

This new workshop helps horse owners learn about the equine spine by drawing the internal skeletal structures on the outside of the horse!



Turned inside out

Your Horse editor Imogen Johnson discovers the incredible complexities of the equine spine in a unique new workshop with anatomy pro Gillian Higgins

We all love to saddle up and enjoy a long hack or fun schooling session on our horses, but how much do we really know about the complex spine we sit on in the process? Keen to find out, I went on an XLEquine Skills workshop led by Gillian Higgins of Horses Inside Out - an educational service aimed at helping owners and riders to understand the physiology of their horses.

For years Gillian's been illustrating the

anatomy of horses by painting their skeletons and muscles on their bodies, a very visual cue for understanding what lies beneath the surface. This particular workshop has been designed to utilise Gillian's skills as an anatomical expert, and promises to improve attendees' understanding of the equine back. It also gives us all the unique opportunity to paint horses, Gillian style!

The day saw me join 15 other horse owners and riders at Scarsdale Vet Group, in

Derby. Gillian began by explaining to us why learning about our horses' spines matters.

"Understanding what sort of movement the joints in your horse's back have will enable you to work your horses correctly," she said. "However, it's not just about the bones. It's also helpful to learn how the movement in your horse's back is created, which means understanding the head, neck, hind limbs and the muscles in the back, too."

With the plan for the day outlined, Gillian picked up a paintbrush and got to work.



The master at work

Working with lovely grey mare Dotty, Gillian began at the poll.

"The horse's neck forms the first part of his spine," she said. "It has seven vertebrae, the first being the atlas - also called the poll or the first cervical vertebra. You can feel this if you place your hand either side of your horse's poll. If you then run your hands down the neck, using the heel of your hand, you can feel the next five vertebrae and the seventh sits under the shoulder muscle."

Gillian then demonstrated how to find each one before painting them onto Dotty's neck.

"These vertebrae are so much lower down in the neck than most people think," she said. "Above them are lots of muscle and ligaments, which are vital for horses to be able to lower and raise their heads."

Getting connected

Armed with our new neck bone locating knowledge, we were sent off

in small teams to have a go on different horses.

My team's well-behaved model, Cassie (owned by Scarsdale Vet Practice's Wendy Furness), was so patient (and a little bemused) as we felt for the vertebrae. At first, it was really tricky but as we grew in confidence it soon became really fascinating and fun.

The session continued with Gillian demonstrating how to find sections of the spine, explaining how they join and work together and how problems can commonly occur in different areas.

We listened carefully then tried our best to precisely paint each section of the spine onto Cassie, not just because we want to be anatomically correct but also because we were told it was competition!

"The team with the best anatomically painted horse will get to watch with pride as their horse is lunged before the group at the end of the session," said

Gillian, and with that our game faces were on!

What lies beneath

As the day progressed, the complexity of the equine spine started to hit home and I even began to feel a little guilty at the thought of ever mounting up again.

Gillian showed us what happens to the spinous processes of the equine back when weight is added to the lumbar region - they get squashed.

"If a horse works consistently with his head up, his hind legs trailing and with a rider on his back you can



WATCH IT ONLINE

See our behind the scenes video of the day at www.yourhorse.co.uk/spine or scan the QR code below with your smartphone.



We're shown how the spinous processes sit within the back

Gillian demonstrates how to find and paint on the neck vertebrae...



...then the group has a go



One of the groups painting a ribcage onto their model

imagine what's happening in the back," she said. "There are only millimetres between each vertebrae in this region - a maximum of 6mm when the back is extended - which is virtually nothing, so when horses aren't worked properly it puts them at risk of things like kissing spines."

To help us protect our own horses' backs, Gillian then offered expert tips for maintaining good back posture, including ways to work horses from the saddle and from the ground - I scribbled notes frantically to be sure I'd go away with every tip!

Equine art in motion

As the practical morning session drew to a close, with all of our horses splashed with colour and our anatomical masterpieces complete, it was time to see each one in action. The horses were lunged around us and, for me, this was the best bit.

With the knowledge I'd just soaked up, I was wowed by the complexity of it all. Gillian's skills had enabled us to literally turn each horse inside out, then watch what happens down the spine from poll to tail as they moved. It was incredible, and

Don't just take my word for it!



Saffy Wright, from Staffordshire, is hoping to study vet physiotherapy. She attended the workshop for some insight in advance

"I have five horses of my own so learning about the structures of the equine back has been so useful for me today. I'm now even more interested in pursuing a career in equine physiotherapy and feel I'm now so much more aware of my own position and also the importance of saddle fit for my horses. I'd recommend this workshop to any horse owner, without a doubt!"



Caroline Walker, from Derbyshire, signed up for the workshop to find ways she can help her horse work following a back injury

"My horse suffered a supra spinous ligament strain. Fortunately, he's now recovered but I wanted to learn more about how his back works and how I can care for him on the ground and when riding. The workshop has given me a greater understanding of what will help and hinder him, and getting to grips with the science behind the equine spine and how it works has been fascinating."

immediately gave me a greater respect of our four-legged friends and how they work.

Having admired Gillian's work for years, it was amazing to see firsthand how she does what she does. Plus, experimenting with this unique way of learning made something quite complicated so much easier to digest.

The day wrapped up with a theory session delivered by Heather Urquhart, senior equine vet at Scarsdale Vet Group, which was the perfect way to round off everything we'd learned in Gillian's practical session. I left feeling determined to put all my new knowledge to good use!



The winning team of the anatomy painting competition - impressive work!

xLequine
Excellence in Practice

Find out more

The 'Understanding your horse's back' Equine Skills workshop was delivered by the team at XLequine. For more information and upcoming workshops, visit www.equineskills.co.uk

Horses Inside Out

To find out more about Gillian and her work, upcoming events, books and DVDs, visit www.horsesinsideout.com

