

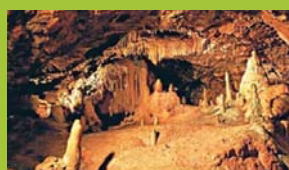
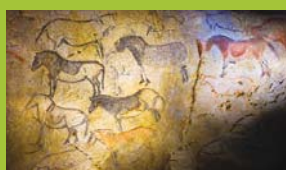
# HISTORY OF THE DARTMOOR HILL PONY

Start Here ↓

Ponies have been on Dartmoor and its surroundings for 500,000 years. Their bones have been found in Kents Cavern, one of the most important Stone Age sites in Europe and are now exhibited in Torquay Museum. Until 9,000 years ago, Britain was joined to the rest of Europe. Pony herds would migrate south seasonally to escape the Ice Age



winter. Man followed them, hunting them and drawing them in cave art. Cave art of ponies, with their bones, are found all over Europe, including Britain (Cresswell Crags, Notts). DNA analysis of their bones confirmed they were the colours shown in the art (not all brown as the Victorians believed).



Stone Age ↓

Iron Age ↓

British ponies in the Iron Age were small. Even so, they were ridden in battle and used as pack-animals as they could carry heavier loads relative to their size than horses. According to Julius Caesar in 55BC when the Romans invaded, British tribes assembled armies with thousands of chariots, each drawn by a pair of small ponies. The Romans loved our native ponies and put them to work in harness.



Bronze Age ↓

Man began to farm Dartmoor in the Bronze Age (1,500BC). Hoof-prints, un-earthed at an archaeological dig at Shaugh Prior, South Dartmoor, are the first evidence that cows, sheep and ponies were farmed together on Dartmoor.



10th Century ↓

In 986AD, Aelfwold became Bishop of Crediton, overseeing the church of Devon and Cornwall. In his Will he be-queathed 'to the AEpeling, forty mancuses of gold and the wild ponies on the land at Ashburn, and two tents.' This is the earliest known written reference to the wild ponies of Dartmoor. Then, as now, the pony herds of Dartmoor were wild, but owned.



11th Century ↓

In 1086AD a national survey began identifying what land and stock people owned and how much tax was paid. Regional surveys were collected into the Great Domesday Book. The regional survey for the South West, the Exon Domesday Book, is held in Exeter Cathedral. Even though wild ponies were not considered of sufficient value to be taxable, they were sometimes entered as owned in manors on the fringes of Dartmoor: e.g. at manors near Cornwood and Bratton Clovelly.



16th Century ↓

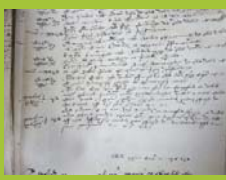
Henry VIII, hated Briton's little native ponies: they were too small to carry a knight in armour. In 1540 he passed a law which tried to make them bigger: no stallion under 15H, mare under 13H, or colt under 11.2H was permitted on common land or run wild. Annual culls of under-height ponies took place. In 1566, Elizabeth I stopped the culls because poor common lands such as Dartmoor can not support bigger horses and 'they are not able to breed (bigger horses) .. without peril of miring and perishing of them'. So Semi-wild ponies on Britain's mountains and moorlands escaped the slaughter.



18th Century ↓

In 1712 Devon's Thomas Newcomen invented the steam pump to solve flooding in tin and coal mines. The pumping of water allowed deeper mining and created a market for pit ponies to bring ore from deep shafts. After decades of trying to make them bigger, the smallness of Dartmoor's hill ponies was an asset. Some herds introduced Shetland blood to keep them small but with the mild Hilly temperament. However, the change in attitude towards these small ponies was slow to change. In 1739, George II passed a law about pony-racing which called them 'a vile and paltry breed'.

This is an example of an entry in the court records 1573-1588, written in Latin: Lidford East: Court of the manor and forest held there on 4 Jul 30 Eliz. [1588].



Proof of stray 3d: At this court there came John Bonamy the elder of Chagford and in due manner he proved that a certain mare of the colour pied, which issued as a stray upon the aforesaid east quarter of the forest of Dartmore, is his own goods.

In the sixteenth century, if ponies owned by farmers and being grazed on one of Dartmoor's commons strayed onto the Royal Hunting Ground, they were confiscated and owners had to go to court to claim them back. **Entries in Lydford's law court records (Sept 1573-July 1588) mention ponies on the moor of all colours: pied, red, black, bay, white, roan, dun.**

## THE REGISTERED DARTMOOR PONY

In 1869 the 10th Hussars regiment returned from India, bringing the game Polo back with them. The quest for breeding ponies for this new sport began. Hillies were recognised for their sure-footedness and speed, so they were crossed with Thoroughbreds, Arabs & Hackneys to produce the perfect sports ponies of the desired size and fashionable colour. At the time the Duke of Cornwall was a keen breeder of Polo Ponies and Arabs at his Tor Royal stud, Princetown.



In 1899 a local committee was set up to oversee the registration of Dartmoor Ponies, creating a Breed: they decided on colour ('Brown, black or bay preferred. Grey allowable. Other colours objectionable') and height ('14H for a stallion, 13.2H for a mare') at odds with the ponies on the moor and more similar to the Polo Pony. They encouraged crossing with Arabs, etc. So much so that in 1901 they had to set limits to rein it in (only 1/4 Arab/Thoroughbred or 1/8 Hackney). But, even after this rule, many ponies were registered 'despite their scant share of true Dartmoor blood', e.g. in 1925 the famous show pony The Leat (1/2 Arab, 1/4 Hackney) which sired generations of pedigree Dartmoor Ponies.

In a report dated 1922 to his boss the Duke of Cornwall, Tim Hurn, the Stud Manager at Tor Royal, states that 'It is a mistake really to try to breed valuable horses on poor land in a trying climate' (Relearning what Elizabeth I realised in 1566). He suggests that 'The Polo breeding mares and their young stock ought to be on one of the low country farms where they would grow faster and cost less to keep, only coming to Dartmoor between say 15th May and 15th October. Only the pony herd ought to be permanently on the Moor.'



Happy Birthday  
94 Years Old

← 19th Century →

Dartmoor Pony

Dartmoor Hill Pony

In the 19th century, Dartmoor's hill ponies were valued as being strong and agile. They were put to many uses: as pack ponies, as postman's transport, for moving granite rocks into position when building a stone wall, pulling trucks on the granite railway at Haytor. It is rumored that smugglers used hill ponies to carry their booty. They bred the white out of their fur so that they would not be seen in the dark! Right up to 1973, prison warders at Dartmoor Prison, Princetown, rode ponies overseeing the prisoners working on the prison farm. Should a prisoner try to escape, the officers would signal to one another with flags.



← 20th Century →

1950's →

In the 1950s and 60s the export trade was buoyant. Shiploads of mares went to Canada for breeding children's ponies (there are no native ponies in the Americas). They had to be small, 11.2 hands or under. In the late 60s, shiploads were sent from Dartmoor to Denmark, Holland & Belgium for food.



In 1951 the Dartmoor National Park was formed. The Dartmoor National Park Authority chose the image of a Pony to be their emblem and logo.

1960's ↓

The last pony to leave the mines and come back to Dartmoor to retire was in 1965. It came back to Cornodon Farm, near Ponsworthy. Hill Ponies worked down the pits in the dark for seven years, building a close relationship with miners. They were then brought back above ground to retire.



On Dartmoor, the last post round delivered on a pony by postman Jack Bellamy, was in 1968.



1970/80's ↓



1990's ↓

In 1999, things took a turn for the worse for the Dartmoor Hill Pony on many fronts. The live export of animals came to an end in 1999. As a result, the European meat trade and exports for riding ponies ended. Male colt foals were left unsold at market, were taken back to the farm, shot and buried. Female foals were selling for just two guineas. Only coloured ponies sold – as pretty riding ponies or hides. 2006 was the last sale at which all ponies taken were sold.

In 1999, the government began to introduce agri-environment schemes on the commons of Dartmoor. This led to the numbers of grazing animals being limited to allow more diverse vegetation to grow. The latest schemes, as well as limiting the numbers of cows and sheep, limit the numbers of ponies allowed to be on the moor and prioritise cows over ponies.

The Dartmoor Hill Pony Association was formed in 2005.

2000's ← →



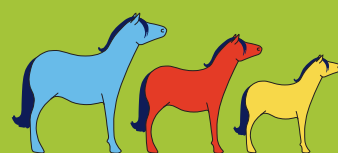
2000 Organisation setup to ensure the the indigenous hill ponies of dartmoor have a future called the Friends of the Dartmoor Hill Pony, which has now become a registered charity.



Registered Charity Number 1141045



Present day



DARTMOOR HILLIES

- The Dartmoor Pony Society (DPS) is the society that represents the 1925 pedigree Dartmoor Pony.
- The Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust supports selected Hill Ponies that look like the 1925 pedigree in size, colour and shape.
- Friends of the Dartmoor Hill Pony supports and promotes all ponies on the commons of Dartmoor, recognising their value on and off the moor, whatever their size and colour.