

THE FELL PONY

From the wild windy hills of Northwest England comes the Fell pony. So-named because they derive their name – FELL – from the old Norse word for “hill”, a word which is still in use in their home range. Historically bred and raised on the rugged hills in the counties of Cumbria, North Yorkshire, and Northumberland, the Fell pony is a delightful animal of exceedingly good temperament and intelligence. With legs and hooves like iron and plenty of dense flat bone below the knee, they are strong, tireless, surefooted, and thrifty. Renowned for their ground-covering trot, leg feathering, and profuse mane and tail, they come in four colors. Over the last few decades black has become the predominant color, followed by brown, bay and gray. A star and/or a little white on or below the hind fetlock is acceptable. Coupled with willingness and stamina, the lay of their shoulder makes them a comfortable long-distance riding mount, and the depth of their girth and soundness of limb and foot make them a trouble-free competitor for driving, jumping or dressage.

During the Roman occupation on the border between England and Scotland, mercenaries were brought in from other countries to help man Hadrian's Wall, which separated these two countries. These mercenaries would have brought along their own war stallions, many of which were left behind to breed and produce a mixture of types in northern England.

A cross between these French, Friesian, German, Polish or Spanish horses and the Celtic pony is believed to have produced many British native pony breeds, including the Fell (79AD to approx. 420AD).

Over the centuries the breed has adapted to changing cultural needs by serving in such areas as; working as packponies, doing light arable work on farms, shepherding on the fells (hills), being mounts in sporting events such as trotting races, and in deer stalking (carrying game for hunters). Fells were infrequently used in mines due to their taller pony height. Smaller breeds such as the Shetland and Welsh Section A were more popular for this.

Fells today still have the reputation of being very easy to manage. They can work all day on a small ration and will thrive where many animals would find it difficult just to survive. They are currently used in North America in venues such as driving, showing, and farming.

Their desired height is 13.1-13.2 hands, but the maximum height allowable is 14 hands high. They are capable of carrying a grown man all day and many are gentle enough for children and the disabled. Fells are presented at shows well groomed yet



“Murthwaite yard grey” - this is a young gray Fell at Murthwaite farm in northern England where they still run and breed their herds out on the fells (hills). Gray Fells are born dark colored, usually black, and gradually lighten as they age.

untrimmed and unadorned to emphasize their natural state.

The official breed registry, the Fell Pony Society, located in England, was formed in 1916 and has Queen Elizabeth II as its Patron. The Queen herself is a knowledgeable owner and breeder and her husband, His Royal Highness Prince Philip often competes in driving events with a four-in-hand.

The challenges of preserving this breed are elaborated on in this quote from equine scholar Clive Richardson, “In recent years the number of Fell ponies bred not only off the fell but outside of the British Isles has increased with new studs in Holland, Germany, America and elsewhere being established. It is vitally imperative that these enthusiastic and committed new breeders maintain a clear focus on the type of animal they are trying to produce. It is relatively easy for a breed to change out of all recognition as a result of environment and not adhering to the original breed standard. The American Shetland Pony, examples of which I have had the misfortune to judge in the United States, is the proof of this. Indiscriminately crossed with Hackney ponies to produce a flashy show animal, they bear no resemblance at all to the native pony of the Shetland Islands.

“By obtaining sound breeding stock, replicating the ponies natural environment as far as possible, maintaining close links with the parent society, using Fells in a wide range of activities, and keeping in mind a clear picture of what a Fell pony should look like, the dangers of breed type being lost are minimized.”

Another danger facing this breed is the notion of some that Fells are a small version of the Friesian horse. This perception is partially due to the fact that black is now the most common color for Fells, and also due to the growing familiarity of the Friesian breed. The danger in such a perception comes about when the focus and presentation of a breed is compromised,

possibly then leading to a change in the direction of breeding standards such has happened with many other breeds in the past. By seeing the Fell in its natural environment, with its various body types and colors, one will soon come to realize the true unique nature and scope of the Fell pony breed.

Globally there are less than 6,000 registered Fell ponies, however, the integrity and usefulness of the breed has recently come to light and exportations are on the rise. To date, there are approximately 60 Fell ponies in North America. Currently there is no official daughter society or club recognized by the mother society, therefore North American Fell ponies must be registered in the British Fell Pony Society Stud Book.

In summation, for work or play, it has often been said, “You cannot put a Fell to the wrong job!” The traditional hill breeders of Britain have carefully preserved this rare breed's ancestral type and the hardiness and savvy of the Celtic mountain ponies, and so the purebred Fell should remain – a preservation breed.

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“Showing at Lowther” - this is a mare and foal at the famous Lowther Driving Trials & Country Fair Fell show (they were not showing at the driving trials just in the Fell show portion) - held this August in the northern county of Cumbria, England. If you want to put their names they are Lunesdale Gypsy Rose (8 yr old mare) and Littletree Bodini (her foal born in May 02). They won 2nd that day in the “Broodmare 4 yrs & over with foal at foot” class and Bodini won 2nd in the “Foal” class that day. HRH Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh, showed his team of four Fell ponies in the driving trials portion of the same event.