



Feather Notes

The quarterly newsletter about Fell Ponies from Willowtrail Farm
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Willowtrail Farm

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Breed Type and the Work at Hand

Fell Ponies are not show ponies, they are work ponies who show well if you like to do that.¹

- Judith Bean-Calhoun

An Unrecognized Threat to the Breed

When I first read the statement above a few months ago, I didn't realize how profoundly it would change my view of the Fell Pony breed.

Judith shared this sentiment with me around the same time that I wrote an article for *Rural Heritage* magazine about stewarding the Fell Pony breed. Generally I feel great if I get a single phone call from a reader in response to what I write.

My Fell Pony article was unusual, though, as I received three phone calls, and the theme of each was identical: the world is losing animals bred for work.

Eddie McDonough lives in England and works his Fell Pony mare Mowcop Black Bess in the woods and shepherding. In the past few months I have been in regular contact with Eddie, and he has emphasized the same thing that Judith pointed out: work is a part of the Fell Pony's heritage that must be considered when stewarding this breed.

My correspondence with Eddie and Judith has brought into focus a threat to the Fell Pony breed that I hadn't previously considered and

about which there is little discussion. The threat arises from a change in the work a Fell Pony is being asked to do. Because of that change in work, the breed type – including conformation, temperament, and all the other characteristics that make the breed unique – is being impacted.

Influences on Breed Type

Around 1973, Mrs. Sylvia McCosh, Vice Chairman of the Fell Pony Society, wrote the following:

The history of the Fell Breed goes back to time immemorial, and until recent years the horse or pony was one of a farmer's most valuable assets... The fell pony played its part well: it was a tough hardy breed, and could do a much longer day's work than its taller neighbours. By force of circumstances fell ponies had to be 'capable harness ponies' in the first instance; it was frequently a long, hard day when the family drove to market, especially if the farm was a long way off the beaten track. It also had to be a strong pony, able to carry a heavy man across the fells in all weathers to shepherd his sheep... Lastly the ponies would be needed to pull the mowing machine in hay time, on fell fields, frequently on slopes with outcrops of rock, much too difficult for a Clydesdale and dangerous for a tractor....²

In 1995, Mr. Walter Lloyd, breeder of the Hades Hill ponies, wrote the following:

The Fell Pony has developed as a result of hundreds of years of breeding on the hills of Northern England. It is hardy, able to live out on the hills all winter with no supplementary feeding and breed successfully the following summer. The hill land develops great stamina and the breed is also multi-purpose, so that in summer the owner can catch up the pony,



Fell Pony mare Admergill Ursula assisting with haymaking near Caldbeck in Cumbra.

Photo courtesy Libby Robinson, Globetrotter Fell Pony Stud and the Fell Pony Society

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*hitch it to the mower and scaler and raker to make hay, to the sweep or sledge or cart to house the hay, to the Dales cart to get the muck out, and then ride it over the fells for shepherding, or in a gig to drive at a trot to market.*³

Both of these descriptions point to the influence of the fell environment on the Fell Pony breed. This influence is given lots of attention in Fell Pony circles today. For instance, breeders outside Cumbria often speak of the importance of being able to return to hill farmers in Cumbria to purchase breeding stock to keep the breed true. There is consensus among hill breeders that Fell ponies should not be spoiled with blankets and hard feed and stables because they don't need it. In addition, great concern is expressed whenever there is a loss of herds that live out on the fells because the influence of the fell environment on the breed is so

widely understood.

Both Mrs. McCosh's and Mr. Lloyd's descriptions of the breed, however, also point to another strong influence on the breed, and that influence is the work the pony does, both in terms of its variety and the strength and stamina required. While the fell environment helped shape the breed we know today, so too did the requirement that a single pony be capable of being ridden, driven, and used for draft work. Small ears, abundant hair, and large nostrils are necessary for survival on the fell, and a well-laid shoulder, hocks well let down, and plenty of bone all are necessary for the traditional work of our ponies.

An example of how traditional work has influenced breed type is articulated in this description of H.M. The Queen's Fell Ponies from around 1973. "They are all kept at Balmoral and are primarily used as stalking ponies, for

which purpose they are very good because they are lower than a Highland pony, and therefore it is so much easier to lift a stag onto them."⁴ The average

Another strong influence on the Fell Pony breed has been the work the pony does, both in terms of variety and strength and stamina required.

height of 13.2 hands is important because of the breed's historic work as pack animals and the desire to not have too tall an animal onto which to hoist heavy loads while at the same time having an animal with sufficient bone and sub-

stance to carry a heavy load.

The Fell Pony is Unique

In 2000, I had been using pony power for a few years but wanted a larger pony to assist me with my work. I was attracted to the Norwegian Fjord Horse breed because of its versatility - ride, drive, draft, pack - since in addition to draft work, I also used my pony for riding, including herding cattle, and driving. I had seen Fjords in my area and talked to breeders and quickly became hooked. I got my first Fjord horse the same month I bought my first Fell, so I've been able to compare and contrast the breeds and their respective societies on a daily basis.

While both breeds are heralded as versatile, they are quite distinct. Fjords have been selectively bred for centuries for their ability to do work, and draft work has remained an emphasis for the breed. Fjord breed shows usually include log skidding and/or draft classes to demonstrate the Fjord's abilities in work harness. Fell Ponies have been selected as much by their environment as by the people who have put them to use. Their prominent use has been packing and ridden work, whether shepherding or carrying the Border Reivers over the rough ground of their homelands. Trotting races have been a part of their heritage for centuries and have recently been revived by the Fell Pony Society. Despite the emphasis of history on the

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Mowcop Black Bess and Eddie McDonough shepherding in England

Photo courtesy Eddie McDonough



Breed Type and the Work at Hand (continued)



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respective breeds, both have been bred to be versatile, with Fjords expected to be handy under saddle and Fells expected to be capable in harness.

The slightly different emphases within the breeds – Fjords in harness, Fells under saddle (whether pack or riding) - have led to differences in conformation. I see it especially in their movement. Fjords move lower and flatter, making their action economical for draft work. Fells elevate their feet more, their action enabling them to cover rough ground more easily. The two breeds, though, ideally have bone and substance both to enable them to carry weight and to use that weight against their collars when working in harness.

The New Work at Hand

Clive Richardson, in his most recent book, *British Horse and Pony Breeds: And their future*, points out that when ponies were regularly used for work, breed type took care of itself because of the way the ponies were kept and the work they were asked to do.⁵ Today, though, the work at hand has changed. As Walter Lloyd puts it, “Nowadays the hill farmer probably uses an ATV to do the shepherding, and a

Fell Ponies have historically been bred to be versatile, with an emphasis under saddle but also expected to be capable in harness.

tractor and baler to make the hay if he doesn't make all silage, and Fell Ponies are mostly used for leisure riding and perhaps private driving; many are kept in a stable all winter and on fertile grassland in summer, in fat or show condition.”⁶

In addition to leisure riding and driving, Fell Ponies also often excel in the show ring. The demands of these modern disciplines are quite different than the ones of times past, and the new demands are having an impact on breed type.

Richardson describes one impact on Fell Ponies brought about by showing. “[The] standard for the Fell pony says that the feather should be straight and silky and that in summer it may be cast except for a little at the heel, whereas in reality the majority of prize-winners have considerably more feather, as this has become a favoured feature in the show-ring. Judges have supported this trend and breeders have followed it but the breed standard has never been amended to reflect the change.”⁷

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Laurelhighland Tabitha demonstrating versatility: pulling a buggy, above, and a mower below.

She also willingly accepts riders of all ages and abilities.

Photos courtesy Adam Schmucker



Breed Type and the Work at Hand (continued)

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Impacts of Traditional Work on Breed Type

There are other elements of breed type that are necessary for work besides bone and substance and height, and two of them are often lacking in modern day Fell Ponies: correct hind ends and correct necks.

The proper conformation for the hind end was once described to me as what is necessary for a pony to back a cart uphill. The pony must be able to step up and back with its hind legs while holding the load. If a pony's hind end conformation is too straight, it cannot step up and back adequately. This requirement of the work of a hill farmer is quite different than the requirements placed on a pony to drive in a show or leisure situation.

A more easily seen problem is in how the neck exits the chest. In many ponies today, including two recent Supreme Champion stallions, the neck exits the chest low. If that pony were required to wear a work collar and push regularly against it, the pony would be in danger of damaging its windpipe or at the least not having the ability to catch its breath. In the pictures here, the stallion on the right would have more trouble pushing against a work collar than the stallion on the left because his neck is set in low and thick. This fault is sometimes called an upside-down neck, where there is too much length on the bottom line of the neck compared to the topline of the neck. The stallion on the left has a much longer topline by comparison.

This requirement of conformation for a pony pushing against a work collar is not replicated in any modern day use, and the importance of proper neck conformation is therefore rarely understood. Proper neck conformation is being left behind, and, especially when champion stallions that have this fault are sought after for breeding, the breed type is being adversely impacted.

Movement is another area where many modern day Fell Ponies are lacking. In a video put out by the Fell Pony Society a few years ago, there are only a handful of ponies pictured that have the movement I've come to associate with the Fell Pony. A couple of ponies had good hind action, a couple had good front action, and only a few had overall good action. There is a tremendous difference between



A change in conformation: necks set in too low, as on the right, are a fault that impacts draft performance but is common in recent champion stallions

riding a pony over the fells day in, day out, for shepherding and riding a pony in the show ring or on a leisurely ride. When I compare riding my fjord horse over rough terrain to riding my Fells, hands-down the Fells are more sure-footed because of their action. Having ridden well-conformed Fells and less well-conformed ones,

there is a noticeable difference as well. Well-conformed Fells are much better able to shift their weight from side to side and front to back, making traversing rough ground easier.

Because the traditional work of the Fell has changed, whether under saddle or in harness, breeding emphasis has changed as well, and the ponies of today are different than those of a few decades ago.

The breed type that ensured that our ponies could do a hard day's work safely in harness or moving across rough ground is difficult to retain when the work at hand has changed and the characteristics of the breed type are no longer understood or valued.

The Fell is Not Alone

I have wandered around the draft horse world for twenty-five years now, initially as a spectator at shows and for the past dozen years as a teamster. I've known the names of the most common draft breeds all my life from studying books like Marguerite Henry's *Album of Horses* as a child. One of the things that most draft breeds have in common is a decline in their fortunes since the introduction of the internal combustion engine. When tractors replaced equines on farms, de-

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Breed Type and the Work at Hand (continued)



Mowcop Black Bess snigging (skidding) Christmas tees
Photo courtesy Eddie McDonough

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mand for these animals dropped precipitously, landing many of the draft breeds on endangered lists.

The Fell Pony breed shared this fate with its fellow draft animals. “[Demand] for the breed slumped alarmingly in the first half of the twentieth century and it was not until the 1950s that the revival of horse riding and driving as a leisure activity saw an upturn in the breed’s fortunes.”⁸ The change in use to leisure activities helped save the breed from extinction. These new uses, including showing, have understandably received emphasis from the Fell Pony Society as a result of their important role in improving the Fells’ fate.

My interest has always been in using draft animals for work, so it didn’t take me long to notice that many of the draft breeds look different today than they did in the books I read as a child (the Suffolk Punch is an unusual exception.) Most animals are being bred taller and sleeker to excel in the show ring, while a minority have remained more compact and substantial to do real work. The show ring has become the most influential modern work at hand, and its demands are impacting breeding practices.

Fell Ponies are not immune to this trend. In his book, Richardson states: “The people who probably have the greatest influence on trends within breeds are judges, because the popularity of showing the last fifty years or so has seen show-ring champions becoming the standard breeders aspire to, even though this may at times slightly contradict the official breed standard.”⁹

My personal experience supports Richardson’s observation. I have looked at hundreds of photographs of Fell Ponies, seen hundreds in person and talked to dozens of

breeders in Cumbria. Ponies bred at studs where showing is the focus look markedly different than ponies bred at more traditionally-minded studs. A Cumbrian Fell Pony breeder once described the show type as a traditional animal made of elastic and stretched in every direction – more hair, more height, longer back, less bone, less substance.¹⁰ The change from traditional work to the modern work at hand of showing and leisure activities is causing the breed type to change. Unfortunately the impacts on breed type have not received much attention.

Showing and Breed Type

Managing Breeds for a Secure Future, a book published by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, points out that showing can have benefits, such as increased public exposure. And if shows are judged with the breed standard in mind, shows can help preserve breed type.¹¹ The Fell Pony Society sponsors many shows in England with this aim in mind.

However, the show ring is not guaranteed to help breeds. In a 2006 article in *The Native Pony* magazine, Valerie Russell discussed the rare breeds status of the Fell Pony, among other British Natives. One of her two modern threats to the breed was showing (the other being loss of their native environment). “With regard to the showing, there is no doubt that many breeders are breeding animals which are as similar as possible to those that are already winning in the ring. This would be acceptable if the majority of winners actually conformed to their breed standard. At the risk of stating the obvious, this is by no means always the case.”¹² In the next issue of the magazine, the same topic was taken up in the opening editorial. “We have all been at too many shows, even at the highest level, where breed society officials are almost literally tearing their hair out as yet another untypical but beautifully produced specimen of their breed triumphs. This is not only maddening for other exhibitors, it is, even more importantly, disastrous for the breeds.”¹³

Managing Breeds zeroes in on judging as an area of concern, echoing Richardson’s concern about the impact judges can have, “If judges evaluate multiple breeds by the same mental picture of excellence, showing can take a breed away from its traditional type.”¹⁴ My observations of the Fell Pony studs focused on showing bears this concern out as their ponies differ from more traditionally bred ones.

Managing Breeds makes another observation about the

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The changes in Fell Ponies that are resulting from the change in the work at hand are not desirable.



Breed Type and the Work at Hand (continued)



Raisburn Letty II with Judith Bean-Calhoun
Photo courtesy Judith Bean-Calhoun

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impact of showing on breed type. “Competitive showing tends to select extremes as ideal, rather than favoring more balanced animals. Favorable placement of extreme animals has the effect of driving selection towards those chosen extremes and away from moderate and balanced animals that may well prove to be more functionally useful.”¹⁵ Richardson’s observation about abundant feather is an example of this sort of extreme selection.

Dr. Deb Bennett, an expert in equine conformation, expresses similar concerns about horse shows. “More than a decade ago, I stopped accepting invitations to judge horse shows.... [Horse] shows simply do not permit enough interaction between the animals and the judge. Often a horse that a breeder has spent significant effort to raise gets less than two minutes’ total evaluation. This leads to what I consider the cardinal sin of livestock judging: picking faults (because they can be enumerated quickly) rather than picking horses.... When the top prize is given to [an animal that may not have done any useful work in its life,] we know nothing certain about his temperament, trainability, aptitude for a particular type of work or potential for ongoing soundness.”¹⁶

When the work at hand for Fell Ponies was shepherding, packing, draft work, and driving, functionally useful ani-

Because the traditional work of the Fell has changed, breeding emphasis has changed as well, and the ponies of today are different than those of a few decades ago.

mals were the most valued and therefore the most likely to be chosen as models to emulate. Now that the work at hand is focused on leisure activities, it is understandable that animals that excel in those pursuits will be favored for breeding. Unfortunately, the breed type necessary for traditional work is not the same as that required for leisure activities, and some breed characteristics are being left behind as the uses to which the breed is put have changed.

A Change in Work and A Change in Culture

While the work at hand has changed for the ponies, it has also changed for the people who breed them, and that is perhaps my biggest concern. Very few people use animals to get their work done. There are very few of us, then, that have firsthand experience with the conformation necessary to do real work. There are very few of us who understand how traditional work contributed to the breed type. I am concerned that the traditional Fell Pony is endangered not only because its population numbers were once so low but also because so few people understand its traditional work and that work’s contribution to breed type.

In the Norwegian Fjord Horse breed, I recently saw a stark example of this threat to breed type. A very well-known long-time breeder published an article that was a tribute to her stallion. She wrote that she had heard criticisms that her stallion was too quick. She defended him by saying that his success and that of his progeny in the show ring proved that her stallion’s speed was just fine.¹⁷ As a work-oriented teamster, I just shook my head. Quickness may be desirable in the show ring, but it is a liability in draft work; it can be a safety issue instantly. Quick responses can perhaps be dealt with by master teamsters, but I know firsthand that quickness in individual animals discourages less knowledgeable teamsters like myself. I won’t have such an animal in harness on my place because it’s just not safe. When enough people like me make those sorts of decisions, in the long run the breed can lose its ability to be versatile because people don’t put it to use in traditional ways.

In my experience, there is a significant difference between showing a pony and working them every day. Holding a pony’s attention for several hours, outdoors, in varying weather conditions, varying terrain and/or location, hitched to various pieces of equipment with varying levels of distraction is a different day’s work than leisurely pursuits or showing. En-

Learning how to breed Fell Ponies that are up to the variety of their historic tasks is going to take effort on the part of today’s stewards since we have little firsthand experience with the requirements that traditional work makes on breed type.

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Breed Type and the Work at Hand (continued)

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Ensuring the safety of both teamster and pony is very different in a work situation than a leisure or show one. In my experience it requires a particular type of pony. Learning how to breed Fell Ponies that are up to the variety of tasks described by Mrs. McCosh and Mr. Lloyd is going to take effort on the part of today's stewards since we have little firsthand experience with the requirements that traditional work makes on breed type.

Is it already too late?

Stewarding a rare draft breed has its challenges in addition to those related to changes in the work at hand. We have so few animals in our gene pool that selection pressure can change the breed quickly. My research shows that in just a ten year period, the majority of the Fell Pony breeding population is replaced. As working ponies have declined in num-

A Cumbrian Fell Pony breeder once described the show type as a traditional animal made of elastic and stretched in every direction – more hair, more height, longer back, less bone, less substance.

ber and ponies used in leisure and showing activities have increased, it is inevitable that selection for showing success has occurred. And selection for the characteristics needed in a versatile work pony has not received enough emphasis.

As I visited other breeders in this country, and I looked at their ponies, it was clear that the breed type is undergoing change. On my trips to Cumbria, I found a few herds that embodied the old type, but they were the exception rather than the rule. I had been prepared to quit the breed, but I was heartened by these herds and their breeders. I decided that it wasn't too late to breed the old type, though it was going to take some effort.

Other breeds and breeders have faced similar challenges. *Managing Breeds* states, "To preserve breed type, it is important for breeders to constantly select animals that reflect that type, and to reject those that deviate from the original breed type."¹⁸ The book then goes on to tell how Criollo horse breeders recognized that a change in type was occurring and took measures to correct it. "In the mid 1900s, selection began to increase the animals from their traditional height of 14.2 hands. With that increase in height came a perception of great beauty and eye appeal, but much less athletic prowess. Breeders wisely abandoned the quest for height in the breed and returned the breed to the original form before irreparable loss had occurred."¹⁹

Does it matter?

Breeds have historically changed with changes in market demand, and that has certainly been true for the Fell Pony. The current change in breed type due to the change in the work at hand is consistent with this history. Is it right? Does it matter? The Fell Pony's fate continues to improve from the perspective of population numbers, so perhaps it doesn't matter that the breed type is being impacted by the change in the work at hand. At least the breed is not going extinct.

Managing Breeds admits there are no easy answers. "Controversies over type have no easy answers, but maintaining type is fundamental if conservation is to truly save the unique genetic package that breeds are."²⁰ The book also concludes, "The original form of breeds is important to keep so that choices remain available to future agriculturalists."²¹

To answer the question, 'does it matter?' for myself, one source of answers is long-time Cumbrian breeders of these ponies. They are in a position to make judgments about breed



Mowcop Black Bess packing hay to sheep

Photo courtesy Eddie McDonough

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type because of their history with the breed and their location in the breed's native environment. One of the things that I've noticed about these breeders is where they go to choose outcrosses for their breeding stock. Despite the dearth of diverse blood lines in the breed, they don't use breeding stock from studs that have emphasized showing and have different-looking ponies, even when diverse bloodlines are available there. They tend to choose outcrosses from amongst themselves. This preference indicates to me that the changes in Fell Ponies that are resulting from the change in the work at hand are not desirable. As a working pony enthusiast, I too feel we are losing something important and valuable. The many phone calls I've received recently indicate that others share my concern.

I often return to Judith Bean-Calhoun's statement as I ponder the question of how to proceed. "Fell Ponies are work ponies who show well if you like to do that." The breed type necessary for traditional work can also be used for showing and leisure pursuits. The important point is to preserve the opportunity for both.

¹ Bean-Calhoun, Judith. "Workpony," email to Jenifer Morrissey dated 1/31/10.

² McCosh, Sylvia. "Looking Back Into History, *Fell Pony News* (Issue III), circa 1973, p. 31.

³ Lloyd, Walter. "Notes on Breeding Fell Ponies," *Fell Pony Society Newsletter*, Autumn 1995, p. 19.

⁴ Unattributed, "News from Here and There," *Fell Pony News* (Issue III), circa 1973, p. 11.

⁵ Richardson, Clive. *British Horse and Pony Breeds – And Their Future*. London, J.A. Allen Publishing, 2008, p. 189.

⁶ Lloyd, p. 19.

⁷ Richardson, p. 190-1.

⁸ Richardson, Clive. *The Fell Pony*. London: J.A. Allen, p. 50.

⁹ Richardson, *British Horse and Pony Breeds*, p. 190.

¹⁰ Morrissey, Jenifer. "Traditional vs. Modern," *Fell Pony News*, 7/2005.

¹¹ Sponenberg, Phil and Don Bixby. *Managing Breeds for a Secure Future: Strategies for Breeders and Breed Associations*. Pittsboro, North Carolina, The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, 2007, p. 159

¹² Russell, Valerie. *The Native Pony*, June/July 2006, p. 29

¹³ Russell, Valerie. *The Native Pony*, August/September 2006, p. 3.

¹⁴ Sponenberg, p. 159

¹⁵ Sponenberg, p. 159

¹⁶ Bennett, Deb, PhD. "Conformation Insights: Seeing Excellence," *Equus* 389, February 2010, p. 43.

¹⁷ Rivoire, Carol. "In Memoriam: Gjest," *Fjord Herald*, Issue 93, Winter 2009/2010, Norwegian Fjord Horse Registry, p. 20.

¹⁸ Sponenberg, p. 91.

¹⁹ Sponenberg, p. 91

²⁰ Sponenberg, p. 92

²¹ Sponenberg, p. 91

Admergill Ursula (see photo on page 1) was always so good at standing and waiting while we worked around her, and steady in turning and backing into the barn. A real working partnership. Mankind has really lost so much of his soul now the horse is not standing with him in his working life; yes it must have been hard, but they cared for each other.

- Libby Robinson,

Globetrotter Fell Pony Stud



Willowtrail Farm

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