



The breed has a strong back, deep body, short neck and sturdy legs, with plenty of fine hair, or feather, at the heels.

## THE FELL PONY AS WORKHORSE

The Fell is historically associated with the old counties of Cumberland and Westmorland, and surrounding areas of Northumberland, Yorkshire and Galloway. Its origins are unclear, however. It may be descended from the first ponies that migrated from Europe 100,000 years ago, before the English Channel formed, or it could come from a similar pony reintroduced by the Celts before 500BC. Britain's early ponies were almost certainly 'improved' by cavalry stock brought in from Europe by the Romans, which would have been larger animals. However, on the northern fells, where conditions do not suit taller animals, the local ponies would have remained small.

By the 11th and 12th centuries, Fell ponies were being widely used for shepherding and hunting. They were also popular pack animals, carrying raw wool, clothes, food and metal ore. From the 12th century onwards, large swathes of the Lake District were owned by Cistercian monks. They used Fells for riding, and it is believed they may have introduced greys, white being a signifier of monastic stock.

By the 13th century, there was a thriving trade in wool to Belgium. From then until the

19th century, Fell ponies were used in pack trains. They are strong, walk steadily and fast, and are small enough to load easily. A train of ponies could do the 500-mile round trip from Kendal to London in a month. Their packs would have been smaller than the typical 175lb (80kg) modern pack of wool, and could be loaded by two men. By the early 1800s, pack trains were carrying Lakeland produce all around the country. Up to 300 Fell ponies a day departed Kendal, laden with food, cloth, hides and salt. Pack trains were eventually displaced by coaches and carts as roads improved, and then by railways, but persisted longer in the Lake District, with its rugged terrain.

Fell ponies were used as pit animals well into the 20th century. Smaller Welsh and Shetland breeds were usually preferred for working underground, although in Northumberland several pits had drifts big enough for the Fells. Mainly, they were widely used above ground for hauling equipment and for delivering milk to local villages. Big collieries often had a thriving sideline in farming milk herds on the pastures above the pits. At one time in the 1950s, Ashington Colliery employed 1,400 ponies.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, Fell ponies were important agricultural animals. They were used for ploughing, shifting manure, hauling produce to market, and taking the farmer and his wife to church. Fells were also used in town for deliveries by milkmen and merchants, and in rural areas for the mounted postal service.

Fell pony trotting races were a popular Cumbrian sport in the 1880s, at shepherds' meets and country shows, with the best animals attracting big crowds. It was around this time that breeders began to record pedigrees and, by the 1890s, show classes were being held for Fell ponies. Riding them for pleasure took off in the 1950s, when people had more time and money for leisure activities. Today, riding, jumping and driving are the main uses of the breed.

The Fell Pony Society was formed in 1922 to ensure the purity of the traditional breed. Bay and brown ponies were common at that time, black not becoming predominant until the latter half of the century. Today, all semi-feral, society-registered ponies have pedigrees, and have their ancestry recorded in stud books dating back more than a century.