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Daring to Dream: Cumbria's Fell Ponies

BY: RACHEL FLYNN / ON: JULY 1, 2019



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I wasn't born in the era of riding a horse to school but I longed to. Horse obsessed at a young age, I remember my saddles took pride position in my bedroom so I could breathe in the glorious smell of leather and horse sweat. I would daydream on the fifty-minute bus ride home from school imagining galloping through the paddocks with every fence a jump.

Growing up in a high country town called Benambra in Victoria, Australia, it was our way of life. We spent every spare hour in the saddle mustering cattle, riding in the mountains or preparing our versatile stock horses for the weekend's competition.

A lifelong desire to travel and photograph horses found me resting on the peaks of the Lakes District National Park overlooking the Haweswater Reservoir in the U.K. While watching a Fell pony herd interact and graze, I reflected on my own experiences and how thankful I am that I had such an upbringing that allowed me to appreciate what the Lakes District had to offer.

Assessing the quality of these Fell ponies, I wondered about David, their owner. Where had it all started for him? How did his love of horses create this successful journey to breeding the respected Drybarrows Fell ponies that grazed in the park? It was already clear that his passion and love of horses had a story too.

Eager to photograph the Fell ponies in their natural environment, David ferried us on the back of his four-wheel motorbike, up to the top to spend time with the horses and experience their world. It is such a peaceful place and immersed in their surroundings I felt the satisfaction of fulfilling my life-long dream to travel and photograph horses with the thrill of knowing that this was only the beginning.

David and Gail's farm encroaches onto the National Park. Their stone built house, old cottage and stables are a typically charming English style. The rolling green hills with stone wall borders, horses, cows and sheep complete a beautiful scene.

The Fell pony has been bred on the fells in Cumbria for hundreds, if not thousands of years! David's family have bred Fell ponies for over 100 years, making him a fourth generation breeder of the beloved ponies.

In 1962 David's Dad left the family farm in Askham, the U.K, to start breeding the Drybarrows Fell ponies just a few miles away and the farm was named Drybarrows. David resides here now with his wife Gail. His dad's income came from cattle and sheep production, however breeding the Fell pony was his great passion and love. He worked with them at home in Askham as a boy and they were his transport until he could drive at 16!

At around 2 years of age David was placed on a Pony and told "hang on" – he learnt to ride from there. Curious, I asked David if he had been lucky enough to ride to school. With a chuckle he said he didn't ride to and from school, however, he did use a pony as his transport to visit friends on farms around the valley at weekends and during school holidays.

From the age of seven, he attended Gymkhanas and jumping events around the country in the summer months. After his dad retired in the late '90s, David took on the tenancy of the farm, and his dad continued the breeding program of his beloved ponies. A family tragedy in 2013 saw the Drybarrows Fell ponies with an uncertain future. David and Gail made the decision to continue on the breeding program and take over what his Dad and ancestors worked so hard to build.



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David reflected “this is the best decision he has ever made”. He and his wife love where they live at Drybarrows in the Lakes District National Park, which he said has recently been recognised as a world heritage site. There is no question why – it simply takes your breath away. A downside to living in the Lakes District is the very long winters and short summers. “An old Auntie of my Mother’s said when she first came to visit Drybarrows, “you will get nine months of winter and three months of cold weather”. She wasn’t far wrong!” reflected David.



Drybarrows Fell ponies are among only a handful of breeders who keep their ponies in their native environment on the Lakeland Fells.

According to David, the future at Drybarrows and that of the ponies is far from secure right now with the increasing pressure from the Landlord and large government bodies like Natural England to remove all sheep and ponies from the fells over the winter months. The Fell Pony Society and its council are not fighting to keep the ponies in their native environment, which is a shame.

David and Gail have sold ponies in Europe and abroad including the United States and New Zealand, possibly exporting the first Fell pony stallion to N.Z by David’s estimate.

It really did feel like home quietly sitting on those peaks connecting with the horses. One thing is certain, I will return to Drybarrows and soak up the English charm and warm hospitality (and pat those gorgeous Fell ponies).

Rachel Flynn is an Australian Photographer who travels Australia wide and Internationally photographing horses. VIP’s, who sign up for Rachel’s newsletter, have a chance to WIN a FREE Equine Photoshoot which she draws EVERY MONTH! You can find out how to enter on her website and social media sites.

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Mustering and family farming duties gave Rachel an incredible appreciation for horses and their connection to the humans who care for them.



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Her life long passion lead to breeding and training Gypsy Cobs.

Rachel loves to travel and write about her experiences and her photography extends from incredible scenic images, stunning equine portraits, creatively directed images and equine event photography. Her work has been featured in a number of publications and online media.

An exclusive collection of her work is in her [Equine Art Gallery & Sales website page](#).

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