

# History Trivia

## HORSE ARMOR

AS ARMOR BECAME bigger, heavier and more effective during the Middle Ages, the horses that carried the warrior became natural targets for arrows and lances. Archers would aim for the animals, specifically their joints and chests; the beast went down and the man, without his horse, was soon killed by the heavy infantry. This was the case at the Battle of Crecy in the 14th century where English knights slaughtered the French.

Armor did not originate in the Middle Ages, however. Armor for horses is called barding and the ancient Greeks developed a piece of armor called the champron to protect the horse's face. Originally made of boiled leather, the champron fell out of use until the 12th century, when it made a comeback as a protective armor made of hinged metal



A knight in the 12th century atop a horse in armor.

plates. Basically, this piece of armor covered the horse's face, and, depending on the design, it may have had protective flanges for the eyes. But the head is only one part of a horse and not necessarily the most vulnerable area. Subsequent to the appearance of metal plated armor to protect a horse's head, the criniere was designed to cover the neck and, depending on whether the armor was "light" or "full", it might cover both the mane and the neck. Sometimes, chainmail was attached for additional protection.

One thing led to another and eventually the armor for a horse weighed as much or more than that of his master. The whole outfit got too heavy, becoming obsolete in the early 17th century, but this did not happen instantly.

During Medieval and

## THE QWERTY KEYBOARD

CONTRARY TO ITS awkward, seemingly haphazard appearance, the computer keyboard layout is actually a well-studied, carefully choreographed design.

Known as the QWERTY (pronounced KWERT-tee) keyboard, the standard English-language layout derives its name from the first six letters in the top row of alphabet keys. It was designed in 1867 by Christopher Sholes, a newspaper editor from Milwaukee who co-invented the first commercially successful typewriter. On his first typewriter prototype, the keys were originally arranged alphabetically in two rows. Sholes soon, however, encountered a problem. As an operator became proficient and could type with any speed, the metal typebars on which the individual letters were mounted often became entangled. The typebars closest to one another striking the platen (or paper spool) in rapid succession would often stick together, forcing the operator to stop and manually dislodge them. The project's chief financial backer, James Densmore, asked a relative in the education field to prepare a study of the most common two-letter sequences in the English language. Sholes then re-tooled his keyboard to separate the most common pairings such as "th", "sh" and "sp". The home row (ASDFGHJKL), reminiscent of the standard alphabet, is believed to be a remnant of the original alphabetical layout.

What influence the QWERTY design had on typing speed is still a debated issue. Critics argue that Sholes arranged the layout to purposefully slow typists down to reduce jamming on his clumsy machines. Proponents maintain that while the design does, indeed, separate common pairings, that



fact actually enables faster speeds by allowing the typist to alternate hands more frequently and establish greater rhythm.

What is not contested, however, is the odd fact that the QWERTY layout favors left-handed typists. Thousands of English words can be spelled using the left hand alone, while only a few hundred can be spelled using just the right. Due in part to this

Renaissance warfare, horses were pivotal in battle, and were a sign of rank and status for nobility. On display in the Tower of London, among many examples of armor, is a full suit for King Henry VIII. His horse would also have been protected, so one can imagine the accumulating weight.

Before the whole outfit became too heavy, a croupiere was developed to cover a horse's hind quarters; flanchards attached to the saddle to protect flanks; the peytal came along to protect the chest. Along with all of this, cloth covers known as caparisons sometimes covered the whole animal nose to tail and extending to the ground. Thus, the particularly vulnerable spots were not visible and it became harder to incapacitate a horse and unseat his knight.

However, a mounted knight could wield only one weapon at a time because he needed a hand for the horse's reins — which sometimes had their own armor. An unseated rider was at a distinct disadvantage and could be easily killed by the enemy. The weight of a knight's armor, often 80 pounds or more, added to the horse's even heavier outfit, made for a unwieldy combination. When a knight was unseated, he often could not get up, let alone fight and armor for horses became obsolete.

Striking examples of armor exist in several collections today, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Tower of London and the Royal Armouries at Leeds. There are also a few rawhide armor specimens for horses from the 1800s by Plains Indians in the United States on display at the British Museum. — SHERRY BALLOU HANSON

anomaly, others have attempted to design alternative keyboards. The most serious competition came in 1932 when the Carnegie Foundation funded Professor August Dvorak, an educational psychologist, to design the definitive layout. The Dvorak Simplified Keyboard (DSK) takes into account various typing factors and behaviors including right-handedness (since most people tend to be right-handed) and the placement of the most frequently used letters under the strongest fingers. Dvorak's home row (AOEUIDHTNS) contains all five vowels and the five most common consonants. Although favored by many computer programmers, DSK remains a distant second. A 1953 study by the U.S. General Services Administration found that no appreciable typing efficiencies were offered by either layout. The high costs to manufacture new keyboards and energize a vast user-base to switch to a new format are heavy contributors to the failure of DSK.

So, today, with few modifications since its inception 140 years ago, the QWERTY design is featured exclusively on computer keyboards from all significant manufacturers, as well as many cell phones and other PDA devices. It is also at the root of most Latin-based language keyboard designs and helped usher in the e-mail era. The very first network e-mail sent in 1971 by ARPAnet computer programmer Ray Tomlinson to another computer in his office read "QWERTYUIOP", the top row of the QWERTY keyboard. — KATE PARSONS

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