Index

1 The Shetland Islands 14
2 History of the Shetland Islands and its ponies 36
3 Shetland ponies in Scotland and the UK 78
4 Shetland ponies in other countries 116
5 Origin and genetics 144
6 Shetland pony management 158
7 Buying a Shetland pony 244
8 Breeding with Shetland ponies 250
9 The Shetland pony in the art world 302
10 Famous Shetland ponies 322
11 The Shetland in sport, showing and leisure 344
12 Contributors and final notes 396

“Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference”

Sir Winston Churchill
The Shetland pony is perhaps the only breed of horse that most people can recognise instantly.

This small pony is totally iconic, carrying its weight ‘close to the ground’, covered in plenty of thick hair, and sparkling with tons of personality. But it is also part of the most widely spread pony breed in the world.

The Shetland pony has often been the first mount of many horse riders, whose best memories are from their Sheltie-days. Some of us have stayed with this charming breed, and the more we learn about these loyal animals, so strong and clever, so small and brave, the more surprised and impressed we become.

However, some people just see a small pony, and they have no idea about the fascinating story behind this ancient breed. Many of these ponies have pedigrees going much further back in time than those of most modern horses.

The Shetland pony originates, as the name indicates, from the small group of rocky islands way up north in the Atlantic Ocean. Having lived there for several thousands of years, the ponies became vitally essential to the survival of the people living on the Shetland Islands.

The Shetland pony has worked hard on those windy islands carrying peat and pulling the plough in the fields for more than two thousand years. During its ‘free time’ the pony was used as the only available means of transport across the rough terrain of the islands. In one of the harshest environments in the world, and during the darkest winters, the ponies needed to fend for themselves, and only the cleverest and strongest could survive this ‘natural selection’.

Introduction
Later in history, because of its hardy nature and its small size, the pony was employed deep underground in the mines in the United Kingdom, including Scotland, and the United States. For more than five hundred years the Shetland pony has also been a favourite animal, providing rides, fun and entertainment for children and adults alike.

Today Shetland ponies are living in almost every corner of the world, demonstrating its amazing ability to adapt to different contexts, and to fulfil various needs. They are not just small fluffy ponies, but they are a breed that deserves our admiration and respect. Today they are as popular as ever, and they are involved in every aspect of equestrian sports.

In the 1870s more selective breeding was initiated, and in 1890, The Shetland Pony Studbook Society was founded, making it the oldest breed-society of any of the native British pony breeds, and one that is still very active and alive today. In many other countries you will also find Shetland pony devotees who have formed breeding societies, and the activity level within the breed is as strong as ever.

Go visit the Shetland Islands
I urge any Shetland pony fan to make at least one ‘once in a lifetime pilgrimage’ to the Shetland Isles - preferably in summertime. It is a beautiful part of the world, with spectacular and unique nature and history.

By experiencing our Shetland ponies in their original habitat, you will learn more about them, and grow a greater appreciation for their resilience and strength.

I hope that by telling their fascinating and eventful story from before the Bronze Age, through Viking and medieval times and right up to the modern age, that even more people will appreciate, understand and admire this small pony.

This book will also introduce you to the basic care and management of your Shetland pony, and the special care and consideration that they need.

We shall also take a look at all the activities where you can enjoy the company of your Shetland pony, and finally you will be introduced to a few celebrity Shelties in history and the world of arts.

If this book leaves you with more knowledge about the Shetland pony, more fascination for our beloved breed, and if this incredible animal has gained a few more friends, it has accomplished its purpose.
The Shetland Islands

Understanding the land from where our ponies originate is important.

The Shetland motto, Með lögum skal land byggja, ‘With law shall land be built’, is identical to the Danish Codex Holmiensis dating back to 1241.

Introduction

Let’s take a look at the Shetland Isles so that we can understand and experience the unique environment that has shaped the Shetland pony.

Our ponies take their name from a small group of rocky islands high up in the north Atlantic. Today we call these islands the Shetland Isles. The ponies originate from these islands with a long history that covers at least 2000 years.

Shetland is a Scottish name, which has been derived from the islands’ many previous names. Early in the Viking era this cluster of islands was known as Hjaltland. The names Hethland, Schetland, and even Shetland, are also mentioned in a reference from 1809. At that time the islands were still called Zetland.

Understanding the local climate, and the unique habitat of the Shetland pony, helps us to appreciate how these beautiful, tough and small creatures have adapted and evolved.

The total area of the islands is 1,468 km² (567 miles²). The capital city of Lerwick is based on Mainland, the largest of the islands. The other major islands are Yell, Unst, Fetlar, Bressay, Whalsay and Burra. Unst is the most northerly island in the
SHETLAND PONIES ARE HIGHLY SOCIAL ANIMALS, ENJOYING A GOOD TIME AMONG FRIENDS.
In order to care for your pony successfully it is important to remember how these animals have lived and survived for millions of years before we discovered them.

You will need to provide a good place for your pony to live, the right kind of food to eat, an experienced veterinary and a skilled farrier. If you are a young person you will also need a parent or adult to help you care for your pony.

Ponies in nature and evolution

Whenever we look after a Shetland pony, or care for any other animal, we have an important responsibility to provide everything the animal needs. So in order to take care of it in the best possible way, when it lives alongside us, we need to understand how the pony lives in its natural environment.

For about 5-6,000 years we have kept horses and ponies as a means of transport. We have not only ridden them for pleasure, they have also pulled and carried all kinds of heavy loads, helped us farm the land, carried us to explore new horizons, and taken soldiers and supplies into war zones. Today horses and ponies are becoming domestic animals but 6,000 years is not long enough for any animal to evolve and adapt its physiology and habits from being wild to being fully domesticated, whether it is a horse, a dog, a cow, a cat, or a hamster.

Maybe, in a few million years, horses will be hairless and they will need to wear rugs all the time. Or maybe they will develop larger stomachs so we will only need to feed them once a day in their stable. But until they learn to adapt to our lifestyle we need to adapt to their way of life, by caring for them in a way that suits their needs rather than ours.

In the wild, horses and ponies graze over large areas, eating selectively for up to 16-18 hours a day. Horses and ponies have surprisingly small stomachs in proportion to their size; on the other hand they have two very large intestines. This means that they are perfectly equipped to eat small quantities of food almost continually, and digest their food very slowly.

Herbivores in herds

Ponies are herbivores which means they only need to eat grass and maybe a few suitable herbs and leaves from small shrubs and plants. Like us, and unlike cows, they only have one stomach but fortunately they are still able to digest cellulose, which is a major component of grass. However, unlike us, they can’t vomit if they eat something undesirable, and sometimes this causes them problems.
Most people instantly recognise a Shetland pony when they meet one of these iconic animals, the smallest of all our native pony breeds. Many people all over the world keep these plucky little ponies for pleasure, for their children’s first introduction to a future life in a saddle, or for anything else equestrian sport has to offer. Some of us never forsake our beloved Shetland ponies, appreciating the motto, “You’ll never outgrow a Shetland”.

This book will take you on a journey through more than 2,000 years of the Shetland’s dramatic ‘roller-coaster’ history. Introducing you to the important basics of caring for your pony, its breeding, and its useful employment, all in the context of understanding the birthplace and home of these unique ponies, the Shetland Islands.

All this fantastic history is presented on 400 pages, fully illustrated by some of the world’s best equine and wildlife photographers. In addition to many photographs, there are a number of Thelwell’s brilliant and famous cartoons, perfectly capturing the essence of the Shetland pony. They say it all.

It is my wish that this book leaves the reader full of awe and admiration for the Shetland pony. And, for those already acquainted, with even more respect for one of the purest and oldest breeds of any kind of horse or pony still living.