

The Fell Ponies of the English Landscape

One of the few breeds of pony still running in semi-feral (wild) herds, Fell ponies derive their name from the landscape on which they survive. Named after the Norse word for "hill", the northern fells of England have been home to this type of pony for nearly 2000 years. Historically the breed originates from northern England and the Scottish border.

The forts along Hadrian's Wall were garrisoned for four centuries with Roman auxiliary troops. Roman military inscriptions show that French, Dutch, German, Polish, Spanish and eastern European cavalymen were posted here to help maintain law and order, and with them came various foreign stallions native to the mercenaries' homelands. These horses, ranging from slender Arab types to coarser Friesian workhorses, may well have been used both during and after the occupation to breed and produce an assortment of types in Romanized Britain. It's believed that crosses between these and the native Celtic pony have influenced many of some modern native breeds, including the Fell pony.

Anything over 13.2 hands was not suited to the conditions on the Northern Fells and such larger animals could only survive with extra feeding. Despite being crossed with larger foreign stallions, natural selection stabilized the breed as a pony. The average size of a Fell is 13.2, with the maximum height being no more than 14 hands. The breed has four acceptable coat colors and is renowned for its silky leg feathering and profuse mane and tail. Over the last few decades, black has become the most dominant color, followed by brown, bay and gray. A star and/or a little white below the hind fetlock are acceptable.

This rare breed demonstrates exceedingly good temperament and intelligence along with sturdy conformation. With legs and hooves like iron and substantial dense, flat bone below the knee, Fells are strong, tireless, surefooted and thrifty. They lay of their shoulder makes them excellent long-distance mounts, and the breed has traditionally been used for sheparding and farm-work. Coupled with endurance, willingness, a ground-covering trot and soundness of the limb and foot, Fell Ponies are

*Fell Ponies in their natural habitat which demands hardiness!
Photo by Sabine Hoff*



trouble-free competitors for driving, jumping or dressage. Successfully competing against native and modern breeds alike, Fells are shown unclipped and unadorned to emphasize the hill-bred tradition.

Over the past 2,000 years the Fell pony has also been used in such diverse activities as transporting goods to market, trotting races and sports events, light arable farm work, shepharding, deer stalking (carrying game for hunters), and trekking (trail riding). They were used only occasionally as pit ponies (in mines) due to their taller pony height.

The Fell Pony Society 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.

Fells today still have the reputation of being very easy to maintain. They can work all day on a small ration and they will thrive where a more highly bred animal would find it difficult just to survive. Nowadays, although most Fell ponies are bred in Cumbria, Southwest Scotland and the North of England, there are also Fells all over the United Kingdom, with studs also established in Canada, France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and the United States of America.

The challenges of this breed coming off of their native fells and being raised and introduced to new environments are elaborated on in this quote from an article by Fell pony 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 that Fells are a small version of the modern 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 popular awareness of the Friesian breed. If the focus and presentation of a breed is compromised by such a perception, it may lead to a change in the direction of breeding standards as has happened with many other breeds in the past. A careful study of the Fell pony

breed standard will reveal that the body type/structure and the movement of the Fell pony clearly differ from those of the Friesian horse. By seeing the Fell in its natural environment, with its various body types and range of colors, one will soon come to realize the true unique nature and scope of the Fell pony breed.

A Fell pony is capable of carrying a grown man all day with ease; many are gentle enough for children and with correct training perfect for the disabled. Their temperament is like that of other British native pony breeds whose instinct for survival has been essential to them for centuries. This instinct, combined with the intelligence, curiosity, stamina, and mischievousness of a Fell, can pose unique challenges to the inexperienced or unwary person. Sensible horse training is always paramount, but when working with a Fell you need to have a cooperative and partnership mentality. Fells, just like all equines, are individuals and each can vary in temperament. They could be compared to working dog breeds - they are meant for activity, which engages their mind and curiosity.

The Fell pony breed matures late – sometimes not until seven years of age. Most Fells in their native country are left to run free until the age of two or three and not overfed. At that time they are lightly trained and then often turned back out until four to five years when they will begin light and straight riding, without much bending of their spines. It is suggested that mares not be bred until they are least three years of age otherwise irreparable damage may be done to internal organs, reproductive organs and may restrict the mare's own growth and maturity.

Fell ponies are presented at shows well groomed yet untrimmed to emphasize the natural state. Fells do not wear the tail ribbon of the Dales or the ear plait of the Welsh. The Fell pony should always be presented as an example of its own breed and not a version of another.

The Fell Pony Society
North American Liaison Officer
Laura Hart
P.O. Box 174
Eau Claire, Michigan 49111 USA
FAX: (508) 519-6533
Website: www.fellpony.com E-mail: Featheryfeet@yahoo.com



The Fell Pony is a very versatile breed. Photo by Laura Hart