

Equine tourism - the Moorland Mousie Trust

Contributed by Nanny

The Moorland Mousie Trust was formed by Val Sherwin five years ago, its purpose being to further the fortunes of the Exmoor pony. The Exmoor had suffered from unpopularity in recent years and Val, a keen horsewoman, rediscovered the breed during her holidays on the moors. Used to larger mounts throughout her riding life, she found the Exmoor to be every bit as good a ride as any thoroughbred but with the added stamina and hardiness that marks all native breeds. Believed descended from the original British Hill ponies, the Exmoor has developed its own self-sufficient attitude to a life lived completely in the open and often on only the roughest of grazing. It was at an annual gathering that Val realised that many of the foals she watched being cut from the main herd would never go on to live on the freedom of the moors nor were they to become useful working ponies. Many in fact would be sold for a pittance (often as low as 20 pounds each) and sent for slaughter in the pet food industry. A true injustice to a magnificent animal and one that Val felt she could not sanction.

It was from this sense of injustice that the Moorland Mousie Trust came into being.

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Slowly at first, just a few ponies bought, and gradually domesticated to accept that not all human contact is bad. These first successes are now found in a variety of homes and jobs, from riding for the disabled to standard saddle ponies. This initial success spurred Val on to carry on purchasing ponies and to offer them to the public in a number of ways. Adoption and sponsorship schemes allowed the public to "own" their own pony and to follow the progress of its new life. Fostering a pony during the first phase of its training has proved invaluable. Newly gathered foals go to the homes of experienced people who foster the animal through the critical first few months of its domestication. Using kindness and patience the pony learns to wear a head collar, walk on a lead rein and have its feet picked up. All very basic stuff but to an animal whose only contact with the human race was to be separated from the herd and hot branded, any contact is traumatic and the trust between human and equine must be built upon slowly.

Fostering and adoption have both been successful. The Exmoor is now beginning a slow but steady return to popularity not only as a saddle pony but also as an ecological, environmentally friendly grass management aid used to help maintain the country's moorlands. Used to some of the most inhospitable conditions that the weather can throw at them, they have proved invaluable in this conservation-based capacity.

Another part of Val Sherwin's dream is to have a visitor centre on Exmoor itself, dedicated to the education of both public and ponies. The dream is set to become a reality in 2005 when the visitor centre at Ashwick opens its doors to become the only centre in the UK dedicated to the Exmoor pony. Phase one will be a renovated barn that will house a demonstration area, viewing gallery and loose boxes. Visitors will be able to watch the education of the ponies and interact closely with them. Planning permission has been granted for a trekking centre so that people will be able to see the moors from the back of one of the ponies that has helped for so many years to maintain it. It is hoped to have an official opening in September or October of 2005 in time for the autumn gathering of foals.

So how can you help? Well, there are many ways. There are the sponsorship and adoption schemes of course, and any monies donated are put to good use. Even a few pounds will buy hay for the winter.

If you have the facilities and the patience then certainly I would seriously consider fostering. My husband and I fostered Lucy who came to us as a 6-month foal, completely wild and virtually untouchable. By the time she left us a few months later, she had become used to humans with all the handling and walking out on a lead rein necessary to give her a good start to her new life. It was wonderful work, slow but so very satisfying and she will always be "Our Lucy".

For any of you travelling to Exmoor for a holiday I recommend a visit to the centre. Although not fully operational, visits can be made by appointment where you will be able to see Val's vision at first hand and be introduced to the unique qualities of the Exmoor pony.

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