



Tom's fell ponies
Hades Hill Fairmile and
Hades Hill Lucky Pearl.

Photo: Graeme Wynne

A special breed

A new business taking adventurers trekking with fell ponies in the Lake District makes good horse sense

WORDS: Mike Glover

Tom Lloyd was just four years old when he was given his first traditional fell pony. Hades Hill Pat was one of a small herd his father, Walter, kept at his hill farm near Whitworth, above Rochdale, to help preserve the rare breed which has roamed northern England for hundreds of years.

They were under threat even then, back in the 1960s. Walter's attempts to revive interest in the breed featured in *Lancashire Life* in 1968. Now Tom, aged 55, who has maintained a lifelong relationship with horses in general and fell ponies in particular, is about to get worldwide coverage for his rapidly growing enterprise, Fell Pony Adventures.

The holiday business allows people to trek across the beautiful Lake District fells, with the fell ponies used as pack animals, and go wild camping. And now he has a licence to allow hacking on them, too.

Tom's herd of 35 ponies are all descended from the stallion and two mares Walter brought to Whitworth back in 1968.

Tom says: 'I grew up with the ponies on my dad's farm. He grew up in a world of horses and when he bought the farm, he still wanted the work done by horsepower.

'I still remember when I was about eight years old being sent to collect a mare and foal that had become separated from the

herd and leading them across the moors to the farm. It was quite daunting.'

At the age of 10, he remembers driving on a bow-top caravan to Appleby Horse Fair, an event he has attended frequently ever since.

'My dad's philosophy for choosing a pony was can it survive, will it breed, has it got the right temperament to work? He was looking for hardiness and temperament before looks. That is the philosophy I still follow, and our current animals are seventh or eighth generation. Thirty years is a good innings for each animal,' says Tom.

When he grew up, Tom went off to the big city to become a film editor, working on TV ads in London before getting involved in the road protest movement, which led to him travelling the length and breadth of the country with horses and fellow demonstrators.

Meanwhile Walter moved his horse interests to the Lake District and bought fields near Newby Bridge at the foot of Windermere, where Tom's business is now based.

Tom gained a degree in film video at Leeds and went into film making, making documentaries, pop videos and corporate films. But his Dreamtime films majored on horses, particularly fell ponies and their breeders, who Tom says are in danger of dying out.

Finally, 50 years after getting his first pony, Tom gave rein to his ambition to make a business out of the herd he inherited from Walter. He took his mountain leader training course with a view to setting up a business to allow customers to experience the thrill and joy of trekking with the ponies. And he spent months researching the owners of all the land he wanted to cross, during treks up to three days long, by studying the land registry documents in Carlisle.

stuttering start, Tom thinks it has given his venture a boost.

‘Post-Covid, people want to connect with nature and want experiences rather than material possessions. I thought my business was going to be mainly adventure seekers, but it has proven popular with families.

‘There is a huge gap in the market for people who want to be with horses. They may have had a pony as a child and walking with a pony gives accessibility when riding would be a

‘The ponies love the trekking. Fell ponies are a breed that have been pack animals for centuries’

‘I believe I am the first person in the country to get a licence for wild camping, which is technically illegal unless you get the permission of the landowners.’

In September 2019 he set up Fell Pony Adventures. He started on land managed by the RSPB and owned by United Utilities at Swindale above Haweswater. He says both organisations have been very supportive.

‘It was part of a rewilding scheme, and I rented fields and camping space. I got rave reviews, then Covid-19 struck,’ he says. ‘I had to take work on the building sites to pay for the upkeep of the horses.’ Although the pandemic meant his business had a

step too far. Half the people who we take out have never been wild camping before and half the people have never touched a horse before.’

On the treks, one pony carries food, another carries kitchenware and horse tackle. Then there are tents, sleeping bags and mats, and personal possessions to be carried.

A party of six to eight people are supported by five horses, over a three-day camp, which includes three-course dinners, 1,000 feet up a fell.

‘The ponies love the trekking. Fell ponies are a breed that have been pack animals for centuries. All I am doing is giving a modern twist to what they do naturally.’



above: Hades Hill Lucky Pearl and Hades Hill Little Pearl above Kentmere. Photo: Tom LLOYD

left: Tom with Hades Hill Perry, the daughter of Polly Perkins 12th Heltondale and from the same line as the original trio of fell ponies bought by Walter Lloyd from famed breeder Sarge Noble back in 1967. Photo: Mike Glover

right: Tom, aged four, with first pony Hades Hill Pat, who shares ancestry with your current herd

This year Tom will start offering hacking holidays from the Newby Bridge base, after being granted a horse yard licence by Westmorland and Furness Council. And he is looking to introduce yard days for children.

He also uses the fell ponies for carriage driving, with an ambition to compete at the Windsor Horse Trials. There is a royal



connection, with the late Queen being patron of the Fell Pony Society. They are still waiting to see who inherits that role.

Tom has joined the society’s council, agreeing with its primary aim: to foster and keep pure the wild breed of pony which have roamed the fells for centuries.

Customers of his treks are treated to his knowledge of the cultural heritage and his enthusiasm about the ponies.

‘I hope I can help to raise the profile of fell ponies and demonstrates how versatile they are for riding as pack animals,’ he says.

As if he wasn’t busy enough, his mission to educate also provides an award-winning fell pony podcast through his website.

He has already been filmed by the BBC’s *Antiques Road Trip* with James Braxton for an episode due to be broadcast later this

year. It attracts a worldwide audience of 7-8 million viewers.

Tom has been supported in the venture by his family. Brother Bill has his own horse heritage, having worked with them in forestry, the subject of his book *One Horsepower*. And Tom’s daughter Flo, aged 18, has also helped set up the business.

But what would Walter, who died in January 2018 aged 93, have made of the business? ‘He would have been thrilled. I am sure. It is a shame I didn’t do it earlier,’ Tom says. ●

The day treks and hacking from Newby Bridge start at Easter and the wild camping treks above Haweswater run from May to September.

For more information, see Tom’s website: fellpony.co.uk