



Bill Potter's Fell ponies are good tempered, despite their feral instincts. Fells come in four coat colours and he breeds all of them.



The Fell pony's plentiful mane and forelock are left to grow long. It has bright, intelligent eyes, and neat, well-formed ears.



Strong and hardy, Fell ponies have large rounded feet, making them sure-footed in rough terrain, and long silky tails.

AT THE FOOT of the Birkbeck Fells in the east of Cumbria lies an unassuming farmstead. It is May, and in the rough terrain surrounding Stoney Gill Farm grazes one of the last herds of semi-feral Fell ponies. For most of the year, they range the high fells, but at this time, farmer Bill Potter and his wife Isobel bring their 24 ponies nearer home to foal.

The land around the farm is barely distinguishable from the exposed commons they usually roam. However, it is enclosed by dry stone walls and close to the farm buildings so Bill can keep an eye on them. Strong, hardy animals, these members of north-west England's native breed need only minimal attention. Seven strong-limbed, stiff-maned foals have arrived so far this year, with none requiring Bill's intervention.

By running their herd on the fell, Bill and Isobel are following a tradition that dates back hundreds of years. The sturdy Fell pony was once as essential a part of Cumbria's landscape and culture as the Herdwick sheep. Today, only a handful live on the open fells. None are truly wild, each being owned by someone with commoners' rights to run them on the fells. Fewer than a dozen people exercise these rights today, some with only three or four animals. Bill is one of only three pony breeders left with more than 20 mares. According to the Fell Pony Society, only 123 foals were born to semi-feral ponies in 2011, and 118 in 2012. In 2016, the Rare Breeds Survival Trust increased the breed's risk rating from at risk to vulnerable.

All this is a far cry from the days when ponies were an essential part of the agricultural economy. "All the farms had ponies; they were the tractor of the day," recalls Bill. "They're a brilliant working animal and very intelligent. When we were teenagers, we did everything with them. I used to take milk to the milk stand with one on the way to school. We'd ride them after school and at weekends. They were our pushbikes. When I left school, I was hired as a horseman and did all the work on the farm with Fell ponies; ploughing, hauling muck, everything."

A sturdy pony

With 40 years' experience under his belt judging Fells, Bill is well placed to describe what makes a good one. "It's like building a house. You must have a good, strong foundation," he says. That means big round feet, open heeled and with characteristic dark blue coloured horn. The pasterns, the part between the fetlock and the hoof, are sloping, but not too long. The cannon bones between the fetlock and the knee should be short, with plenty of good flat bone beneath big, well-formed knees, and strong, muscular legs and hindquarters. The back is strong and short, with a deep body and short neck. A small head, small, alert ears, big nostrils, a wide muzzle and big, bold, intelligent eyes are also characteristic of the breed standard. There is lots of silky hair. The mane and tail are left to grow long, and a pony should have plenty of fine hair at its heels.

It all adds up to a charismatic animal that clearly shows its working roots. As the Fell Pony Society states, a Fell pony should be "as hard as iron". It should have the "unmistakable appearance of hardiness peculiar to mountain ponies", but also a "lively and alert appearance and great bone". The ideal Fell pony is 13.2 hands, >