

# Alive and well in the RSA

by Theresa Odendaal



Braidwyn Belinda, champion young child pony at the Free State championships, belongs to the Marijani stud of Bloemfontein. Here she is ridden by Mizan Viljoen from Bloemfontein. With them in the picture are the judge, Cheryl Middleditch (left) and Marietjie Venter of the Marijani stud

**M**ention the word Welsh ponies, and one immediately thinks of picture-pretty ponies with adorable little tots on their backs, parading in the showing. Yes, this picture is accurate, but there is so much more to the Welsh pony in South Africa and the rest of the world.

Around 8 000 BC, Britain was physically attached to both Ireland and Europe and animals migrated freely from Asia and Africa. It is likely that the Celtic pony took this route and established itself in Ireland (Connemara), the Hebrides (Shetland) and ultimately Wales (Welsh ponies).

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 (55-54 BC) who wrote about their speed and docility as chariot horses and their activity as riding horses.

### European roots

The next mention of Welsh Ponies is in 1 188 AD, 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 13 hh, because they were too small to carry the weight of a knight in full 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the mountainous areas of Wales prevented this death sentence from being carried out in that area and the law was later repealed by Queen Elizabeth I.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 to keep them warm in the bitter cold. The

ponies were of predominantly dark colours with blacks, browns and dark duns most prevalent.

### Hard labour

By 1892 between 1 000 and 1 500 ponies were counted on the Longmynd Hills. This number can probably be multiplied by ten to account for the ponies in the Brecon Beacons, the Denbeigh beacons, Eppynt and Carmarthen. Once they had been captured, many of these ponies were sold to the mines as pit ponies. However, there was also an increasing demand for them as smart harness ponies and as children's ponies for the wealthy nobility of England and Wales, apart from the fact that farmers were using them extensively as pack and shepherding ponies.

In the nineteenth century many attempts were made to glamorise the "Cobby" hill ponies. There were several examples of Arab stallions being turned out onto the hills. It is possible that a grey Arab stallion turned out by Mr Williams of Aberpergwm, was responsible for introducing the grey colour into the hill ponies. Another animal which had much influence during this period was a small Thoroughbred stallion, Merlin, who was turned out with a Welsh herd on the Ruabon Hills by his owner, Sir William Watkins Wynn.

### Enter the stud book

From 1884 it had been possible to record the parentage of Welsh breeds in the Hackney stud book and from 1899 in the Polo Pony stud book as well. However, in 1901 the Welsh Pony and Cob Society was founded with 248 members under the presidency of Lord Tredegar.

Volume one of the stud book was published in 1902 and it should be noted that there had been a Section B of the stud book right from the beginning. Farmers had developed a larger shepherding pony which could also be used for cattle herding, rounding up wild mountain ponies, riding to stock fairs and taking part in pony races. This Section B was originally developed by crossing Mountain Pony mares with small, quality Cob stallions.

In 1918 the Horse Breeding Act was passed. This meant that every breeding stallion had to be

licensed annually after a veterinary inspection. By the late 1920s it was clear that there was a tremendous demand for quality children's ponies and it was decided to allow two stallions of eastern blood into the stud book. Many of the resultant larger mares were crossed either with Hackneys for harness ponies or Thoroughbreds and Arabs to produce the famous part-bred ponies which are so popular today.

In 1930 the stud book was restricted to registered animals. In 1931 the maximum height limit for Section A's was fixed at 12 hh, because experience had proved that ponies of this height and less were best able to survive in the hills.

The present day classification of Sections A, B, C & D was accepted in 1949 and the Welsh part-bred register was approved in 1950. In 1951 the stud book classification was revised and the practice of entering any registered pony between 12 hh and 13,2 hh as either B or C, depending on type or owner's preference was stopped. From this date, classification was done purely on breeding. Thus any pony with  $A \times B = B$ ,  $A \times C = C$ ,  $B \times C = C/D$  (depending on height),  $B \times D = C/D$  (depending on height),  $C \times D = C/D$  (depending on height).

### Shop at the show

In 1960, as an experiment, several premium stallions were judged in public at Glanusk Park. This proved so popular that from the following year all premium stallions were judged there. By 1969 the show had expanded so much that it moved to permanent show grounds at Buihth Wells, where it has become a shop window for potential buyers, particularly from overseas.

Ponies from Wales have been exported all over the world, with the majority of exports being to the USA and Australia and more recently to Holland and Germany.

*SA Horseman* would like to thank Sue Cook, National Secretary of the Welsh Pony and Cob Society of South Africa, for all the valuable information she supplied about these wonderful ponies and the way they have influenced the breeding of some of the most successful children's ponies in the country. **SAH**



Hydown Olympic Flame is a champion part-bred Welsh pony. Her owner is Delandi Human from Bloemfontein. Here they appear with judge Cheryl Middleditch



Staten Bismark, property of Delano Human of Bloemfontein. He was supreme pure-bred pony at the Free State championships



Frosty Lager was the champion pure-bred riding pony at the Bloemfontein championships. He was shown by Jenni van Kerkhof