

# Hampshire Horsewatch

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## GUIDANCE AND INFORMATION REGARDING THE USE OF HORSE TRAILERS

### INTRODUCTION

This information sheet is designed to provide horse owners with some useful hints and tips regarding various aspects of horse transportation. As such, the guidance has been kept as general and simple as possible in an effort to cover as many different areas of interest as possible. The law relating to vehicles and trailers is very complex and detailed, and this guide is designed purely as an overview of the more salient points. More detailed information can be obtained from the legislation itself, and an access point to this can be through your local Traffic Department Office or your local library.

Many vehicles or trailers for horse transportation are used fairly infrequently, and this can lead to potential safety hazards such as perished tyres, seized wheels or ineffective brakes. Moreover, horses are predominantly a hobby to most people, albeit an expensive one, so where possible, people try to make savings. These savings are sometimes made through reductions in maintenance programs, which again, can lead to safety being seriously compromised.

### TOWING IN GENERAL

All cars have a maximum weight that they can safely tow, determined by the manufacturers. You can find this out either by looking in the vehicle's handbook or by contacting the appropriate dealer. Very generally, the weight of the trailer plus any load that it is carrying, (it's laden weight), should not exceed 85 % of the unladen, weight of the car. This is so that the car is always substantially heavier than the trailer as if it is not, the trailer will tend to dictate where the vehicle and trailer go, especially when braking. Also, the brakes and suspension fitted to the towing vehicle are only designed to work for a specific weight. Basically, the closer you get to the car's weight, the greater the risk of problems with control, and the more careful you have to be.

So how do you work out what the trailer's gross weight is? Well, by law, all trailers must display their weight. This will be printed on a small plate riveted to the chassis of the trailer, usually close to the towing hitch, but the location varies greatly between different makes of trailer. Hopefully, the plate will show the unladen and maximum gross weight of the trailer. Look at the unladen weight figure and add to that the weight of any load that you wish to carry. As a very rough guide, my 17h mare weighs about 500kg, half a tonne. If the trailer has an unladen weight of 1000kg, the gross weight becomes 1500kg. With this combination, the vehicle I use to tow it should weigh at least 1765kg. This is heavier than a great deal of normal cars, and so hopefully, you can see that the whole situation is a bit more complicated than perhaps first thought. The usual comment of "I've only got a Cavalier to tow with, but that's okay, as it is a two litre" is missing the point somewhat! What must be remembered is that it is not just what is legal that matters, what is safe is just as important.

As ever, there are exceptions to the general rules. A lot of four wheel drive vehicles are specifically designed to tow heavy loads and can often tow weights far in excess of their own. As an example, a Landrover Discovery weighs around 2000kgs, but can tow a trailer with a gross weight of up to 3500kgs, or 4000kgs if the trailer has hydraulic brakes. This is because certain components such as the brakes are bigger than normal to cope with these higher weights. You should consult the vehicle's handbook on these weights as they vary considerably from vehicle to vehicle.

## **TYRES**

At any one time, the trailer carrying your horse only has four footprint-sized contact points with the road. Consequently, it's extremely important that the tyres are in as safe a condition as possible. They are relatively cheap to buy but a crucial element in the trailer's overall safety. The minimum tread depth allowed by law is 1.6mm which must be throughout a continuous band in the central  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the breadth and around the entire circumference of the tyre. For just one defective tyre, you could receive a £60 fine and three penalty points on your licence, but at the other end of the scale, your trailer could be prohibited from any further use on the road. Think about what you would do if this happened on the way to a show, with two horses on board, and miles from home. Also, it's worth considering why the tyre depth law exists; tyres running on a wet road surface need to disperse a substantial amount of water if the tyre is to remain in contact with the road surface and provide some grip. Basically, the deeper the tyre tread, the more water can be dispersed. If sufficient water cannot be dispersed, then the trailer will aquaplane and there will be a loss of control. My recommendation is that a tyre is changed when the tread depth reaches about 3mm, as below that, the tyre becomes quite inefficient at dispersing water. A lot of police vehicles have their tyres changed at 3mm rather than 1.6mm for this very reason.

Tyre tread depth is only the start of it however. There are lots of other aspects to consider, most covered by Regulation 27(1) of the Road Vehicle (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986. The most relevant parts for trailers include tyre pressures, cuts in the tyre, lumps, bulges or tears, all of which will seriously hinder the tyre's ability to perform in the way it was designed to. Did you know for example, that a tyre should be changed after no longer than six years even if the tread is still legal? This is because of the risk of tyre failure due to the rubber perishing, (small cracks appearing in the tyre wall). With trailers lying static in a field or driveway for most of the year, it is worth remembering that the tyres can deteriorate significantly through lack of use alone, and should always be thoroughly checked before each journey. If a tyre is under-inflated, it will flex more than it should. This flexing causes excess heat to be generated which can lead to the tyre bursting without warning.

## **BRAKES**

Your horse trailer must be fitted with a braking system. This will usually consist of a system known as 'overrun brakes'. This ensures that when the car brakes, the trailer brakes, and it works through a spring mechanism directly behind the tow hitch on the trailer. On older trailers, the system is such that unless you override it, the brakes will also be applied when it is travelling backwards, so be aware of this when your car seems unable to push the trailer in reverse. The law also requires that the trailer be fitted either with a secondary coupling, or a device that will stop the trailer automatically if it becomes detached from the towing vehicle, (Regulation 86a of the Road Vehicle (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986). A chain which links the trailer to the car and won't allow the hitch to touch the ground if it became detached from the car is sufficient to meet this requirement, or alternatively, a wire linked to the trailer brakes is quite common. As with a car, brakes on a trailer require regular servicing, so consider getting this done at the start of each show season. Don't simply attach the chain to the towing hitch area though, as this will be useless if the reason why the trailer becomes

detached is that the tow hitch comes off the car. Instead, attach it to the vehicle's own tow eye if it has one.

## LIGHTS AND REGISTRATION PLATE

In most circumstances, all lights fitted to your trailer must work, and your horse trailer will require its own lights. If you buy a working light board and place this on the rear of the trailer, then any other lights fitted to the trailer don't need to work. Again, if the vehicle is left static in damp conditions for most of the year, there is a risk of earthing problems developing, so it is worth checking all of the trailer lights each time you use it. Think about giving your horse some protection with the hazard lights when you break down on a fast stretch of road and have to wait for an hour for the recovery agency to arrive. If these don't work, you're putting your horse at even more risk.

If you are borrowing a trailer from someone else, the registration number of the towing vehicle must be displayed on the rear of the trailer in the form of the normal registration plate, (i.e. **not simply chalked on the back somewhere**). An incorrect registration number will attract police attention as a possible stolen vehicle, and once stopped, there is always the chance that that defective tyre or broken light will be spotted! Whilst on the subject of borrowing trailers, it's worth remembering that if the police find an offence on a trailer, the driver of the car **and** the owner of the trailer are both liable to be prosecution.

## OTHER LEGISLATION RELATING TO HORSE TRANSPORT

There are lots of rules regarding trailers in general, and some specifically designed for livestock transportation. Horseboxes must have at least two metres, (6'6"), headroom, regardless of the animals' size. Unless you are transporting a mare and foal, when carrying more than one horse, they must be separated with a partition, and even with one horse on board, you must have a breast bar fitted to enable the animal to brace itself when the trailer brakes. Finally, if you transport a horse during darkness, the trailer must have a light fitted that works, so that you can inspect them if the need arises.

## DOCUMENTATION

By law, your trailer does not require to be insured. However, consider the situation where the trailer becomes detached and causes damage to something else, or something falls off it and strikes another vehicle. Unless you have insurance in place, you could become personally liable for the costs incurred which can run into many thousands of pounds if it involves injury. Some car insurance policies cover a trailer when it is being drawn, but you need to check exactly what is covered before you need to make a claim. Although trailer theft is big business at the moment, the cost of insuring your trailer against theft is still relatively low, so it is certainly cost effective to get it insured. If a horse damages the trailer, consider which is the cheapest option as you may be able to claim either off the horse's own insurance or the trailer insurance.

If you obtained your full car licence on or after 1<sup>st</sup> January 1997, then you are restricted as to what you can drive and tow. [This area of legislation is very complicated and if you have any doubts as to whether you can legally tow a horse trailer, then you should ring the DVLA helpline on 01792 772151.](#) Below is a guide to the main points that may have a bearing on you;

If you passed your test on or after 1<sup>st</sup> January 1997, then you can drive a car and trailer so long as the combination does not exceed 3.5 tonnes **AND** the maximum laden weight of the trailer does not exceed the unladen weight of the towing vehicle, regardless of whether the trailer is loaded or not at the time. Calculating this using with practical examples, will illustrate

that this rule is quite restrictive. If these rules affect you, then you will need to take a further towing test.

If the towing vehicle has more than eight seats, (i.e. a Landrover 110 Station wagon), unless you passed your test before 1<sup>st</sup> January 1997, you will have to take a minibus test before you can drive it, or a minibus towing test if you want to tow a horse trailer with it. To quote a certain actor, "Not a lot of people know that", and unfortunately, not knowing that a law exists is not a defence in court.

## **SPEED LIMITS**

Even when you're towing a trailer you can still break the speed limit! Lots of modern four wheel drive vehicles are more than capable of towing the weight of a laden horse trailer, so it's quite possible for your speed to creep up un-noticed. Do you know what the speed limit is for your vehicle when it's towing a trailer?

Well, just in case, **the limit on a single-carriageway road subject to the national speed limit is 50 miles per hour.** **On dual-carriageways and motorways your limit is 60 miles per hour.**

If you get stopped for speeding, you could be fined £60 and receive three penalty points on your licence. If you get to twelve points in a three year period, you could well face a ban.

## **TIPS ON TOWING**

Think of how much effort you put into looking after your horse in its home surroundings? All that expensive food and veterinary care, not to mention the rugs, boots, electric fencing, and hours of your time. You should put as much thought into moving them around in a trailer.

Here are some basic hints and tips to assist you in this;

Make sure the tow ball height matches the tow hitch so that the trailer sits evenly on its four wheels. This will greatly effect the handling characteristics if it's not quite right. Generally, a tow ball about 46cm, (18in), from the ground is suitable for most trailers.

Towing using a car fitted with an anti-lock braking system, (ABS), will greatly assist in situations where you need to apply emergency braking.

Give your horse as smooth a ride as possible to avoid injury and to prevent unwillingness to load. Smooth gear changes and gradual braking can be achieved by looking further ahead and taking in more of the information that is available from the view available to you.

Anticipate the actions of other drivers and leave plenty of room between you and the vehicle in front, as this will provide you with more time in which to react to anything untoward.

Negotiate bends and roundabouts at a much slower pace than you would normally, to allow the horse to keep its balance. Allow more room when negotiating tight turns, as the trailer will be more likely to strike the kerbs.

On motorways, you are not allowed to use the far right-hand lane. Be aware of the effect of cross winds which will be accentuated when towing a high sided trailer or passing other large vehicles. Don't panic, and don't over-react.

From time to time you will feel the trailer sway from side to side. This is to be expected, and is quite normal, but sometimes, it can become worse and lead to snaking and loss of control.

This situation will arise more easily if the trailer is too heavy for the car, the load is unevenly distributed, the tow ball is not at a suitable height, or the tyre pressures are uneven. If this happens, try not to brake or accelerate, just come off the throttle smoothly and allow the speed to drop gradually. If you do need to brake, because you're going down a hill for example, make this as smooth and gradual as you can. Don't try and steer to compensate; just keep the wheel steady and as straight ahead as the road allows. Stabilisers fitted to the

tow hitch area can assist in preventing snaking, although they are less effective if the cause is due to some defect with the trailer or towing vehicle.

Reversing a trailer is an art, but once you have the hang of it it's actually quite easy. Do lots of practicing before you need to do it for real, and use the towing vehicles' low ratio gearbox if fitted. The trick is to keep the speed low and the steering movements fast. Lower the wing mirrors so that you have a view of the trailer's wheel guards, and if you have someone spare, get them to guide you and warn you of any obstructions that may be out of your view. You can get lessons in reversing through the Caravan Club, (01342 326944), or the Camping and Caravan Club, (01203 694995). Alternatively, your local Institute of Advanced Drivers group or local driving school may be able to assist.

## **WHAT TO DO IF YOU BREAKDOWN**

Try and get the vehicle into a safe position off the road, even if this is at the cost of a tyre. Don't ever try and unload a horse at the side of the road, but if this is unavoidable, then ring the police and wait for them to arrive before you start.

If possible, always be in possession of a mobile phone when transporting horses. Have a list of people to call in case you need them, such as the recovery agency, someone with another towing vehicle who is willing to come out and assist, and someone who can attend with another trailer should yours become useable.

Getting recovered by a garage can cost well in excess of £100, so it is extremely cost effective to join a recovery agency, but if you do, make sure you have trailer recovery included in the package.

If you break down on a motorway, you will need to give a precise location when you ring for help. There are marker posts on the verge at 100 metre intervals each with a number on it such as 106.7. The post will also display an arrow indicating the direction you should walk to the nearest emergency telephone. These phones are a direct link to the local Police control room and the operator will be able to offer you any assistance that you require. Even if you can fix the problem yourself, let the police know that you are there. Remember that unless you break down or have some other emergency, you are committing an offence if you stop on the hard shoulder. When you move back onto the live carriageway, if you build your speed up on the hard shoulder you will find it much easier to slot into the traffic flow.

Nowadays, many dual-carriageways have marker posts on them, but most of them do not have emergency telephones, so a mobile phone is essential.