Having written a book on the British Army’s use of horses from 1875 to 1925 (Winton 2013), I read with great interest the feature article by C. Trenton Boyd and Bruce Vivash Jones, ‘Postcards from the Front’ (VR, February 21, 2015, vol 176, pp 192-194). The postcard collection was quite amazing. There are, however, a number of points made in the article on which I would make comment.

One might certainly argue that in military circles the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 was not surprising, a point which is equally true of the Veterinary and Remount Services. At the outbreak of the war, the British Army had a peacetime establishment of some 342 vehicles and required approximately 643 to reach the wartime establishment of 1485. The peacetime establishment of horses was about 25,000, with a wartime establishment, to horse the British Expeditionary Force, of about 135,000. Within 12 days in August 1914 some 165,000 animals were procured, increasing the military horse establishment by some 700 per cent.

The successful mobilisation of mechanical and equine establishments in August 1914 was not achieved in a ‘panic atmosphere’, but by a very detailed and meticulous motor vehicle and equine mobilisation and subsidy scheme, set within a legal framework, with enumeration and impressment programmes, linked to railway timetables, and all laid down before the war in mobilisation statements. Although the scale of the First World War would take both the military and political world by surprise, prewar planning allowed for the immediate despatch of Remount Purchasing Commissions to be sent overseas, for example to North America.

Motor vehicles performed extremely well in all theatres of war, especially on the Western front. They had been embedded into the British Army’s New Transport System before the war, linking efficiently and effectively all forms of transport (ie, rail, road and animal). Recognising the weakness of motor vehicles working off road, they were used from the railheads to refilling points, where supplies and other resources were transferred from motor vehicles to divisional horse transport (First Line Transport) and then regimental transport. It was at that point that the Army had planned to use animal transport. This was no rushed decision because of vehicles not being able to operate on muddy or on dusty roads. Fifty-five thousand horses sailed with the British Expeditionary Force in August 1914, reinforcement and other issues amounted to 26,000 (total 81,000) and a further nearly 84,000 for the Territorial Forces.

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Reference

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