


Profile  
TOM LLOYD

# A breed apart

Tom Lloyd's herd of Fell ponies, which live out all year on the fells near his Newby Bridge home, is one of just 19 hill-bred herds in existence. Tom tells of his love for the breed and why he's sharing a unique trekking experience

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Tom Lloyd with Lucky  
photographed on the fell  
above Staveley-in-Cartmel,  
Newby Bridge



With the birthdate July 7, 2007, Lucky couldn't be named anything else. The beautiful black Fell pony, full name Hades Hill Lucky Pearl, has a velvety coat, a swishy tail

and a generous mane through which she gives us sideways, knowing looks with her big eyes.

Lucky belongs to Tom Lloyd and is one of the 12-strong Hades Hill herd which he has cared for since taking on the ponies from his late father, Walter, in 1994.

The herd – as well as Lucky there are six other mares, a stallion called Hades Hill Geronimo and several youngsters – lives out year-round on the fells near Tom's home in Newby Bridge. The herd represents the latest chapter in a history of the breed that dates back many centuries.

Tom, who has spent most of his career as a filmmaker, grew up with Fell ponies and has dedicated himself to keeping the herd going and preserving three separate blood lines. Now he wants other people to be able to share the experience of spending time with the ponies.

The idea was first sparked about a decade ago when Tom, 51, led a group on a trek but with the participants walking alongside the ponies rather than riding.

"The first time I did this was about 10 years ago," he says. "I took about five horses and 10 people from Sedbergh, through the Howgills to Orton, Bampton and over High Street and it was one of the best experiences I've ever had.

"You're getting off the roads, you barely see a soul up there. I thought this is a really nice thing, I would like to do this."

The experience planted a seed and now Tom has launched a business, Fell Pony Adventures, to offer treks to some of the Lake District's hidden corners with two or three nights of wild camping.

And just as he did with his original trek from Sedbergh, the groups walk with the ponies rather than ride the animals. Tom says that the ponies, which are fitted with a pack saddle and panniers, can each comfortably carry up to 40 kilos and are able to transport all the kit needed to camp out, including tents, bedding and food, travelling up to eight miles each day.

Tom says that walking alongside a pony in this way is very different to a riding holiday.

"When you're walking with a pony, it's a very laid back, mellow experience and you can carry more. If you're riding, either you've got to take a second horse with you, or you just travel very light."

Tom says travelling with the ponies represents freedom, both from being on the fells and from being able to wander away from civilisation.

Trekking with them provides a sense of being grounded, through a connection with the seasons and the land and a feeling of power from connecting with a horse: "It's not a power over the horse – it's a partnership and the powerful nature of that partnership."



Tom and Lucky on a  
bridleway near Staveley-  
in-Cartmel, Newby Bridge



The ponies are fitted with a pack saddle - they can each comfortably carry up to 40 kilos of kit

Because they're not riding the horses, Tom's clients don't need any prior experience but they can still get to know the animals well during the trip.

"I did a trek with a family a couple of months ago and the kids were quite guarded with the horses. By the time we got up to the tarn, they were fighting over who could lead the pony."

Tom, who once drove two of his ponies from Cumbria to the Devon-Cornwall border, says it's important to be calm around them.

"They pick up on your heart rate. I've been in some quite interesting situations over the years, travelling with my horses. No matter what's going on, you just have to calm your heart rate right down so the horse picks up on that."

Said to have roamed the northern fells since before Roman times and originally used as pack ponies, Fells are hardy and able to withstand the harshest winters. They can undertake many tasks from carriage driving - which is Tom's passion - to wood snigging or pulling timber. They are excellent pack horses, can be ridden and can take part in cross-country dressage and jumping, which Tom's daughter, Flo, 14, is beginning to do.

Tom says an old adage about the ponies is: "You can't put a Fell to the wrong job."

There are Fell ponies all over the world. The Queen is probably the most famous Fell pony rider and her granddaughter, Lady Louise Windsor, takes part in carriage driving with Fell ponies, as the Duke of Edinburgh has done for many years. But unlike other native breeds - including New Forest and Exmoor ponies - the name Fell doesn't immediately associate them with a place. Tom says that as a consequence they have perhaps suffered from a lack of recognition.

Tom's ponies live out all year, grazing freely on the land. His brood mares and stallion run out on an area of enclosed fell called Dixon Heights on the southern tip of Newton Fell overlooking Morecambe Bay.

"What I say to people is my ponies get to see the world, they're not just stuck in a field all day watching the world go by," he says.

The trekking is part of what they're bred to do, he says: "I'm convinced they enjoy it. They're bred for working; fell ponies were bred as pack animals, they would much rather have a job to do than be sitting in a field."

The Hades Hill herd was started by Tom's late dad, Walter Lloyd, in 1957 when he bought two Heltondale mares from famous breeder Sarge Noble, near Bampton.

Walter, who died in 2018 aged 93, was a polymath whose varied careers included farming and working as emergency planning officer for Greater Manchester council. After he settled in Cumbria, he became known for his commitment to environmental issues and traditional Lakeland crafts, including charcoal burning. He was a familiar presence at Appleby Horse Fair, to which he would drive a bow-top wagon every year. Tom's award-winning documentary film, *Romany Rai*, captures Walter's long involvement with the horse fair and the Fell ponies which pulled his father's wagon.

Walter's farm was near Rochdale but Tom grew up with his mum outside Halifax. He went to film college and moved to London to work as a film editor's assistant.

He travelled in Europe and joined an anti-road protest at Solsbury Hill in Somerset, spending six months living in a treehouse. Over one summer he drove two ponies, including his gelding, Oscar and an old mare called Hades Hill Fenella or Nellie, from ▶

*‘There are cultural reasons, heritage reasons, there are all these reasons I should keep this herd together. The biggest reason is that it’s a thing my daughter and I connect with’*

Cumbria to the south west.

After settling in Cumbria, Tom took on the herd from his dad and worked as a commercial filmmaker, studying for a MSc in creative technology at the then Leeds Metropolitan University.

He hopes that Fell Pony Adventures will enable him to continue to look after and breed the ponies while making a living from what is effectively his biggest asset.

Much planning has gone into the business. Tom has undertaken Mountain Leader training and spent many months seeking permission from landowners, including the RSPB, to lead parties into the fells for wild camping. Two routes, in the Howgills and at Haweswater, are the first to be launched. As far as he’s aware, Tom is the only person offering private guided, walking and wild camping treks with Fell ponies leading the way.

Tom is also offering day treks and a short walk with Lucky provides Cumbria Life with a taster of the experience. Lucky is fitted with a pack saddle and panniers - which Tom sources from Canada - and loaded up with our gear, including a blanket, coffee pot and other provisions. We set off from Tom’s home and walking with Lucky forces us to go at her pace while the clip clop of her hooves on the road is mesmeric.

We leave the road and head up a hill with Lucky taking everything in her stride. When we reach a good stopping point, with views of the steam trains on the Lakeside and Haverthwaite Railway, the waters of Windermere and Coniston Old Man shrouded in mist, we make camp, with Tom’s first priority to provide Lucky with grazing and water.

Tom brews proper coffee from Mr Duffin’s Coffee at Staveley and brings out a bar of quality chocolate. The catering on the wild camps has to be of a good standard, he says and travelling with the ponies means he can carry a charcoal stove and cook proper food, rather than packet meals.

Having Lucky tethered next to us is part of the experience: “One of the nice things about travelling like this is the ponies aren’t going in a stable at the end of the day. They’re tethered up and as we’re sitting around and cooking, they can come up. They’re part of it.”

When Tom took on Walter’s herd there were about 30 ponies. Tom has reduced that number but is endeavouring to maintain the herd at a level that will sustain his new business while still allowing him to have two or three mares in foal each year. The herd’s three bloodlines include that of Hades Hill Pat, the first pony he was given at the age of three.

Although there are thousands of Fell ponies worldwide, the Fell Pony Society’s records indicate there are just 19 hill-bred herds of Fell ponies, most of



which are in Cumbria, with approximately 200 mares of breeding age between them. The society is keen to maintain or increase those numbers because the hardiness of the breed and its other characteristics are developed by them being up on the fells.

Tom says there are many reasons for him to keep the herd going: “There are cultural reasons, heritage reasons, there are all these reasons I should keep this herd together.

“The biggest reason is that it’s a thing my daughter and I connect with.”

Having taken on the herd from Walter, Tom had often wondered about his motivation but he says after losing his dad last year, he doesn’t have any doubts about his own feelings for the animals.

“When my dad was around there was always, in the back of my mind, the question was I only doing this because of my dad, was I doing it for heritage reasons or cultural reasons? Now my dad’s not around, I’m still as passionate about it as I ever was.”

Fell Pony Adventures: [www.fellpony.co.uk/adventures](http://www.fellpony.co.uk/adventures)  
Fell Pony Society: [www.fellponysociety.org.uk](http://www.fellponysociety.org.uk)

**Tom took over the Hades Hill herd from his father Walter**