

You'll fall in love with

FELL PONIES

Photo: M.J. Gould-Earley



Fells have thick manes and tails.

High on the hills of the Pennines, a mountainous range that divides northern England, roam semi-wild herds of an ancient breed known today as the Fell pony. Named after the hills, which are also called "fells," it is one of the native "Mountain and Moorland" ponies of the British Isles.

With just over 100 Fell ponies in North America and less than 5,000 in the world, the Fell Pony is classified as "endangered."

But don't count the breed out yet—this tough little pony has narrowly escaped extinction more than once. He's a descendant of a long line of equine survivors that go all the way back to the Ice Ages.

When North America became covered with ice thousands of years ago, most of the large mammals that lived there became extinct. Fortunately, various types of prehistoric horses traveled northwestward in search of a better living environment, crossing the land bridges that once existed between Alaska and Asia.

We can trace the Ice Age trail of ancient equines because their fossils have been discovered—including the fossils of two types

of ponies that lived in Alaska.

These fossils resemble ones found in England, where it appears these prehistoric equines ended their journey. One of these types was a small, light-boned pony, similar to the Exmoor Pony. The other was a heavy-boned, larger pony, who's closest living relative, based on fossil evidence, is probably the Fell pony.

You can see ponies that look remarkably similar to these ancient equines living in England today.

During its migration, the larger prehistoric pony flourished in the cool, swampy forests that existed at that time in central and northwestern Europe. The pony became known as the "Forest Horse," or *Equus Caballus Sylvaticus*.

However, based on the earliest fossil remains, he only stood around 13.2 hands high, and probably should have been called the "Forest Pony!"

The original Forest Horse had short, heavy cannon bones, so he could carry the weight of his small but heavily built frame. He also had broad feet, which helped to keep him from getting stuck in the swampy ground.

His long, sloping shoulder gave him a high knee action, which helped him to ramble over fallen trees and other obstacles without stumbling.

His long fetlock hair or "feather," long forelock, thick mane and tail, and fuzzy "beard" provided warmth and also helped rainwater to run off his body.

The Forest Horse was probably dark-colored—black or brown—to help camouflage him in the dark forests, and also to help retain heat in the cold environment.

His large, relatively forward-looking eyes set on a short, broad face provided good vision. His ears were small and tucked

Fells can be gray.

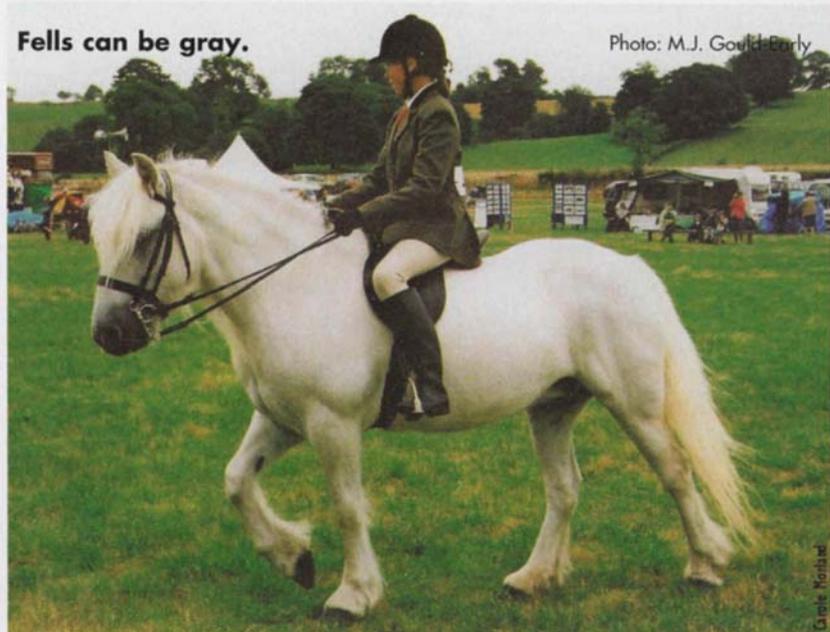


Photo: M.J. Gould-Earley

beneath the heavy mane to protect them from the cold.

This sturdy little pony probably contributed to the development of many draft breeds by cross breeding with larger horses.

There were lots of Forest Horses in France, where cavemen not only hunted and ate them, but also immortalized them in their Stone Age cave drawings. At that time England and France were connected by a land bridge, so it's not surprising that similar fossils are found in England, too.

As humans became clever enough to domesticate the horse, the Forest Horse began to be used as a pack pony. His weight-bearing capacity and slightly longer back made him ideal for the job.

The first to employ them were probably the Phoenicians, ancient explorers who sailed to the "Tin Islands," now known as Britain, in search of precious tin during

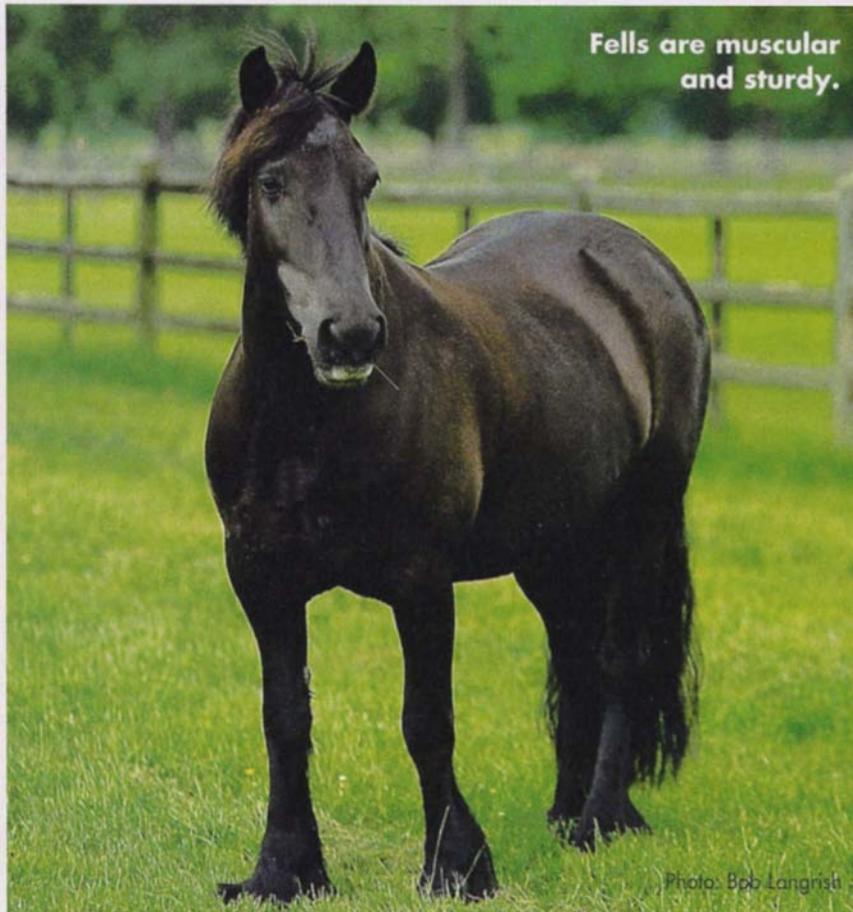
the Bronze Age.

Years later, during the first few centuries A.D., when the Romans occupied Britain, their Emperor, Hadrian, ordered a huge wall to be built—stretching across what is now roughly the border between England and Scotland—to defend his people against a northern tribe called Picts.

This wall was partly built in what is now Cumbria, which also happens to be the home of the Fell pony.

While the wall was being built, Friesian soldiers in the Roman army brought their own stallions from Northern Europe to help with the work.

Some people believe the Friesian stallions were bred to native ponies and this is how the Fell breed originated, but this explanation is probably a myth, because fossils resembling the Fell pony have been found in



Fells are muscular and sturdy.

“You’ll Fall in Love with Fell Ponies”, by Mary Jean Gould-Earley, appeared in the July/August 2004 issue of *Young Rider Magazine*.

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Author’s Notes:

- Page 1 - Headshot is Waverhead Robbie. Grey mare is Orton Hall Dusky, ridden by Rebecca Morland. (Photo should be credited to Carole Morland, not me!)
- Page 3 - Photo is of the Duke of Edinburgh driving Her Majesty’s Fell ponies.
- Page 3 - Photo is of Lune Valley Dolly being ridden by my niece, Jessica O’Donnell.

Fells are fabulous driving ponies.

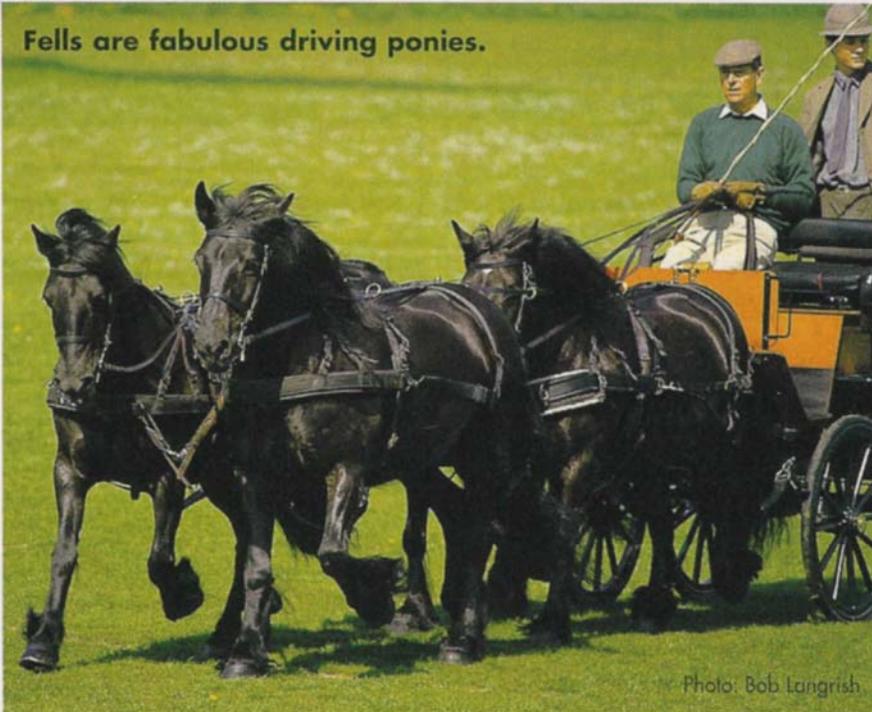


Photo: Bob Langrish

England dating back to 60,000 B.C.—long before the Romans ever invaded Britain.

It's more likely that the two breeds shared a common prehistoric ancestor—the Forest

Horse. However, no matter what outside blood may have contributed to the breed, perhaps the greatest influence was, and still is, the harsh environment on the fells in Cumbria, where the ponies still run in semi-wild herds today.

Fell ponies were used for many centuries as pack ponies in Cumbria. The heavily laden ponies traveled in droves with one pony and its rider guiding the rest along established routes.

Their remarkable strength and endurance allowed them to carry packs weighing more than 200 pounds over rough, hilly terrain, where they averaged more than 200 miles per week.

They also became well known as fast trotters during races that took place at shepherd gatherings. Back then, Fells were known as “Galloways.”

Ironically, the Fell hardiness, strength and usefulness almost brought the breed to extinction in the 20th century because they were sold in droves to the army to pull and pack artillery throughout World Wars I and II.

Unfortunately, this left few Fell stallions behind. And as tractors and cars began to replace them on farms, many Fells ended up being sold for meat.

Fortunately, more people began riding for fun in the 1950s and 60s and breed enthusiasts gave Fells a new lease on life.

Like other native breeds, the versatile Fell pony rose to the task and was able to adapt to this new market for an all-around sport pony.

The Fell pony is a sure-footed, larger-type pony that stands 14hh or less. Both children and adults can ride Fells. For older

kids, the Fell pony can be an ideal mount, because it's a pony they will never outgrow!

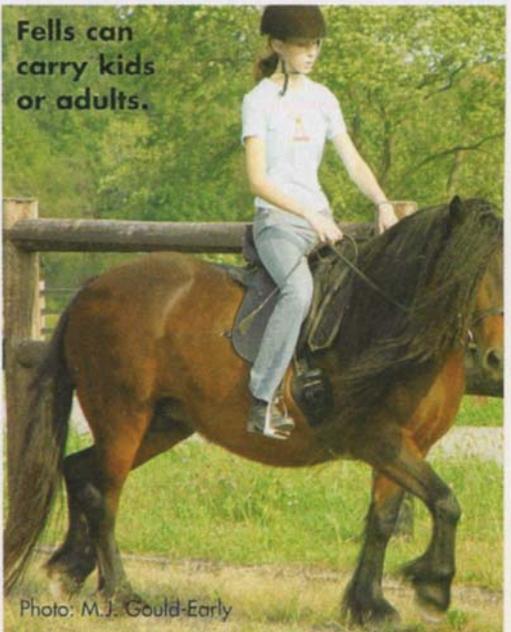
Fell ponies are talented driving ponies and able jumpers and they are often used in programs for riding and driving by the disabled.

Although the Fell pony is most commonly black, it is sometimes bay, brown or gray, with a long mane and tail and luxurious “feather.” It is also well known for its stamina and wonderfully friendly and gentle temperament.

For more information about Fell ponies, visit the website for the Fell Pony Society of North America, Inc. at www.fpsna.org, and check out the Fell Pony Society's website at www.raresteeds.com/fellponysociety.

Finally, to learn even more

about Fell Ponies, take a look at this upcoming book, *The Fell Pony Family Album* at [www.laurelhighland.com/news.htm#album!](http://www.laurelhighland.com/news.htm#album)



Fells can carry kids or adults.

Photo: M.J. Gould-Early