

THE EXMOOR PONY SOCIETY

The Exmoor Pony

The Exmoor is the most instantly recognisable of the British native breeds, simply because Exmoor Ponies are “like peas in a pod”; they all look alike. There is no range of colour or markings in the breed but all individuals conform to a natural pattern of brown coat with mealy colouring of the muzzle, around the eyes and sometimes under the belly. Most Exmoors are around twelve and a half hands; the designated “preferred height range” is 11.3hh to 12.3hh for males and 11.2hh to 12.2hh for females. They are very strong and can carry up to twelve stone.

Uniformity of a highly primitive appearance is just one of the reasons why the Exmoor is thought to be a surviving representative of the original equine colonisers of the British Isles. Exmoors have a fascinating history of people not interfering, rather than trying to redesign them. For this reason, scientists suggest that they are more truly a race rather than a breed – we can’t take the credit! Once, this type of pony was probably widespread throughout Britain but in most areas developed into localised breeds. Only Exmoor seems to have resisted this trend, which began as early as Roman times and carried on into the last century. For much of history, Exmoor was insignificant and little visited.

Today there are probably around 4000 Exmoor Ponies in total, of which about 700 graze the moors and commons of Exmoor itself although the breeding population is much smaller. There are fewer than 500 mares and about 100 stallions currently used for breeding resulting in between 100 and 200 foals born each year.

On Exmoor, there are about eighteen herds of which around ten that run a stallion year round. They graze the vegetation all year round, well-adapted to getting the most out of the moorland diet and to coping with the harsh winter elements. Every feature of an Exmoor, upon close examination, turns out to be efficient at either converting poor food, keeping the body warm and dry or escaping from their long-departed predators.

Those features of strength, stamina, agility, sure-footedness and economy were exploited by the Exmoor people for a variety of roles in the hill farming communities. In days before engines, the ponies were the work-force, carrying farmers shepherding, to market or out hunting; drawing the ploughs and harrows, the carts and traps; carrying the children to school or the postman on his rounds. Like all the native breeds, they were the foundation of the local community, the means by which people could interact and make a living in such a difficult place.

Although such roles have waned and gone, those same qualities, once valued in work, have found new applications. The list of equestrian activities in which Exmoors are taking part reads much as for any native breed – pleasure riding, endurance riding, riding for the disabled, Le Trec, driving, dressage, showing and so on. That they are not as well known in some disciplines reflects the fact that there are just so few of them.

The Exmoor Pony Society has existed since 1921 to promote and encourage the breeding of Exmoor Ponies. The Society has coped with various crises such as the thefts of ponies in World War II, after which just 50 animals survived. It has always worked on towards the goal of making this remarkable pony safe and secure in the modern world. The work of guarding this precious gene pool continues through the system of inspections and registrations in the Stud Book. The Society is also important as a first point of contact for anyone seeking information about the breed. No Breed Profile on the Exmoor Pony would be complete without mentioning one last attribute. These ponies have the ability to find some really wonderful owners and amongst those people can be found that most valuable of all things in life – true friendship. Special ponies and special people – that’s the Exmoor pony world!