

RARE BREED THE FELL PONY

*Gilly Chippendale with
Stennerskeugh Smoke
at Glamis Castle*



*Teresa Whitehead with
Django at Smith's Lawn*



The pony that meets with royal approval

Last but not least amongst the rare native breeds of the British Isles is the Fell pony, which gained recognition in the driving world thanks to the Duke of Edinburgh. *Susan Dunne* finds out more about this native of the north.

Traditionally found on the north western fells around Cumbria and the adjacent hills of Westmoreland, this pony has roamed the region for centuries. Bred to work on unforgiving uplands and downlands, they were used as packhorses carrying substantial loads of lead, slate and copper up to 240 miles a week. The result is a strong hardy workmanlike pony noted for its sure-footedness and for its good walking pace.

Royal Patronage

This hairy working pony has benefitted greatly from royal patronage. The Queen is a strong supporter of the breed – she was seen riding a Fell pony at Windsor at the age of 93 – and is patron of the Fell Pony Society. Fells came to prominence in the driving world with the Duke of Edinburgh's pony team which featured on the driving trials circuit for many years. The tradition has continued as the Duke's granddaughter, Lady Louise Windsor, has taken up the reins, driving Fell ponies from the Balmoral Stud.

Versatile but Vulnerable

Like many of our native breeds, the Fell is a versatile all-rounder which has helped to ensure its survival both in the driving and riding world. Closely related to the Dales pony across the border but slightly smaller at around 13.2 hands, the breed is comparatively well represented in both private driving and driving trials with a number of Fell driving teams. However, Fells are classed as Vulnerable by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust. Libby Robinson from the Fell Heritage Centre has driven Fells for many years and has recently helped launch an exhibition on the role of the Fell pony at the Rheged Centre in Penrith. She highlights the dangers of removing Fells from their traditional winter grazing: "There's a lot of misinformation about over grazing on the fells. Since the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001 there

have never been as many sheep and removing ponies from their traditional winter grazing threatens the biodiversity – insects and birds rely on pony droppings and removing them creates an imbalance. I think it's really important that the large herd breeders on the Fells are listened to because they are the real experts. If Fell ponies aren't allowed to roam on their traditional territory they will lose the sure-footedness they've developed to elevate over uneven land. They'll end up becoming field ponies instead of Fell ponies."

Gilly Chippendale

Living close to the heart of fell country Gilly has 18 Fell ponies on her thousand acre farm, breeding under the stud name of Lammerside. She and her fabulous grey Fell Stennerskeugh Smoke are no strangers to the driving world. Smoke has wowed spectators and judges alike with his stunning white coat and long flowing mane. Formerly a stallion (he has sired no fewer than 61 offsprings); Smoke was bought as a 10 year old having only just been broken to drive. Gilly says: "He was very much in the raw when we got him but we worked him and showed him straightaway and got to Addington in the same year. We mainly do private driving and Attelage which he enjoys more than the big agricultural shows. We've travelled thousands of miles showing together and he's been brilliant to have adapted so well to showing in his later life." She says of Fells "They generally have a nice temperament and they're very strong and sturdy enough for men to ride. Having said that they can have a lot of attitude – especially the grey ones. They're very much a working horse – they're not fancy toe-pointing little things and they make very good driving ponies."

"In the showing world some judges do prefer black and it can be hard work keeping them clean when they're grey, especially when the harness dye runs in the rain. Some judges have also asked me whether his mane isn't a Health and Safety issue"

Teresa Whitehead

At the opposite end of the country to Gilly in Kent, Teresa discovered Fells whilst volunteering for her local RDA group. She says "The group also did carriage driving and they had a Fell pony. I liked him so I thought I'd get one. I bought Duke with a harness in 2014 for the bargain price of £400. He was a bit naughty at first as he'd not done much but since then he's really come on and now he's an RDA assessed pony."

Having driven one Teresa thought it would be good to drive a pair and along came Django who was already broken to drive. With help from Sonny Hillier, she got them going as a pair and

now does mainly pleasure driving, BDS showing, Le Trec and BDS drives. Of Fells, Teresa says: "I just love their character. They can be a bit naughty but they are good fun. I've driven behind different horses but you have to go

a long way to beat a pair of Fells.

"They are definitely good doers and very strong. We live on top of the North Downs in Kent with some really steep hills and either will go up singly with no problem and in a pair they will fly up. My daughter rides Django for hours and he's always quite happy and so reliable."

• Further information about Fells can be found from *The Fell Pony Society and the Fell Heritage Centre. The Rheged Centre in Penrith is holding a temporary exhibition on the Fell Pony.*

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