

THE EXMOOR PONY SOCIETY

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EXMOOR PONIES ANCIENT & RARE BRITONS MAKE VERSATILE & ADAPTABLE COMPANIONS

The ancestors of our present ponies evolved in an ice age about a million years ago. Fossil bones have been found dating back a hundred thousand years to the tundra like conditions of the ice age, today's Exmoor Ponies being the only remaining breed to show the jaw development found in the fossilized bones. These ponies roamed the British Isles in pre-Celtic times and are mentioned in the Domesday Book, but unfortunately there are no early stud books of the breed. Nothing is recorded until 1818 when the last warden of the Exmoor Royal Forest, Sir Thomas Acland, drove some 20 of the ponies to his own land on Winsford Hill. The descendants of these ponies, the main foundation of the breed, are owned by David & Emma Wallace. They still run on Winsford Hill and are branded with an Anchor, which was the Acland brand. In 1818 the rest of the ponies on the moor were sold at the forest dispersal sale, fortunately some were bought by the ancestors of today's moorland breeders. These included Mr Samuel Milton whose Ponies continue as Herd 23 on Withypool Common, the second of the foundation herds and Mr Crockford's Herd 12, the third foundation herd, running on Codsand and now belonging to the Western family. Herd 44 and Herd 1 & 10 have also remained in the same families to the present day.

The ponies are quoted, in Sidney's "Book of the Horse" in 1893, as being an average height of 12hh, generally bay with a wide forehead and nostril, mealy nose, black points, small sharp ears, good shoulder and back, short legs and good spine, much as they are today. The Exmoors surefootedness and stamina has been of value in breeding hunters and event horses and two Grand National winners are known to have Exmoor blood in their veins. The National Pony Society began registering purebred Exmoors and Crossbreds in the late eighteen hundreds. World War one made little difference to the breed but the difficult times of the 1939-45 war left only some 50 pure bred mares and 4 stallions on the moor.

The moors of Exmoor are home to several herds in addition to the foundation herds. Gill Langdon & Jackie Ablett run ponies on the commons around Dunkery Beacon (Herd H17), the Mitchell family (Herd H8) have ponies on Withypool common and there are several herds on Brendon common. In 1957 Peter & Susan Dean formed Herd 14; the ponies are based on Anchor and Herd 1 stock and are free-living on the Cumbrian Fells. Four Exmoor ponies all matched for colour and size driven by Peter must have been a wonderful sight. Debbie Davy (Herd 21) has a breeding herd on Scoraig, a wild peninsular in North West Scotland, where they used to also be used for postal delivery, taking the children to school and carrying peat in panniers. Dai & Ruth Thomas established Herd 49 in Wales in 1970 based on Herd 12 and Herd 2 bloodlines. Hawkwell Rowan 12/76 lived for over 41 years. The Royal (Dick) Veterinary College, Edinburgh, (Herd 2) maintains a herd of Exmoors for the benefit of students' studies, the mature ponies being broken to provide trekking ponies. Over the years many outstanding ponies have been bred from the free-living herds and competed successfully in most equestrian disciplines.

Pat McElligott (Herd 9) along with Marion Williams & Irene Nash (Herd H29) both bred successful ponies for many, many years and were renowned for their encouragement of our young mounted enthusiasts. They have also had prolific winners from the foals that they have had from the free-living herds. Herd 78 (Dunkery) founded by Lilo Lumb who bred some very successful Part Breds in addition to her registered Exmoor pony herd which has continued in the ownership of Wendy Vint. Exmoor Ponies have been exported to and are also bred in a number of countries including Sweden, Germany, Canada and the USA. The Exmoor National Park Authority established two herds on Exmoor in the interests of conservation and to ensure that the Exmoor Pony remains in its natural environment for the visitor to enjoy. Other organisations also have "free living"

herds to help to assist in the conservation of flora and reduction of scrub. Exmoors are still very much a rare breed and classed as "Endangered" by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust. Less than 200 foals are born each year, of which about half are born into free living herds. It is of major concern, in addition to the low numbers, that there are few bloodlines remaining and therefore little genetic diversity. DNA profiling and parentage testing of foals is undertaken to accurately record breeding and try to ensure that further genetic diversity is not lost. Exmoor Ponies need support, emphasis must be on increasing and preserving the ponies natural environment and producing a breeding programme to ensure a sound genetic base for the future of the breed.

Despite their increasing popularity "free living" Exmoor ponies are wild in the sense that they have to live on the moor throughout the year, find their own food, care for their young and wander free over huge areas of moorland surviving a bad winter without additional shelter or food, although their owners do keep a watchful eye on them. To maintain breed quality, foals are rigorously inspected prior to registration. All foals are micro-chipped and a DNA hair sample taken. Where requested by the owner, for visual identification purposes, registered ponies remaining within the free-living herds on Exmoor are branded by a trained Society inspector with their herd number/symbol and pony number. These two methods of identification mean we can always identify the foal's breeder and pedigree. The "free living" herds remain the essential reservoir of natural characteristics and it is of utmost importance that the moorland herds continue to enable breeders, away from the moor, to return to the foundation stock in future generations. Unlike most other breeds, which have been tailored to human purpose, the Exmoor's characteristics have evolved naturally. The pony is quite literally the "child of the moor", the food, climate and living conditions producing the pony as he is today.

Several Riding for the Disabled Groups have found Exmoor ponies to be adaptable and reliable and several riding schools use them, the pupils competing successfully in pony club events, gymkhanas, long distance rides and cross country events. Knightoncombe Dingy Footman ably demonstrated their versatility by winning many times in hand, representing the breed at Olympia with his young rider, being regularly hunted by his adult owner and being driven with great success, both singly and in tandem, a true family pony.

A further outlet for this excellent family pony is driving. The ponies are easy to match for size, colour and stride, what could be more fitting for a pony that began

its useful life to mankind harnessed to a chariot. One can imagine Boadicea behind a similar pair leading her tribe to do battle with the Romans.

The Exmoor Pony Society itself was formed in 1921 by Mr Reginald Le Bas and others with the aim then, as it is today, to encourage the breeding of Exmoor Ponies of Moorland Type. It produced its first Stud Book in 1963 and, with computerisation, all known ponies are included in the latest edition. The Society holds a Stallion Parade in conjunction with its AGM in early May each year and an annual Breed Show near Exford in August where there are a wide variety of ridden and in-hand classes. Each area has an Area Representative and several area Exmoor Pony Shows are held along with social activities. There are several Performance Award Schemes and the Society and the Horserace Betting Levy Board provide premiums for stallions and mares producing registered foals. Membership costs are reasonable with considerable funds also being raised by "Friends of Exmoor Ponies" at venues throughout the country. "The Exmoor Pony" book contains a wealth of information, the history of the pony is detailed in the Speed Papers, "Survival of the Fittest" a book about the breed by Dr Sue Baker and the DVD "Discovering Exmoor Ponies" are all available from "Friends of Exmoor Ponies". Comprehensive information is also available on the Society website along with membership forms.

Details of ponies for sale are on the website and available from the Secretary, (SAE please) and youngstock are readily available in the Autumn. The breed owes its continued existence to a small band of enthusiasts and local farmers who experience difficulty in finding homes for all the colts each year. With such a small breeding population use of geldings as riding ponies, rather than the mares, is to be preferred. Handled foals are available in addition to the foals from the moorland herds. It is a rewarding project to take an unhandled moor bred foal and bring it on to be an excellent family pony. His trust and companionship will amply reward the time and patience needed. Advice on handling and feeding is readily available from Breeders and the Society.



Guardians of the Breed since 1921