

HARRY BECKER



Resting. Oil on canvas. H457mm W607mm. On loan from Simon Loftus.

HORSES IN THE LANDSCAPE

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GALLOPER-SANDS HISTORIC COLLECTIONS

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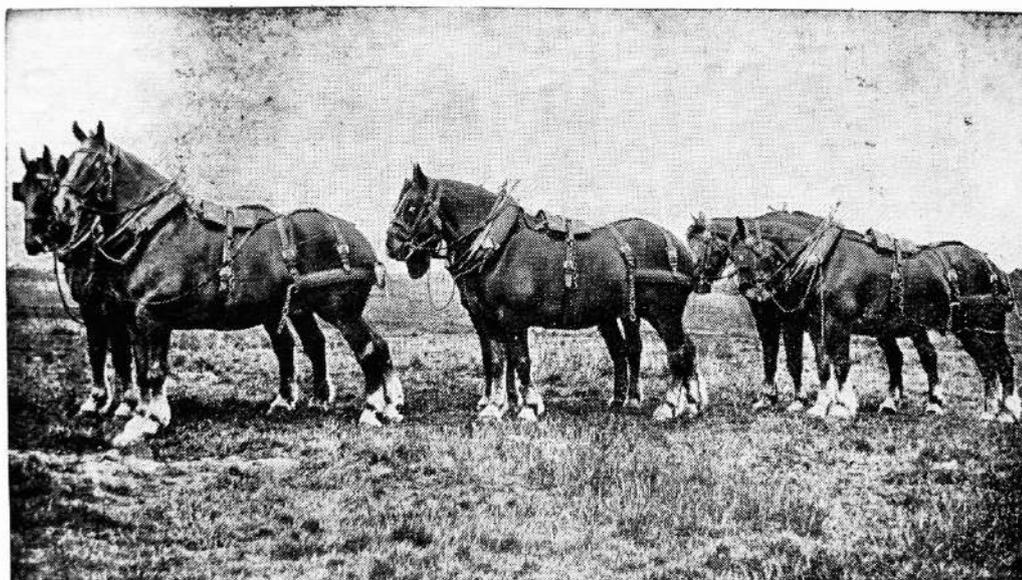
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INTRODUCTION by Jason Gathorne-Hardy

We are delighted to present a selection of newly released drawings and a painting from the Loftus Family Collection. These join other works that previously shown at the farm, including drawings of horses and the magnificent *Binder Team* lithograph. Harry Becker was working in the Suffolk landscape at a time when horses provided almost all of the motive power on farms and most of them were Suffolk Punches. Indeed, farms were often informally classified by the number horses that worked on them : one, two or three horse farms.



A TYPICAL TEAM OF SUFFOLK HORSES.

Above : from *The Suffolk Horse : A Short History of the "Punch" Breed*. Published by the Suffolk Horse Society in 1935.

Larger farms and estates often had their own breeding mares and stallions - the latter being escorted to other farms to cover mares by a Horse Leader. The qualities of Suffolk Punches - their stamina and strength - made them famous and valuable. They were the living engine at the heart of every farm. Much of the daily activity revolved around their upkeep and work on the land, be it ploughing, harrowing, hauling harvest wagons or tumbrils or Smythes drills and reapers and bairders, as mechanization crept into the farming world in the second half of the nineteenth century. The leading horsemen were equally valued, for they - and blacksmiths - held the knowledge that governed the management of the horses.

The breeding studs at the county's larger farms and estates advertised their stallions in magazines and pamphlets - and paraded them with their home-bred mares and foals at the local or county shows. The Suffolk Horse Society kept detailed records of all the registered breeding animals on every farm in the county - and still does to this day, despite the near-catastrophic drop in numbers of horses.

Spiralling out from the presence of Suffolk Punches in the farmyards and on the land in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were constellations of dependent crafts and rural enterprises : the harness maker; the blacksmith and wheelwright; the tailors and clothes makers responsible for creating the horsemen's peculiar suits; the cobbler and agricultural engineers such as Ransomes of Ipswich, Smythes of Peasenhall and Garretts of Leiston.

This was the world within which Harry Becker arrived from London : the rural countryside of East Suffolk around Wenshaston and Southwold. And it within this working farmed landscape that he immersed himself for almost two decades, recording the hard graft and effort of horses and men and women on the land. As Simon Loftus observes in the Foreword for the exhibition catalogue, it was a time when the combustion engine was largely absent from rural life. Implicit in Becker's work is the silence of the land - or at least a vividly different acoustic landscape.

50. *Suffolk Horses at Plough*

"They tread so dainty where that burrow was
That let their feet in sudden deep, when we
First ploughed the pasture up, less grass than moss:
And though there weren't no difference you could see
When we were drilling wheat, me and the boss,
They knew that place, and went right fretfully,
Like today they did at plough again, because
They still mind where that burrow used to be."

The plough lay sideways like a stranded ship,
With hedge-pole handle, cotton reel and spud
With which from share worn silver-bright, the mud
He pared; then straightened and again took grip,
Pouting the cinder of his home-made fag,
And gee'd and twisted them with the plough-cord's sag.

Adrian Bell

Above : *Suffolk Horses at Plough* by Adrian Bell. From *East Anglian Verse*. Boydell Press, Ipswich. 1974.

One hundred years on, his drawings and paintings feel fantastically fresh. The directness and energy of his mark-making seems to short-circuit the century that has passed since he was working in this landscape. We can almost imagine being there with him amid the creak of leather harness, the soft metallic jangle of plough chains and the inter-linked pace of horses and ploughmen. Lost - or largely unspoken today - is the dialect and the words that went with the work. And perhaps Becker's drawings, paintings and lithographs of horses in the landscape invite us to remember these horses, the hard graft that gave us the farmland we are fortunate to have today and the language and folklore that went with them : to retrieve them from the past and revive this beautiful aspect of Suffolk's heritage.

Jason Gathorne-Hardy. White House Farm, Great Glemham. November 2022.

BECKER'S HORSES ~ Foreword by Simon Loftus



'The reaper with its flailing wooden arms was pulled by a temperamental tractor, but the old, blue-painted wagon, piled with a vast load of sheaves, lumbered down the lane behind a pair of plodding horses. I would be perched on top, high in the sky, king of my swaying castle.'

I am quoting myself, from a book that I wrote long ago, but that memory of harvest celebration is still vivid in my mind. Half a dozen men, some armed with dangerous shotguns, stood ready to shoot the rats and rabbits, running to escape the diminishing stand of barley as the reaper-binder circled closer. More men gathered in the threshing yard, clustered round the steam traction engine which powered a clanking elevator as the stacks were built. Smell of straw and grain. Smoke. And horses. This was the world that Becker knew.

The landscape is emptier now. A few vast machines driven by contractors, doing in a day what it took weeks for all those men and horses to accomplish. There was a different sense of time and space, slower rhythms, smaller fields - and a whole ecology has been lost. Every village had its blacksmith, every town its harness maker, and all those Suffolk Punches needed somewhere to graze. That was why the big landowners bordering the Blyth estuary, where I live, paid in the eighteenth century for the river to be embanked, the flood-plain reclaimed as salt-marsh meadows. Four hundred acres of tidal mudflats, now home to a wonderful variety of wading birds, were once rich pastures for horses and foals.

This was not, nonetheless, a rural idyll. The work was grindingly repetitive, achingly exhausting, and the workers, like Becker himself, lived close to poverty. I have a tiny sketch, drawn in a few moments on a scrap of tracing paper, which vividly conveys that sense of drooping fatigue as men and horses trudged home at the end of the day. Look closely. Becker's horses are not the neatly groomed specimens that you might encounter at the Suffolk Show - their tails and manes are ragged. Nothing is softened. But there is a sense of congruity between the landscape, the workers, the horses. A sense of truth.

One of the most interesting things about looking at Becker's images of agricultural life in Suffolk in the early 20th century, is to reflect not just on the vast changes that have taken place since then but how differently that past was experienced, by the artist and his subjects. Their sense of time and space was unlike ours, but so, too, were their immediate, earthier

senses of smell, sound, light and dark. Moving slowly through the agricultural landscape meant a heightened awareness of changes during the day – the early morning freshness of smells, dampness of dew, the first turned sod of earth as the ploughshare bit through a crust of frost, sweat of the horse as the work laboured on, stillness except for the distant barking of a dog, the sounds of birds – nothing mechanical. As evening drew on the moon was brighter then, or seemed so, as did the stars, because there was none of the background glow of electric light that veils our perception of the dark.

The horses themselves meant that work was inseparable from the care of those big, gentle, occasionally stubborn creatures. The pleasure of riding them bareback when bringing them in from their pastures – legs spread wider than on the elegant hunters of the gentry - the muttered commands at the turn of the furrow, a coaxing Suffolk voice incomprehensible to outsiders.

Becker's line, his immediacy, his quickness of pencil and brush, somehow embody those senses. Alfred Munnings, darling of the hunting classes, was heard to exclaim one day "There's old Becker, painting away, painting away, never finishing a thing." But it's precisely that lack of finish, the absence of a flattering sheen, which makes his work so resonant.

© Simon Loftus, October 2022



Resting

Oil on canvas
H457mm W607mm

POA. On Loan from Simon Loftus.

For more information : enquiries@gallopersands.co.uk



Three Horse Plough Team

Charcoal on paper
H380mm W550mm
£1,450



Resting Plough Team with Hames

Graphite on paper
H330mm W555mm
£1,150

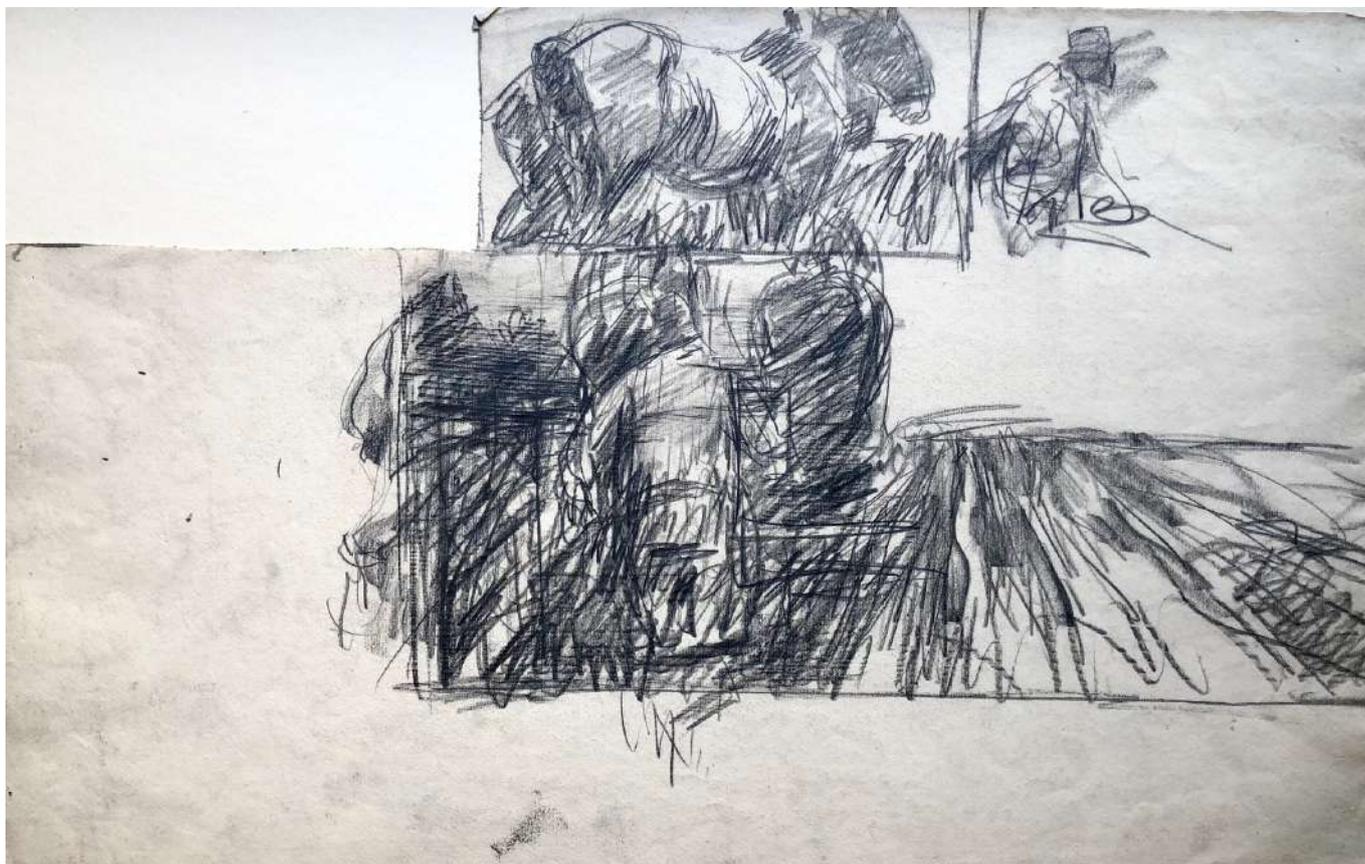


Harvest Scenes : Scything & Building the Stack

Mixed media on paper

H275mm W382mm

£1,350



Studies of Plough Team and Man Leading Horses

Graphite on paper

H322mm W510mm [top left section of paper missing]

£1,250



The Binder Team *

Lithograph on paper
H1016mm W1270mm
£12,500

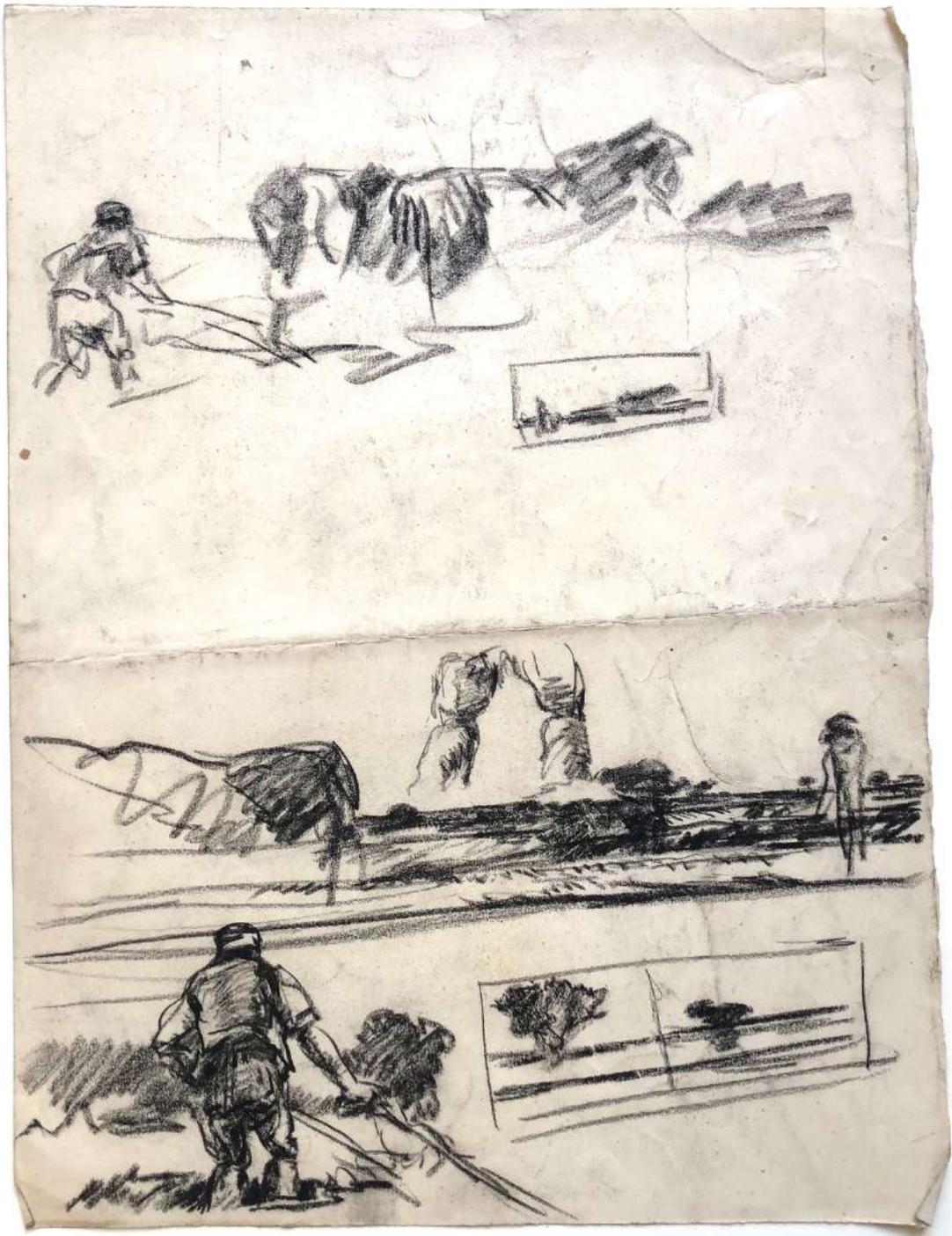


*Drawings of a Reaper and Binder at Work **

Graphite on brown paper

H280mm W360mm

£1,250

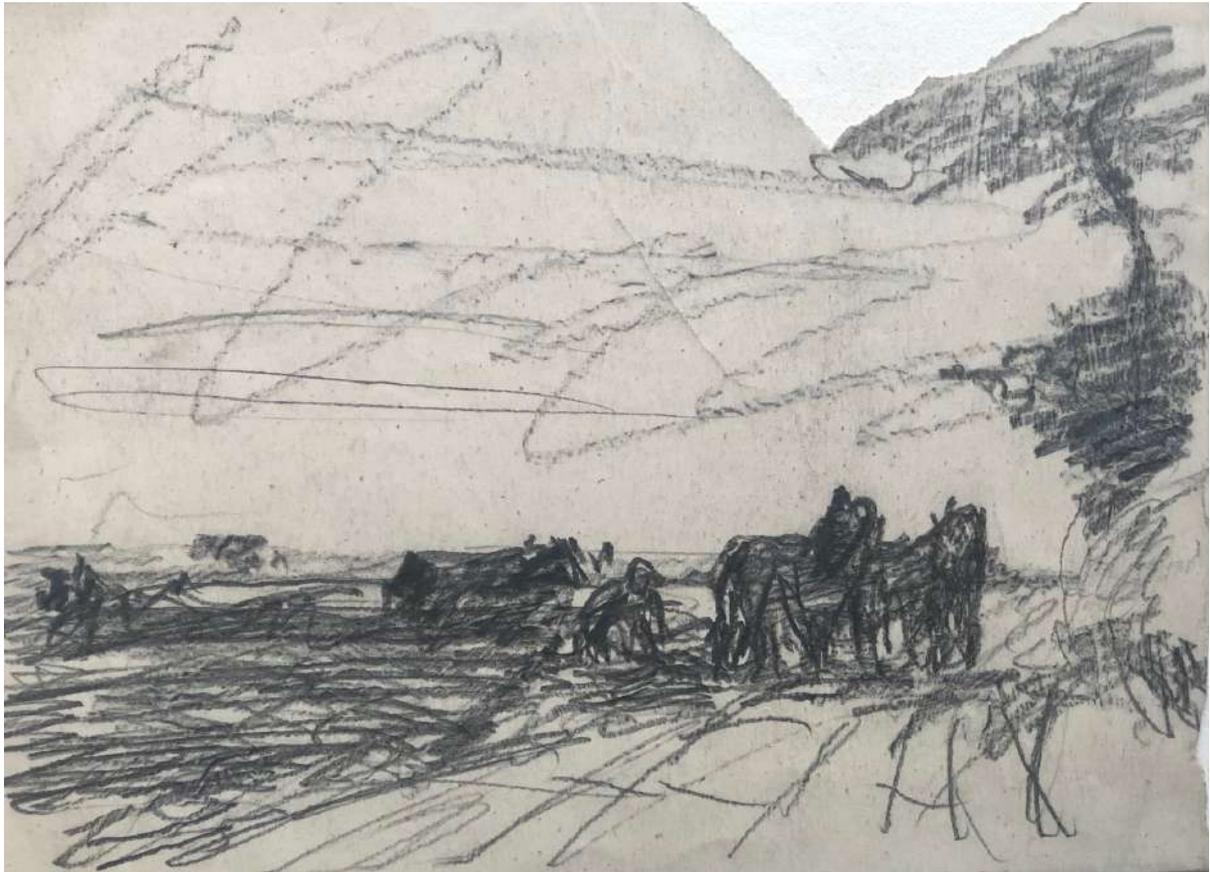


Studies of Plough Man & Horses

Charcoal on paper

H322mm W510mm [top left section of paper missing]

£1,250



Turning

Graphite on paper

H195mm W255mm [upper section of paper missing]

£695



Sketch of Plough Team in Harness

Graphite on paper

H180mm W245mm [top section of paper missing]

£585



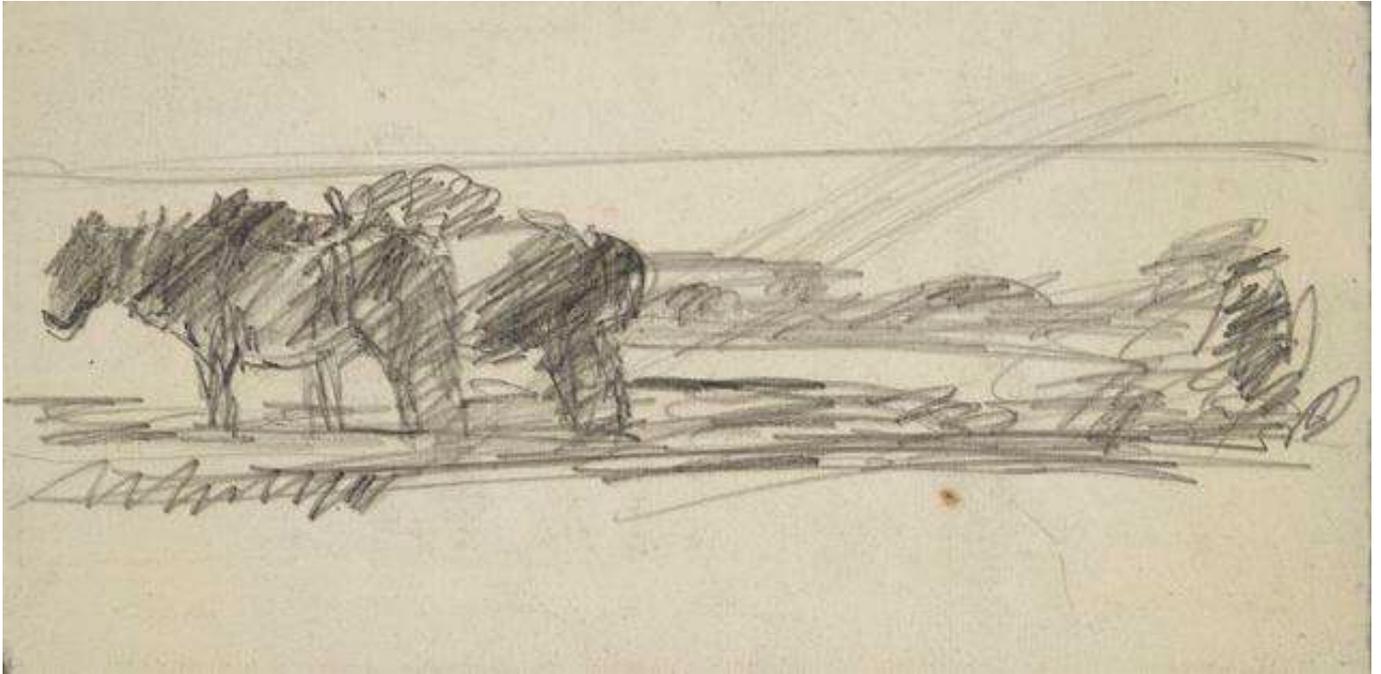
Plough Team & Figure

Graphite on paper
H175mm W250mm
£825



Horses & Cattle

Red pastel on paper
H190mm W273mm
£975



Horses Standing in the Plough

Graphite on paper
H135mm W260mm
£995



Plough Team in the Landscape

Graphite on paper
H233mm W393mm
£1,150



Plough Team on the Horizon I

Graphite on paper
H176mm W226mm
£1,250



Plough Team on the Horizon II

Soft graphite on paper

H140mm W280mm

£650



Study of Horse in Collar and Harness

Graphite on paper
H147mm W290mm
£1,050



Study of Standing Horse in Collar

Graphite on paper
H185mm W211mm
£750



Study of Horse and Hip Joint

Graphite on paper
H195mm W322mm
£795



Sketches of Horses in Harness I (Study for The Binder Team)

Graphite on brown paper

H372mm W520mm

£1,150



Horse Studies I *

Graphite on paper; torn corner lower left

H380mm W555mm

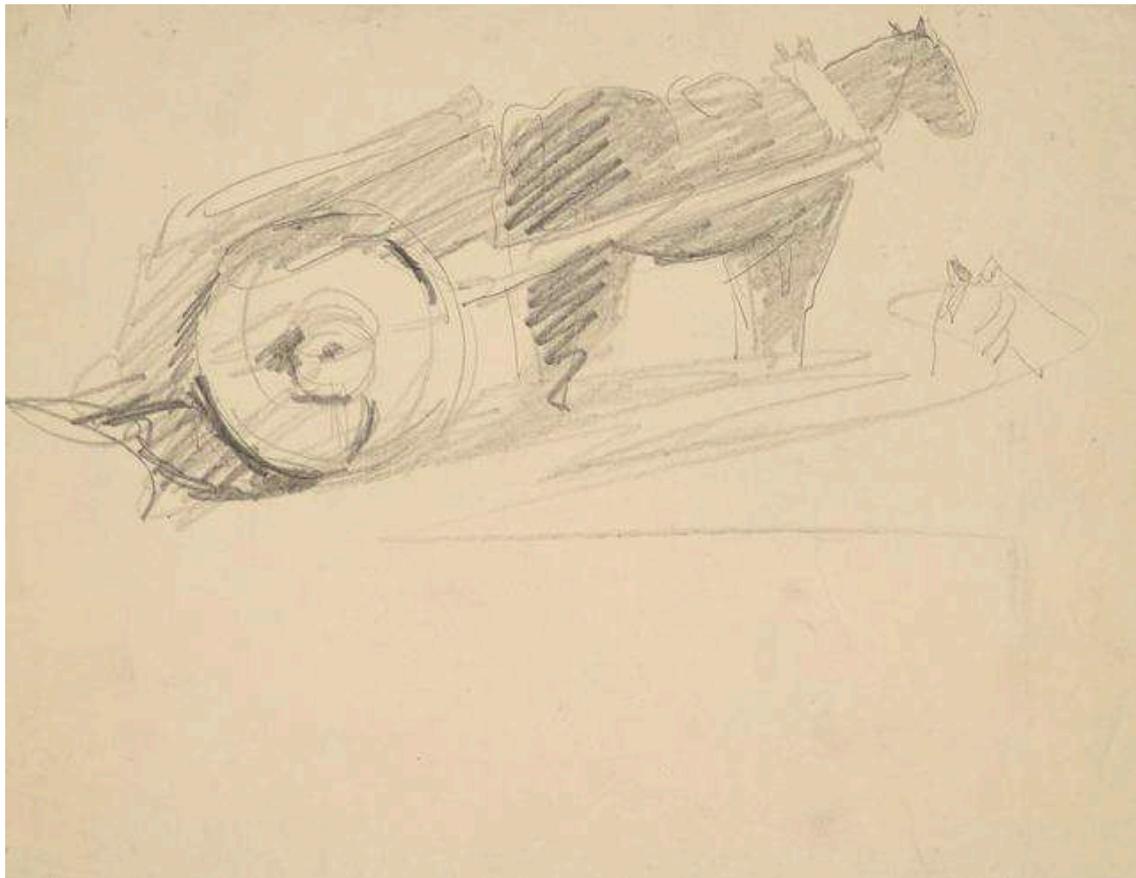
£1,500

* In this work and also in *Horse Studies II*, Becker seems to be exploring how to best catch the movement and posture of farm horses, being led and also standing. Some of the studies are framed-off with graphite lines and relate to other finished works in oil.



Horse Studies II

Graphite on paper
H378mm W555mm
£1,500



Horse and Tumbrel

Graphite on paper
H232mm W296mm
£595



Sketch of Horse and tipping Tumbrel

Graphite on paper
H232mm W296mm
£595

Gallopersands Historic Collections

Gallopersands is the contemporary art gallery for The Alde Valley Spring Festival. This price list accompanies a limited edition catalogue that has been published to coincide with an exhibition of works by Harry Becker from The Loftus Family Collection.

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