



Fell ponies exhibit intelligence and self-preservation, enabling them to adapt to their harsh conditions. They become familiar with the best grazing spots and water sources on the land they know as home.



though up to 14 hands is acceptable, a hand being 4in (10cm). Typically, they weigh between 700 and 1,000lbs (350-450kg). Recognised colours are black, brown, bay or grey, but not chestnut, piebald (black and white) or skewbald (brown and white). Some ponies have a small star on their forehead, or a small amount of white on their hind feet.

Despite their sturdy appearance, these are agile animals, capable of tackling slopes that other breeds would struggle with. Even today, Fell ponies are used in steep areas where tractors cannot operate. They are employed in light forestry work, transporting equipment for repairing footpaths, and for carrying grouse and stags off the hill.

Easily trained and good with people, they are known for their sure-footed trot and good hock action. This latter indicates that they have an expressive movement through the hind leg. Their size and their steady temperament make them popular animals for riding and trekking stables. Many are what Bill calls garden ponies, ridden for pleasure by adults and children alike. Their popularity has been boosted by Royal patronage. The Queen has ridden Fell ponies from a young age, and breeds them, while a pony bred by Bill was offside-leader on Prince Philip's driving team of four Fells.

Starting a herd

Bill bought his first fell pony in 1952, at the age of 14. It cost him £11. He left school that same year, and worked variously as a rabbit catcher, farm horseman, tractorman,

*“With flowing tail and flying mane...
A thousand horse – the wild – the free –
Like waves that follow o’er the sea,
Came thickly thundering on.”*

Lord Byron, ‘Mazeppa’s Ride’

slaughterman, quarryman, and on the nearby M6 motorway. Many of his jobs brought him into contact with farmers, at a time when most were divesting themselves of their ponies, turning to tractors instead. “I always had a few pounds in my pocket. If anyone was going to send their ponies to be killed, I’d buy them,” he recalls. By 1972, he had 72 ponies, kept on the fells near his uncle’s Stoney Gill Farm.

He and Isobel took over the farm when his uncle died in 1983, farming suckler calves and sheep as well as the ponies. Today, approaching retirement, the couple still farm 350 sheep. Their ponies, together with ponies owned by Bill’s brother’s family, form the Greenholme stud. The stud’s bloodlines are highly rated in the Fell pony fraternity, accounting for countless show champions as well as supplying ponies to the Queen and Prince Philip.