



Fell ponies with glossy midnight black coats make an arresting sight at the breed's stallion and colt show. Show classes for Fell ponies were held in Cumbria at Heskett New Market in 1894 and at Shap in 1895. The first Fells were registered in the Polo and Riding Pony Stud Book in 1898.

maintenance and hardy, so they can cope with difficult terrain and rough grazing.”

Conservation grazing schemes may offer an opportunity to put Fell ponies on new upland locations. However, the requirements of such schemes for animals that can be easily moved on and off sites means they will be unlikely to use the hefted semi-feral animals.

With fewer people running the ponies, Bill is concerned the iconic free-ranging herds will disappear. Environment schemes can mean farmers being paid not to keep animals on common land. Bill estimates keeping ponies on the fell costs him approximately £3,000 a year in subsidies.

However, for him and the handful of enthusiasts who continue to run ponies on the fells, it is all about love, not money. “You don’t keep them for profit; you make nothing. They’ve got to be in your blood,” he says.

Today, the sight of these sturdy, hairy ponies ranging the northern fells may be increasingly rare, but it remains one to treasure. It is a connection with the past, and an example of a breed that has adapted perfectly to its surroundings. ■

• Words and photography: Steve and Ann Toon

CONTACT

www.greenholmestud.f9.co.uk

SALES AND SHOWS Each year, Bill keeps a few filly foals for future breeding. He will not use them until they are six years old. Others are sold to buyers who visit the farm while the foals are suckling. Most, though, are sold at six months old, at the annual Fell Pony Sale at Crooklands in late October. The sale draws a huge and enthusiastic crowd from all over the UK. Top price in 2016 was 1,600 guineas, for Greenholme Kate, a filly foal from the Greenholme stud, owned by Bill’s two nieces, Rebecca and Bethany, while his batch of foals attracted a lot of interest, selling at a top price of 1,150 guineas.

There are Fell pony breed shows throughout the summer, with the most important being the stallion show on the second Saturday in May, and the breed show for young stock on the second Saturday in August, both at Dalemain, near Ullswater.

As well as showing his own ponies, Bill was a judge for 40 years, including twice at the Royal Show. “The first year I was dreading it, but it was the biggest disappointment of my life.

There were maybe five or six ponies in each class, and they couldn’t waddle, let alone trot, they were so fat. I came back to a local show the following weekend and there were 16 in a class, every one better than at the Royal Show.”