

# WELSH BREEDS – ANCIENT AND EARLY HISTORY

In the period around 8000BC Britain was physically attached to both Ireland and Europe and there was free migration of animals from Asia and Africa. It is likely that the Celtic pony took this route and established itself in Wales, Ireland (Connemara) and the Hebrides (Shetland). The large Bronze Age collection of fragments of harness and small (less than 3") bits found in North Wales, indicates that ponies were being used for harness work at that time. Certainly, ponies were very much in evidence in Wales during the conquest of Julius Caesar (55-54BC) who wrote about their speed and docility as chariot horses and their activity as riding horses.

The next mention of Welsh Ponies is in 1188A.D. when the Welsh Hills were reported to be "full of ponies". One theory is that much of the final type of the Welsh Pony and Cob was established at this stage through the influence of stallions brought back from the East by the Crusaders, but there is no firm evidence to confirm this.

Welsh Ponies returned to prominence in 1535 when Henry VIII ordered the destruction of all horses under 13hh because they were too small to carry the weight of a knight in a full suit of armour and were eating valuable grazing. Fortunately, the inaccessibility of the mountainous areas of Wales prevented this death sentence from being carried out in that area and the law was later repealed by Queen Elizabeth I.

The harsh climate and continual persecution, not only by Henry VIII, but also by the lowland farmers who drove the ponies back into the hills whenever they went in search of better grazing, led to the development of a very hardy pony with plenty of bone, a thick mane and tail and lots of feather. The ponies were of predominantly dark colours with blacks, browns and dark duns being proven the most hardy.

Founders of the Welsh Pony and Cob Society, recognizing the need to preserve the integrity of the bloodlines of Welsh Ponies and Cobs, Registry decided to exclude those animals with excessive white markings from purebred registration. This was an educated decision to discourage the propagation of Welsh carrying piebald and skewbald coloration and various other traits foreign to original Welsh Mountain Ponies. Those officers, concerned breeders themselves, decided that preserving the original Welsh standard was the Registry's priority, and registration and show

rules were adopted which would best serve the preservation of the Welsh pony and cob breed.

Evidence of the existence of the Welsh Cob in the middle ages and even earlier can be found in mediaeval Welsh literature. According to description he had to be "fleet of foot, a good jumper, a good swimmer and able to carry a substantial weight on his back". He had also to be capable of drawing loads of timber from the forests and doing the general work on the upland farms long before the introduction of heavier animals. Both in times of peace and war he has played his part. According to documentation in the 15th century, the Welsh Cob was part of the essential string of mounts for the British knight. A Welsh Cob or "rouncy" was used to lead the mighty fighting horses known as destriers. As the destrier's natural gait was the trot, the Welsh Cobs had to cover great distances matching the warhorse stride-for-stride at the trot. No doubt in 1485 the British throne was gained by Henry Tudor with the help of the Welsh Militia on their cobs which he gathered round him on his arrival from France at Milford Haven as he travelled up the west coast of Wales. And indeed, much later the Morgan Horse almost certainly owed his origin to the Welsh cobs left behind by the British Army after the American War of Independence at the end of the 18th century.

The founders of the Welsh Pony and Cob Society in 1901, in their wisdom, decided to register and record this ancient breed together with the Welsh Mountain Ponies and the larger Welsh Ponies in the Welsh Stud Book, dividing them into four sections according to height and type. Essentially the description for each section is similar - the typical short Welsh pony head with small ears, the large prominent eyes and open nostrils, the well-laid shoulder, short back and powerful muscular quarters with gay tail carriage - standing on good clean legs with dense bone on sound feet. The characteristic fast trotting action of the Welsh Cob and Pony of Cob Type like that of the Mountain Pony should be true, bold and free, covering the ground with forceful impulsion from the hocks.

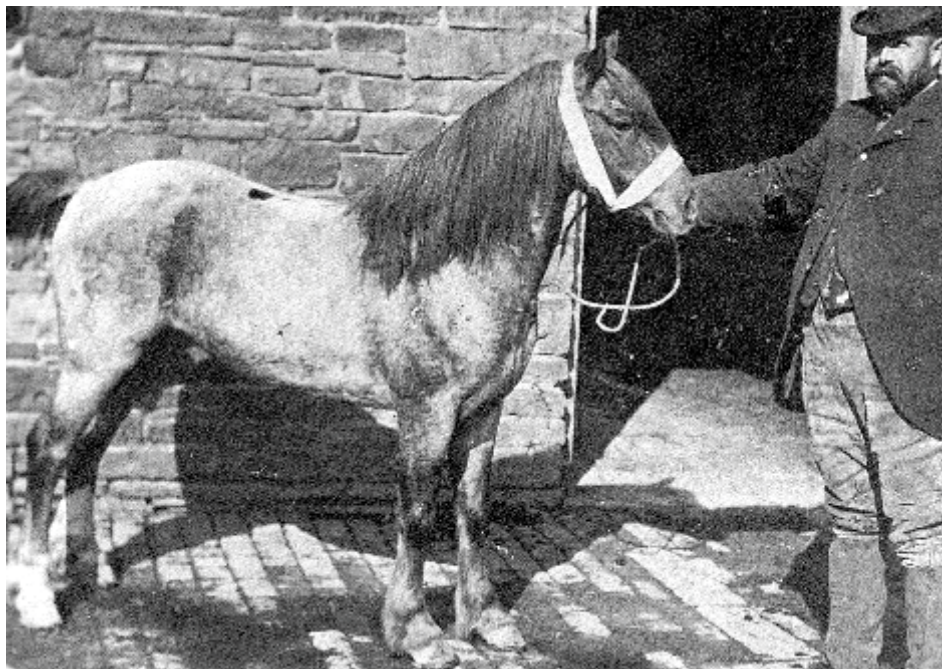
Before the advent of the motor car the Welsh Cob was the speediest mode of transport for the doctor or tradesman and others eager to get from here to there in the shortest time. Business men in South Wales were, known to select a cob by trotting him all the way from Cardiff to Dowlais - some 35 miles uphill all the way. The best would do this in under three hours never slackening or changing pace from start to finish. Before licensing was introduced in 1918, stallions and breeding stock were selected by this kind of test and by means of the old trotting matches which took place with a stopwatch over a measured distance on many

roads in Wales. Such names as the many Comets, Flyers and Expresses which abound in the early volumes of the Stud Book testify to their speed and prowess.

In harness, too, the Welsh Cob is spectacular and has recently proved in combined training events under F.E.I. rules that he can compete against all and beat them. His innate suitability for high school and dressage in the "Lippizaner" manner is being now realized and demonstrated in Austria. He crosses especially well with the Thoroughbred to produce hunters, jumpers and event horses or with the Arab to get a riding pony with more bone and substance. At one time cob mares were in great demand as the foundation for Polo Ponies to obtain the agility and nimbleness necessary.

Any colour is allowed - except piebald or skewbald. Chestnut, bay, brown and black are most usual. Greys are rare, but there are a number of duns, palominos and creams. The Welsh Cob is beyond doubt the most versatile of animals in existence and long ago established a reputation as the best ride and drive animal in the world.

## **WELSH ROUNDABOUT USA**



*Nineteenth Century Welsh Mountain Pony before the influence of Dyoll Starlight - from Dr Wynne Davies book Welsh Ponies and Cobs*