

TIMELINE

Start Here

Did you know that Hillies are known to have been on Dartmoor for 500,000 years?



Their bones, dating from the Ice Age through the centuries to Medieval times, were found in Kents Cavern near Torquay in the 1800s. Their fossilised hoof prints dating from the middle Bronze Age were excavated on Dartmoor in the 1970s.

The wild celtic pony appears in Palaeolithic (11,000BC) cave paintings in France and Spain – some include spotted and coloured ones – when Britain was connected by land to the continent. Fragments of bone and teeth found deep in caves at Cresswell Crags, Derbyshire, show that we were hunting ponies in the UK at around the same time that these paintings were being drawn.



Stone Age

1st Century

During the Roman occupation of Britain, our ponies were harnessed for chariots – a task they took to well and for which they were much prized back in ancient Rome.



Bronze Age

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



11th Century

The first written record of ponies on Dartmoor dates back to 1012. In his will, the Bishop of Crediton bequeathed 'the wild horses in the land of Ashburton'.



Then, as now, although the ponies seemed wild, they belonged to someone. The wild ponies of the region are also listed in the Exeter Domesday Book, 1086.

In 1086 a survey of what the whole population of the UK owned was conducted for William the Conqueror in order to calculate tax. The survey became known as the Domesday Book. The Domesday Book detailing the South West region is held in Exeter Cathedral. Wild Hillies are listed on farms which lay on the fringes of Dartmoor. Being wild, there was hesitation as to whether they should be included as a taxable good at all. Then, like today, Hillies were wild, but owned. The right to graze them on Dartmoor were already in place.

15th Century

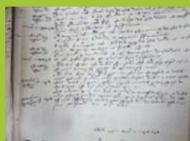
In the reign of Henry VIII, our hill ponies were too small to carry a knight in armour. So, in 1535, Henry directed that mares should only mate with stallions that were big enough (14 hands), or the owner be fined 40 shillings. He deemed 'little horses and nags of a small stature' being a 'vile and paltry breed'. Dartmoor, however, paid little heed to his legislation: it was too remote for enforcement.



16th Century

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.** Elizabeth I was Queen and Shakespeare was yet to write a play.

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 1855 the 10th Hussars regiment returned from India, bringing the game Polo back with them. In Britain we began to breed ponies for this new sport.

Dartmoor hill ponies were recognised for their sure-footedness and speed, so they were crossed with fine breeds such as Thoroughbreds, Arabs and Hackneys to produce sports ponies of the desired size and appearance. In 1899, the Polo Pony Stud Book was formed.



19th Century

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 rumoured 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

In 1925, Miss Calmady Hamlyn bought a polo pony colt called The Leat. The Polo Pony Stud book tells us his father was Dwarka, an Arab; his mother was Kitty, a cross between Confident George, a Hackney and a Dartmoor Hill Pony mare. Miss Hamlyn began the Dartmoor Pony breed with The Leat registered as the first pedigree Dartmoor Pony, 'despite his scant share of true Dartmoor blood' (*The Dartmoor Pony, Joseph Palmer). The Leat's progeny were the beginning of the pedigree Dartmoor Pony, bred for beauty, which we see today. The Dartmoor Pony Society administers the Dartmoor Pony Register.

The registered Dartmoor Pony is bred and shown all over the world – Malta, Canada, USA, New Zealand, Australia, Greece.



When breeding pedigrees, there is a danger that the gene-pool becomes too small. To breed safely and widen the gene-pool, new hill pony blood is introduced to The Dartmoor Pony through the 'newtake scheme' on Dartmoor. Hill Pony mares deemed suitable (usually plain brown and of an approved shape) are put into a field with a registered Dartmoor Pony stallion to breed. Daughters are put with another Dartmoor Pony stallion to breed: this is repeated for four generations. This way, the 25% Hill Pony genes have been renewed. If the resulting offspring meet all the breed standard requirements, it can be registered as a Dartmoor Pony.

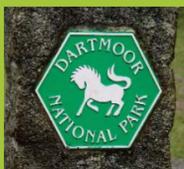
When creating the Dartmoor Pony, the colour brown, or bay, with no white markings was necessary to meet the breed standard. From this appears to have grown the Modern Myth that all Hill Ponies on Dartmoor should be brown.

In the Twentieth century, hill ponies were sold at annual pony fairs held in the autumn at Tavistock, Princetown and Chagford. It used to be that profits made by selling ponies were enough to buy a tractor. They went for shillings when a weekly wage was 30 shillings. Before and during the war, 90% of ponies sold for a good price, as food.



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 Corndon 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 – as on the moor and prioritise cows over ponies.



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.

The Dartmoor Hill Pony Association was formed in 2005.



Registered Charity Number 1141045



Present day



- 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.