

# Diary of a mounted police sergeant

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Sergeant Leon Astley shares what it's like working with horses in the Met

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I am one of 15 mounted branch sergeants in the Metropolitan Police. I am based at Hammersmith stables and am responsible for 11 police constables, one member of police staff and six police horses. I completed my police equestrian training in 2020 and have been riding police horses ever since, both in Thames Valley Police and the Metropolitan Police.

My team work a mixture of early shifts starting at 7am, mid-turn shifts starting at 11am and late turn starting at 1pm. This gives us a good spread of availability to patrol at different times depending on what our focus is.

## Tuesday

I am deployed to Great Scotland Yard stables, central London, with one of our newest officers and two police horses, Yve and Treasure. We are tasked with escorting the royal state carriages from the Royal Mews, located at the back of Buckingham Palace, for the state visit of the emperor and empress of Japan. We escort the carriages to Horse Guards Parade where they take part in the royal procession to Buckingham Palace. This is a security role to prevent members of the public coming into contact with the carriages.

We then carry out security patrols in St James's Park, where we encounter a drunk female who is upsetting other members of the public. Once we have assisted our colleagues deployed on foot, we carry on patrolling in St James's Park. The height advantage of mounted patrols is of great benefit, as it enables the public to see us and feel reassured by our presence.

## Wednesday

Today was an early start, preparing six horses to attend the specialist training centre at Gravesend. Each horse is mucked out and given clean bedding and then washed and groomed for the day. We must prepare the horses' tack (saddle and bridle) as well as their protective equipment for their eyes and legs.

Public order training is critical for our unit as this is one of our core functions. The training consists of 'nuisance training' for the horses, where objects are placed in the road which ordinarily, as flight animals, the horses would try to evade. With regular exposure, they become more comfortable with them. These nuisances are gradually increased to include noise, and eventually petrol bombs are thrown on the floor for the horses to negotiate.

We then train with officers on foot to practice mounted tactics that could be used during a public safety or public order deployment. This included a scenario-based exercise for the mounted officers to apply the skills in an operational context.

## Thursday

The week has finally brought some summer weather and the temperature outside has been in the upper 20s. Hammersmith stables has been lucky enough to have new air conditioning installed which is undergoing testing. I have been at the stables today to monitor the temperature inside the building and feed any observations on the welfare of the horses back to building services and to my inspector.

Animal welfare is our main priority, so making sure this system works efficiently is critical to the safe running of Hammersmith stables.

## Friday

It's the following week and I have returned from rest days. I am contacted by a neighbourhood inspector who informs me there had been a shooting overnight and two young teenagers have been injured. Incidents like this this can have a huge impact on the neighbourhood.

Horses play a massive role in public engagement. Mounted officers are more likely to generate positive engagements with members of the public compared to officers on foot. Officers from my team were deployed to the area to provide visible reassurance to the community. After carrying out patrols in this area, positive comments were made to officers who had taken the time to speak to members of the public.

This week I've also arranged for the vet, physio and dentist to see our horses. As the football season is fast approaching, it is important that we keep our horses in the best condition for what

sometimes can be long and challenging days. Making sure they are healthy and have the best stabling conditions means we have happy horses who can support frontline policing to the best of their ability.

The role of a mounted officer is a really varied one, from dealing with animal welfare to potentially using the horses to control crowds during serious disorder. We are used for community engagement events and football matches on a regular basis.

It has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding roles I have performed during my time in the police.

- Peer reviewed by Inspector Susan Redfern, Mounted Branch, Greater Manchester Police

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