

The ponies abandoned by British children and sent to France as horse meat

By SEAN POULTER - [More by this author »](#) Last updated at 22:49pm on 19th September 2007

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The slaughterman precariously balances a rifle against the small grey pony's head.

Seconds later a shot rings out, the pony flails on the ground and is then winched onto a production line.

This is the reality of the slaughter and butchering of thousands of unwanted riding ponies and racehorses at a British abattoir.

The picture here is one of several taken by undercover investigators for Animal Aid.

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Production-line death: A pony that almost certainly belonged to a child meets its fate at Potter's abattoir: Picture by Animal Aid

They hope the images will prompt an official inquiry - or at least touch the consciences of owners who simply abandon pets when their children have grown out of them.

The remains of this pony, like much of the meat that passes through Potter's abattoir in Taunton, Somerset, each year will be sent to France as there is no taste for horse meat in Britain.

Animal Aid says its dossier raises serious questions about the running of the abattoir. Officials suggest the

way the slaughterman is holding the rifle means it could slip if the pony tossed her head.

The bullet would then inflict pain, rather than killing outright.

Animal Aid director Andrew Tyler said: "This seems a typical example of the abandonment of a pet whose useful days are over. It occurs when a child loses interest in riding or wants a bigger pony or horse."

The group says one horse was apparently injured elsewhere and then kept alive long enough to reach the abattoir - prolonging its suffering.

An animal which is humanely put down in a field or stable cannot go into the meat process because it has to be bled immediately after slaughter to make it suitable for the table.

The alternative is to sell it for between £20 and £200 to an abattoir.

Around 3,000 ponies and horses are put through Potter's each year. The company says that around 100 are from horse racing and the remainder privately owned.

Its latest annual report says it is engaged in the "elective euthanasia of equines and export of horse meat".

Stephen Potter, who operates the abattoir, said: "I don't think anyone who keeps a pony will get rid of it just for the sake of it.

"We will all be old at some point and may spend our later years in great discomfort and horses are the same.

"The horses are handled in a stress-free manner by professional people and despatched with the minimum of fuss, none of us could ask for anything better than that."

The food and farming department, Defra, says the Taunton operation, together with another in Cheshire, kills 6,000-10,000 horses a year for consumption abroad.

Animal Aid believes the slaughter of these horses and ponies will shock the public.

Mr Tyler said: "Those shown being killed in the 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 this establishment.

"What all the 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 horses are bred to excess.

"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."

Animal Aid is presenting the footage to the Meat Hygiene Service in the hope that it will carry out an investigation.