

FELL PONY BREED & HISTORY

Compiled by *The Fell Pony Society*

Our Patron: Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II

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Fell ponies are a sturdy native breed of exceedingly good temperament and intelligence. The Breed standard states they should have plenty of dense flat bone below the knee and should be strong, tireless, surefooted and thrifty. They are renowned for their ground-covering trot, thick leg feathering and profuse mane and tail. They should have a well laid shoulder which makes them a comfortable long-distance riding mount, and with the Breed Standard's requisite depth of their girth and soundness of limb and foot should make them trouble-free competitors for driving, jumping or dressage.

This rare pony breed hails from northern England and the Scottish border where they derive their name – FELL – 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 cavalymen were posted there. Foreign horses of several types are known from archaeology in Northern Britain, from slender Arab types to coarse Friesian workhorses.

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 high was not suited to the conditions on the northern fells. Big animals could not survive without extra feeding, so by natural selection the breed stabilised as a pony.

In 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. The two were geographically close and are said to have been very similar, probably similarly bred and containing types ranging from the taller Dales and Highlands to the smaller end of the Fells. Most of the ponies were probably of subdued colours such as brown, dun, black or dark bay, and white markings were limited. Old farmers still sometimes refer to a Fell as a Galloway.

The Cistercian Order or Grey Friars owned large amounts of land in the Lake District in Northwest England, and it is believed that the grey colour in the Fell breed partly traces back to their preference for horses of this colour. Grey was a very common horse colour 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 4th Century until the 18th Century when engineers began to surface roads again. Packponies were the only reliable means of transporting goods and the Fell was particularly good for this purpose, being a fast and steady walker.

Through the 18th and 19th 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 19th Century ponies were utilised for trotting races and sports events as well as light arable farmwork, shepherding, and transport such as carrying mail, or goods to market by trap.

In the 20th Century Fell ponies were used only occasionally as pit ponies (in mines) due to their taller pony height. In some areas they were used for ‘deer stalking’, an endeavour 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 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. They are currently used in activities such as pleasure riding, endurance riding, competitive driving, showing, and farming.

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.*

“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.”

Averaging 13.1 - 13.2 hands high, the maximum height allowed for Fells is 14 hands high. They come in four different colours. Black over the last few decades has become the predominant colour, followed by brown, bay and grey. 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.

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. 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 nor 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.

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. There are growing populations of Fell ponies in many countries such as America, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and France. For the present, all Fells, except in Holland, must be registered directly in the British Fell Pony Society Stud Book, the recognized authority on the Breed.

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 working breed.

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