

# COMMON LAND AND LOCAL AND HERITAGE BREEDS



A high proportion of native sheep and pony breeds are associated with common land, with many restricted to tightly-defined geographical areas.

These breeds have been favoured because of their ability to prosper within the challenging climate, ground conditions, and herbage found especially in the uplands, and because their territorial behaviour is well suited to extensive unfenced pastures.





The Swaledale is well suited to northern England because flocks maintain a discrete territory (heaf or heft) within large tracts of common land. The heaf is held by ewes that have grazed the same land since birth, and must be learned between generations. Swaledales are also capable of browsing heather-dominated vegetation, and are ideal for moorlands managed for grouse.

Exmoor ponies, an endangered breed, are direct descendants of the European wild horse. They are the oldest native breed in Britain, and there are references to them in the Domesday Book. Many free roaming herds remain all year on Exmoor's commons.

Many heritage sheep breeds are strongly associated with particular regions. For example, 95% of all Rough Fell, Dalesbred, Herdwick, Shetland, Welsh Hill Speckled and Brecknock Hill Cheviot sheep are confined to single geographical areas with substantial common land. These associations are driven by both breed suitability and local tradition.





- Over half of all Rough Fell and White Faced Dartmoor sheep are associated with common land.
- Some 75% of Shetland sheep occur on common grazing.
- Over 80% of Talybont Welsh ewes graze commons on the Brecon Beacons, Black Mountains and Buckland.



- More than three-quarters of all Herdwick ewes are kept on holdings with common rights in the central and western Lake District.
- More than half of pure bred Exmoor pony foals born each year come from mares running in free living herds on Exmoor's commons.



- North Ronaldsay sheep feed on seaweed and are confined to a narrow strip of common grazing on the foreshore.
- Some 70% of breeding Swaledale ewes are kept on common land.



- Forest-bred New Forest ponies are all owned by commoners with grazing rights in the Forest.



**Herdwick sheep are familiar elements of the Lake District landscape. Their importance derives from their extreme hardiness and ability to cope with high rainfall and rough terrain. The historical isolation of Lakeland communities enabled the development of customs focused on commoning and Herdwicks. These included shepherd's meets for the return of strays, and unique systems of sheep marking and counting. Where geographical associations remain strong, common land is not only important for the survival of heritage breeds, but also provides a gene pool available for the ongoing development of desirable traits.**



*Keeping commons alive by active grazing*

[www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk](http://www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk)

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**Our vision is of thriving commoning communities across Great Britain and beyond making real contributions to economic, cultural and environmental wellbeing**

