

# *Fell Ponies for Work or Pleasure*

*By Laura Hart*

**F**or strength, versatility, and sensibility, Fell ponies cannot be beat. These delightful animals are 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. They are renowned for their ground-covering trot, silky leg feathering, and profuse mane and tail. 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 choice for driving, jumping, dressage, or farming.

## **Fells for Farming**

Empresshire farm in Canisteo, New York, is home to a wide variety of rare animals, all of which serve a useful purpose. But from the rugged Highland cattle, to the Saanen goats, to the magnificent gray Shire horses, none are quite as versatile as the Fell ponies.

Some 11 years ago when Tony Imperatrice was looking for a good working pony, he could not have found a more perfect match than this hard-working British native pony breed. He has since used his Fells for working his beet, hay, and corn fields. Fells have pulled his corn binder, 4' blade mower, and 30-bale hay wagon. Tony's daughter and granddaughter have enjoyed success showing Fells at local shows and country fairs.

Lucky, a gray yearling colt, recently joined

Empresshire Farm's other two Fells. Lucky has done well in shows, has begun serious driving and farming, and will be standing at stud when he reaches two years of age. Soon to be imported is 6-year old Burnhead Jester, a half-brother to Lucky on their dam's side. Jester, a gray gelding, trained to ride and drive, has been used for shepherding and pulling timber in the United Kingdom.

While many Fells live into their late 20s, one of Tony's Fell mares Susanna was recently examined by his vet and considered to be over 42 years old and in good shape for her age.

Fells are native to the north of England, and that is where you will find Eddie McDonough working Mowcop Black Bess, his 9 year old 13.1 hand mare. Bess helps Eddie with such tasks as carrying hay in big panniers to his Herdwick and Aberdeen sheep, carting the hay in from the fields, harrowing, pulling stumps, and harvesting Christmas trees. She has been known to impress dressage riders with her figure-eights when harrowing.

Bess can jump a 4' 6'' fence and loves to jump riderless, with no lunge line. She invariably heads for the jump as soon as Eddie has set it up. She is just as eager to work, and seems happiest when performing farm tasks.



**Tony Imperatrice drags a sugar beet field with Fell ponies Joey and Susanna.**

*Photo by Juliette R. Escalante*



**Eddie McDonough hauls hay with his Fell mare Bess.**

*Photo by Madge Miller*

Eddie and Bess have formed a strong bond over their five years together, although it didn't start out that way. Teamster and horse got off to a rocky beginning until Eddie discovered that Bess was not responding to his commands because her previous owner spoke with a Westmorland dialect, which Eddie did not. Since he began mimicking that speech pattern, the two have got along famously.

### **Rare Breed**

The Fell pony is a rare breed hailing from northern England and the Scottish border, where it derives its name from the Norse word for hill. During the four centuries of Roman occupation on this border, auxiliary troops were brought in to help man Hadrian's Wall, which separated these two countries, and to maintain law and order throughout the area, as they did in most of the British Isles. French, Dutch, German, Polish, Spanish and eastern European cavalrymen were posted there. Foreign horses of several types, from slender Arab types to coarse Friesian workhorses, are known from archaeology in the area.

A cross between such foreign horses and the Celtic pony might have produced an animal closer to horse size, but anything over 13.2 hands was not suited to the conditions on the northern fells. Big animals could not survive without extra feeding, so by natural selection the breed stabilized as a pony.

By the second century the Galloway pony in southern Scotland was already established as a breed. So too was the Fell across the northern counties of England. Old farmers still sometimes refer to a Fell as a Galloway. The two were geographically close and similar, probably because they were similarly bred and containing types ranging from the taller Dales and Highlands

to the smaller end of the Fells. Most of these ponies were probably of subdued colors such as brown, dun, black or dark bay. White markings were limited.

The Cistercian Order or Gray Friars owned large amounts of land in the Lake District in northwest England, and the gray color in the Fell breed partly traces back to their preference for horses of that color. Gray was a common horse color in the north of England in the early 1500s.

Well maintained road surfaces were few and far between from the time of the Roman withdrawal in the 4<sup>th</sup> century until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when engineers began to surface roads again. Pack ponies were the only reliable means of transporting goods and the Fell – being a fast and steady walker – was particularly good for this purpose.

Through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the canals, roadways, and train lines were developed, the ponies were gradually superseded for distance transport and became once more a mainly local asset. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century ponies were utilized for trotting races and sports events, as well as light arable farm work, shepherding, and transport such as carrying mail, or goods to market by trap.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Fell ponies were used only occasionally, as mining pit ponies due to their taller pony height. In some areas they were used for deer stalking, an endeavor which required a steady, surefooted pack pony which would carry the dead stag down the hills for the hunter.

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 at Murthwaite Stud in Cumbria, England, one of the few places where the ponies still run and breed semi-feral on the open fells.** Photo by Laura Hart

Fells today maintain their reputation of being easy keepers. They can work all day on a small ration and thrive where a more highly bred animal would have difficulty just surviving. Although most Fell ponies are now bred in Cumbria, southwest Scotland, and the north of England, Fells may be found all over the United Kingdom. Studs are also established in Canada, France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, and the United States.

### **Challenges**

The challenges of this breed coming off their native fells and being raised and introduced to new environments are explained 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*



**Derrick Byas, an instructor at the Cumbria Campus of the University of Central Lancashire at Newtown Rigg, trains 3-year-old Fell stallion Peepings Geoff.** Photo by Laura Hart

*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. This perception occurs in part because black is currently the most common color for Fells, and because Friesians are enjoying an increase in popular awareness. Such a perception can compromise a breed’s focus and presentation, and may lead to a change in the direction of breeding standards, as has happened with many other breeds. A careful study of the Fell pony breed standard will reveal that the body type and movement of the Fell pony clearly differ from those of the Friesian horse. If you could see the Fell in its natural environment, with its various body types and range of colors, one will soon come to recognize the unique nature and scope of the Fell pony breed.

Fells average 13.1 - 13.2 hands high, with a maximum allowed height of 14 hands. They come in four colors. Black has become the predominant color over the last few decades, followed by brown, bay, and gray. Gray ponies are born dark and gradually turn gray over time. A star and/or a little white on or below the hind fetlock is acceptable. Although an excess of white markings is discouraged, such ponies are eligible for registration.

### **Resources**

The Fell Pony Society  
North Craigs Cottage  
Waterbeck, Lockerbie  
Dumfriesshire DG 11 3 HA  
Scotland  
Phone/fax 011-44-1461-600606  
[www.raresteeds.com/fellponysociety](http://www.raresteeds.com/fellponysociety)

The Fell Pony Society  
North American Liaison Officer  
Laura Hart  
PO Box 174  
Eau Claire, MI 49111  
fax: 508-519-6533  
[www.fellpony.com](http://www.fellpony.com)  
[Featheryfeet@yahoo.com](mailto:Featheryfeet@yahoo.com)



**Laura Hart prepares for a logging demonstration with 7-year-old Fell gelding Merlin.**

*Photo by Jennifer Grote*

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 owner. 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. These ponies might be compared to breeds of working dogs - meant for activity that 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. At that time they are lightly trained and then often turned back out until four to five years, when they begin light and straight riding, without much bending of their spines. Mares should not be bred until they are at least three years of age.

To emphasize their natural state, Fell ponies are presented at show well groomed, yet untrimmed. Fells do not wear the tail ribbon of the Dales nor the ear plait of the Welsh – being shown as an example of the Fell breed and not a version of another. Globally fewer than 6,000 registered Fell ponies are registered, but since the integrity and usefulness of this breed have come to light, exportations are on the rise. Since North America has no affiliated Fell pony organizations, Fells in North America are registered directly in the British Fell Pony Society Stud Book, our only recognized authority on the Fell breed.

The purebred Fell should remain a preservation breed, with thanks to the traditional hill breeders of Britain who have carefully preserved this rare breed's ancestral type, with the hardiness and savvy of the Celtic mountain ponies. As the saying goes, for work or play "You cannot put a Fell to the wrong job!"

*Laura Hart lives in Eau Claire, Michigan, is the North American liaison officer for the Fell Pony Society, and owns Fell gelding Merlin after a pony-shopping trip in Britain.*

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**Gainesboro, T N**

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