



What's life like for professional horse transporters — and what can we learn from them? Carolyn Henderson finds out



LOC International Horse Transport can handle everything from horses to llamas

Delivering the goods

In 1975, Eric Gillie and his wife Jane started their horse transport business with one secondhand lorry. As they celebrate 35 years in business, they run six 10- and eight-stall luxury horseboxes and number The Queen among their clients.

This year, they were awarded the Royal Warrant and are so busy that their vehicles have to be replaced every five years. It's a far cry from the days when Eric transported hunting clients on Boxing Day for £8 a time, but it is still a family business.

Eric and sons Michael and Alan are all drivers, while Jane and her niece Lind, run the office. Michael's wife, Karen, runs the 24-box yard at Kelso, in the Scottish Borders, where animals in transit are rested and there are two other full-time drivers.

Organising the weekly runs is an exercise in logistics. There's no such thing as a typical day, but every Monday sees all the lorries head south, with each covering a different part of the country to minimise travel time.

As well as making sure their charges stay relaxed and happy, drivers must stay within the stringent laws restricting driving hours. This is where the Kelso yard and top-class stabling facilities throughout the UK play their part; drivers can rest up and horses get a break from being on the road.

The horses they transport range from ponies to stallions, mares and foals and youngsters. Travelling companions are sorted carefully and each horse treated as an individual.

"We don't travel broodmares with stallions," gives Jane as an example. "And while they all have plenty of room, some horses might need a bit more, such as a two-year-old who's never travelled before.

"Horses are herd animals and if you know what you're doing, you don't get problems. We've just had a load with a 16.2hh mare who was a real wotsit, a two-year-old colt who'd never travelled and an older horse who came over from Ireland as a four-year-old and hadn't been in a lorry since.

"They've all arrived safe and sound, but our drivers are proper horsemen. They can load horses and do things with them other people can't manage, very quietly and without making a fuss."

Few of us can match Gillies' last word in luxury transport, but we can learn from their expertise. In many ways, travelling horses comes down to a mixture of sense and commonsense — and not being so anxious to do everything right that we actually do too much.

For instance, could you be over-rugging your horse or is the leg protection you use causing more problems than it prevents?

"A lot of people put on boots, bandages, rugs, the lot," finds Jane. "They might be fine for going to a local show in a trailer, but why subject horses to all that for long distances?"

"We also get people who bring in filthy unclipped horses from the field and put rugs and boots on top of the mud. And what's the point in putting a rug on something like a Highland pony, which grows its own?"

The company helped researchers at the University of Edinburgh looking at areas of transport stress and as a result, doesn't offer hay in transit.

"Horses take the weight off their feet in four-time, so we reckon travelling's like walking for them," explains Jane. "You wouldn't put a haynet in front of a horse walking down the road, so we don't do it on lorries. But remember that we get on

to the yard at 6.30am and they have ad lib hay until the lorries leave at 8am — and they have frequent breaks when travelling.”

Could loading and unloading problems be down to you not letting the horse balance itself?

“Let a horse stretch its head and neck to balance,” advises Jane. “Don’t hold the rope too close to the headcollar or make them hold their heads up.”

If you can teach a horse to load and travel calmly and happily, it makes life easier. But if you have any doubts, leave it to the professionals; Jane says she always keeps her fingers crossed when a customer books in a youngster and promises her that “we’ll practise beforehand”.

A good licensed, professional transporter can save you a lot of worry and hassle. LOC International Horse Transport founder Liz O’Connor has travelled horses across 28 countries from her Surrey base and says she can organise the wheels, wings and documentation to get your horse anywhere.

Like many transporters, she also offers emergency and breakdown cover and as well as her lorries, has Ifor Williams trailers. Her two-horse box can be hired either with a driver or on a self-drive basis.

Liz and her drivers’ day starts at 6am when lorries and hire vehicles are ready to go out of the yard. Then she starts juggling paperwork, e-mails and phone calls, sorting everything from export licences to ferry bookings — she organises the whole journey from start to finish.

“It’s easy for owners to go wrong with paperwork,” she says. “It’s the little things — you can’t call a horse a mare or a gelding, it has to be a male or a female. And you can’t record height in hands and inches, it has to be centimetres. I’ve had clients telling me they’ve tried to do it themselves and had the paperwork sent back five or six times.”

Customers moving abroad often have animals other than horses to transport. By accident, Liz is now also a specialist in moving alpacas, llamas and birds.

“Someone moving to Spain asked us to take her horses and mentioned that she also had alpacas and a parrot,” she explains. “She asked if they could go along and I said fine, no problem. I did the horses’ papers, then went to do the alpacas’ and realised they were camelids.

“That means special documentation and they also



Horses don’t have to be rugged up to travel, advise the transporters



Every time the phone went in the cab, the parrot said: ‘All right, Eddie?’ – Liz O’Connor

need correct handling to minimise stress — all our drivers are now trained to handle alpacas and llamas. I thought the parrot would be easy, but then we had the bird flu scare and there was a lot more paperwork involved.

“Finally, I was told it was an exotic bird and had to be kept at a certain temperature, so it travelled in the cab. Every time the phone went, the parrot said: ‘All right, Eddie?’ We were very pleased to get there!”

A good transporter will look after you too and appreciate that you’ll be anxious about your horse’s progress, especially if he’s travelling long distance.

“People get worried if they don’t know what’s going on,” points out Liz. “They may look on their horses as their children — think how you’d feel if you sent your children off with a total stranger. You have to be prepared to tell someone exactly how many carrots Misty ate on the trip. Seriously, though, it’s important to keep owners informed and let them know if there are any delays.”

When it comes to equipping horses for travelling, Liz agrees that you must use horse sense.

“There’s no right or wrong but, for instance, I wouldn’t advise putting full-length reinforced travel boots on an unshod yearling,” she says. “It’s likely to kick until it gets them off.

“If you want to use boots, get the horse used to them in short bursts over a couple of weeks. Put them on for a few minutes and let it move around, then gradually increase the time until it’s happy to wear them.

“Think about the horse and the journey. How far are you going, how old is the horse, what will the temperatures be? If it isn’t shod, it might not need leg protection.”

So what would Liz use if she were travelling her own shod horse?

“Probably exercise bandages over padding and overreach boots,” she admits. “But you have to be able to put on bandages correctly, so the pressure’s even and they’re not too tight.”

Owners sometimes have firm views about how they want their horses to travel and specify everything from travelling position to clothing and leg protection. However, you’re paying for a professional’s expertise with horses as well as their driving skills, so be open minded and take advice.

That way, your horse will travel happily and arrive safely, whether you’re moving to a new yard or crossing continents.



The new Gillies 10-horse lorry has every conceivable mod con