

Dartmoor Ponies – The Spirit of the Moor.

The Ponies of Dartmoor are a feature of the area that is often taken for granted, but as Andrea Crisp reports, work is constantly ongoing to ensure their survival.

The Ponies on Dartmoor are as synonymous with the moors as the Tors and Blanket Bogs. In fact when Dartmoor was designated a National Park in 1951, the pony was chosen to be its logo because they help give Dartmoor its unique character.

Evidence has been found on the Moor of Ponies dating back to the Bronze Age, although what type of Pony is unclear. However, the pony has been on Dartmoor long enough for there to be a distinct breed – the Dartmoor Pony.

Contrary to popular belief, the semi-wild ponies that you see on the moor are all owned by local farmers and have in the recent past had no market value. Therefore there was a fear that the pony might disappear from the moor altogether. The Dartmoor National Park Authority has worked hard with all interested parties to try to ensure that there is a sustainable future for all ponies on Dartmoor. They are an integral part of the moorland landscape and are a part of the area's cultural heritage. Ponies are also important for conservation grazing, particularly on certain habitats such as wet permanent pasture. The Authority has been successful in setting up not only support for all breeds on the commons, but has worked in partnership to ensure that the future of the native breed - the Dartmoor Pony has a sustainable future in its native habitat.

The Pony Year

The ponies live out on the moor all year round. They spend most of the time in small herds of mares with one adult stallion and young ponies. Most foals are born between May and August. In late September and early October all the Ponies are rounded up by the local Farmers (with lots of help). These round ups are called "drifts" and are an eye catching event. People on horseback, four wheeled bikes and on foot, herd the ponies across the moorland towards a convenient small field or yard where they are separated into groups according to ownership. The health of all the animals is checked and treatment is given where appropriate. The sick, old and infirm, or those to be sold, are separated from those which will be returned to the moor.

Ponies - Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Historically, the markets for ponies were very buoyant. Before modern transport and agricultural machinery, the ponies were sold as working animals, for example for pulling carts, carrying loads or for milk and post deliveries. Some ponies were cross bred with Shetlands to produce strong, short legged ponies for working in coal mines. With the advent of technology that market disappeared and a new market was found in Europe, as meat for human consumption. There was also a small demand for meat for zoos and pet food. However, markets in Europe disappeared when an export ban was imposed on the export of live animals in 2001.

Pony Timeline

- **Prehistoric Times**
Hoof-prints found on Dartmoor prove that domesticated ponies were to be found here around 3,500 years ago.
- **Medieval Times**
The first written record of ponies on Dartmoor occurs in AD 1012, with a reference to the 'wild horses' of Ashburton, owned by the Bishop of Crediton.
- **Industrial Use**
In the mid 1800s Dartmoor was the main source of granite in Britain. At Haytor the remains of a granite railway, used to transport granite down to the quayside at Teigngrace, can still be seen. Ponies were used to haul the trucks up and down the tramway. Until coal mines in England and Wales were fully mechanised, ponies were used to pull wagons from the coal face. Some of the ponies were stabled underground and never saw the light of day after their arrival at the pit.
- **The first half of the 20th century**
Before widespread use of machinery and modern transport, ponies and horses were used extensively to enable goods and services to be delivered and farm work to be carried out. They also provided, as they do today, recreational opportunities for both locals and visitors.
- **The Present**
In 1950 there were approximately 30,000 ponies on the moor. Today there are fewer than 3,000.

Current Schemes to support Ponies on Dartmoor

Dartmoor Pony Moorland Scheme

The Dartmoor Pony Moorland Scheme was introduced in 1998 by the Duchy of Cornwall and the Dartmoor Pony Society. The aim is to improve the bloodline of ponies living on the commons of Dartmoor and thereby ensuring their suitability to the Dartmoor environment.

Dartmoor National Park Authority Pony Herd Agreements

These were introduced in 2000 to support existing herds on National Park land. Pony keepers receive financial support to maintain the herds on the land. Ponies are inspected annually by an independent vet to ensure their continued well being.

Public Awareness Campaign

This campaign helps inform visitors and local residents of how they can protect the ponies on Dartmoor. The main elements of this include discouraging the public feeding the ponies, asking them to keep well away, to take all their litter home and to keep to the 40 mile per hour speed limit on moorland roads.

Dartmoor National Park Authority Conservation Grazing Scheme

A scheme has been set up on an experimental basis which uses a mobile herd of Dartmoor Ponies that can be moved from site to site to graze areas other livestock find unpalatable.

Pony Passports

European Union legislation requires each semi-feral pony to have a passport and Britain is required to comply with this legislation. Although the legislation is put in place on a Europe wide basis to enable meat products to be traced, the benefit of such a system in this country is that each pony will have a unique number or brand, that will identify it from birth. It is hoped that this will encourage people to recognise the worth of the pony and thereby increase its market value. The Government recognises that it is uneconomical for pony keepers to obtain passports for individual animals in a herd and has given Dartmoor a special derogation. This means that the ponies will only need a passport if they are sold or moved from the moor.

Dartmoor Commoners' Council's Stallion Support Scheme

The Dartmoor Commoners' Council introduced this in 1999 to ensure that ponies not hardy enough to survive on the moor are not bred. Regulations have been put in place by the Council to ensure that only stallions that have been inspected and approved by an independent vet to be hardy, healthy and of good conformation are allowed out on the commons.

Hopefully over the next few years the future of this wonderful animal will be secured, thanks to the combined efforts and hard work of all the schemes and organisations mentioned above. It would be a travesty if the Dartmoor Pony became nothing more than a legend!

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