

## **The Eriskay Pony as described by the Eriskay Pony Society**

### **History & Origins.**

Modern Eriskay ponies are the last surviving remnants of the original native ponies of the Western Isles of Scotland. They have ancient Celtic and Norse connections and Eriskays have been proven by measurement to be of similar proportions to those found on ancient Pictish stones throughout the North and West of Scotland.

Until the middle of the 19th Century ponies of the “Western Isles type” were found throughout the islands and used as crofters ponies, undertaking everyday tasks such as bringing home peat and seaweed in basket work creels slung over their backs, pulling carts, harrowing and even taking the children to school.

In some ways the ponies were subject to “human” in addition to “natural” selection. The ponies had evolved to survive on meagre food supplies, with coats, ears and tails well adapted to coping with a harsh, wet and windy climate. Eriskays were then subject to the forces of living in a society where women and children did most of the work while the men were at sea. Poor temperaments could not be tolerated. Only those ponies happy to live in close proximity with their handlers, those willing to be trained and work hard, were retained. Unsuitable specimens were culled. Over the centuries, the Eriskay ponies evolved into the hardy, versatile, people friendly characters we recognise today.

On many of the islands increasing mobility and farming pressures led to larger ponies becoming fashionable. Norwegian Fjords, Arabs, Clydesdales and others were introduced to “improve” the native stocks and produce larger, stronger animals. On the remote island of Eriskay in the Western Isles, however, due to difficulties with access, other breeds were not introduced, leaving a stock of pure bred ponies which, due to mechanisation, had declined to around 20 animals by the early 1970s.

It was at this time that a dedicated group of people comprising a local priest, doctor, vet, scientist and crofters, got together and decided to save the ponies whose numbers were dangerously low. Through their hard work and the establishment of breeding groups throughout the British Isles, numbers have risen steadily and now there are around 420 Eriskays in the world.

The Eriskay Pony is classed as critical by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust with whom the Eriskay Pony Society works closely to ensure the long term survival of the breed.