle pressure via legs and/or reins, as needed with the requests to 'stand' 'walk', 'trot' 'go back' etc. He was slow to trot on request and his first attempts at this with me onboard felt very wobbly. But within a few weeks, we both accomplished a reasonable posting trot. The bitless bridle has been a boon. I feel much safer without having anything in Harry's mouth. Verbal cues are used first for changes in gait and direction. Only if these cues are not accepted do I use my legs and reins as needed. Even then the pressure is mild and with Harry's quick reactions the pressure is also brief. So we were now ready to go out for his first ride.

First hacking sessions.

Clad in hi-viz vests, we took Dobbin with us on a lead rein. The first few rides were short, again along familiar lanes. Harry did not mind most traffic, as he'd got used to this during many earlier walks in-hand. But cyclists induced a **threat response**, with his ears held back tightly if they came too close. I ignored this, just asking him to 'walk on'. Some noisy motorbikes and large vans which came too close or approached too quickly caused a **fear response** and Harry would start to shy away from them; so with a raised hand I asked these drivers to stop for me. Harry was asked to walk past them in his own time. I have also had to do this with police cars and ambulances with sirens blaring while 'blue-lighting' past me. Where Harry felt unable to pass a vehicle while staying reasonably calm, I dismounted and lead him past. Gradually he learnt to accept these vehicles, though he is still not confident with large loud tractors and it is difficult to get regular, predictable exposure to these which would help with his training.

Harry remains barefoot, bitless and is not subjected to reprimands or positive punishment. I feel much safer without him wearing a bit and I ride with little or no contact, giving verbal cues before resorting to physical aids. After backing and basic schooling, Harry was ridden 12 to 20 miles a day, several times a week, as part of his training for a forthcoming camping trip. On long rides I dismount every hour for about 10 minutes and walk with him. This gives him a rest from carrying me and helps me keep fit as well! I also dismount on ground that might be too difficult for him, where he might lose his footing. Harry took some time to get used to crossing water and squeezing through narrow places on some of our more tricky bridledways. But he remains calm, he makes a point of coming to see me when I go to his field, and

he seems to really enjoy being groomed. He stands still as his tack is put on him and when being mounted. When out riding, he'll go almost anywhere I point him, without making a drama out of things we encounter on our rides. He is happy to be tied up for an hour at lunch-time to graze, or for a while at a pub or café while I get my own food. He has turned out to be very co-operative and calm, and I feel this is the best insurance for both my safety and his welfare. I am convinced that more horses and riders would benefit greatly by using gentle training methods based on learning theory.

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*Add: In part two Greg describes his camping trip with Harry over Dartmoor and Exmoor. ]*



Greg with Harry.





Harry takes a grazing break during a day's ride



Greg and Harry; training ride for camping trip.





Harry wearing Dr Cook's cross-under bitless bridle (noseband has been padded) and Biothane headcollar. Dunkery Beacon, Exmoor, Somerset.