

# Same, Same, but Different - What Biting History Shows Us

By Fiona Dearing, [Bit Right - Equine Bit Fitting](#)

When we look at biting from a historical perspective it's commonly acknowledged that we've come a long way. It's also easy to judge the past rather than use it to understand how our current knowledge has evolved. We've worked alongside horses for thousands of years, and bits have changed according to our needs, technology and our understanding of the horse itself.

However, when we examine historical biting through a modern welfare lens it's interesting to note the similarities that sit alongside the learnings that have led to change.

## Humans Experiment with Communication

Our earliest bits were made of rope, rawhide, bone and wood and date back to 3500-300BC. Due to the perishable nature of these materials few remain but we're able to recognise biting from both art of the time and wear on teeth in skeletal remains. Earliest bit designs were crude but the changing in materials even at this stage shows a desire to search for more effective ways to communicate with horses as opposed to using biting as a simple restraint.

We continue to do this in modern biting with manufacturers developing a variety of materials in both metal and non metal options, again, to enhance communication.

## Heavier Bits Were Used to Create Stability

Many of the historical bits you'd see in museums are super heavy by modern standards. Even some of the bits I grew up with weigh at least double that of bits we'd currently use. Historically the weight was relied upon to keep the bit still in the mouth, with the belief being that less movement gave clearer signals. Bear in mind many of these bits were being used in war so it really was a case of life or death for those riders!

Today, we achieve stability in the horse's mouth through balance, shape, and fit, not weight. The end goal for the rider remains the same, to achieve clarity of aids without confusion.

## Riders were Noticing Individual Preference Long Before We Understood Equine Anatomy

If you observe Roman cavalry bits you'll notice some early variations in mouthpiece shapes. They included straight bars, jointed bits and ports. Again, these bits were crude by our modern standards but it does show riders were noticing not all horses responded in the same way to the same bits.

Fast forward to now and consider the large numbers of bits in differing shapes, materials and styles to suit individual horses' likes, dislikes, anatomy and training level. Like the notion of stability, riders thousands of years ago were considering reactions horses showed and using it to attempt to improve the end result.



*Roman Cavalry Bits. Note the similarity to modern bit designs.*

## Xenophon was Talking About Softness Over 2,000 Years Ago

Ancient Greek horseman Xenophon wrote about the importance of light hands, voluntary acceptance of the bit, and the dangers of force. He observed that discomfort leads to resistance. This principle continues to align closely with modern welfare principles and training. Horsemanship didn't suddenly appear in the 21st century. The principles have been there all along, we've simply learned to apply them with more refinement and better understanding.

## Medieval Bits Were About the Job, Not the Horse

In Medieval times, horses were performing under extreme conditions. They were carrying a rider clad in armour, in noisy battle scenarios for long hours. Bits were performing the functions of steering, stopping and collection, generally at the expense of equine comfort. The original curb bits were designed to allow the rider to communicate with minimal movement whilst using one hand. The other hand was employed to carry and wield a weapon. When looking at these bits it's hard to imagine even putting one in a horse's mouth, they're particularly severe.

Clearly this equipment was performing the function it was designed for at the time but in comparison to today, welfare was clearly not high on the list.



*Curb Bit from the Beginning of the 16th Century France - Late Medieval Period*

## Decoration Was About Status

Highly decorated bits often signified wealth or rank rather than function. Gold, silver, and engraving didn't make it a bit more comfortable for the horse, it made a statement about the rider's status.

These decorated bits continue in modern times, largely in Western disciplines and are often at the more expensive end of the shopping experience. In a way, they remain about status and wealth but are certainly better made with equine comfort in mind.



*Curb Bit, Spain c. 1350 with family coats of arms displayed*



*Newly released Neue Schule Grazing Bit with high levels of decoration*

## What History Ultimately Teaches Us

Riding a horse has always reflected human priorities and biting is a part of that. Historically biting has been about control, function and even status.

Today, we have the opportunity through better understanding of the horse to have biting be about something else. A way to communicate more effectively with our horses. We've moved from asking the horse to adapt, or more accurately, submit to equipment to adapting our equipment to work *with* our horses.

The most important changes aren't in the bits themselves, it's how we consider using them.