



The Welsh Ponies

by G. Stubbs



What better subject for a set of Welsh Regional special issue stamps than paintings of Welsh ponies; apart from Welsh sheep of course? When people think of Welsh ponies they automatically think of the Welsh Mountain Pony, but in fact there are other breeds living wild in the principality which are often forgotten, ignored, unknown, or misunderstood. These stamps feature paintings from a set by George Stubbs late in his career. They were issued in 2004 on the bicentenary of his death.

Stubbs (1724-1806) is a renowned artist, most famous for his accurate depiction of horses. Art historians amongst you will know that he was born in Liverpool and had absolutely nothing to do with Wales, at least not until 1798 when he was commissioned to paint these works of art. In 1791 the Prince of Wales, later George IV, first commissioned Stubbs to paint his portrait astride a horse; he was quite pleased with the result. George did not get on with his wife, Caroline of Brunswick, but he doted on their daughter Princess Charlotte. Mindful that he was Prince of Wales, and that all little girls will want a pony some time in their childhood years, he contacted Stubbs and ordered some paintings for the child's nursery. George's not inconsiderable debts had been paid off by parliament in return to him agreeing to marry Caroline, so once again he had money in the bank and a desire to spend it. The pictures were to show Welsh ponies in all their glory. Stubbs, ever particular about accuracy, researched the history of Welsh ponies, and sketched many, but all without venturing into Wales.



There were 6 paintings in all and they were originally hung in the nursery of Carlton House. When Charlotte married Leopold of Saxe Coburg they made their way onto the continent and became split up. Only these four are known to exist and details of the missing two are sketchy. So check your attics; you may have a missing Stubbs up there. Actually Stubbs had virtually retired when he painted these, and they are not considered among his better works. There is evidence that he did recycle some ideas from his earlier paintings.

As previously stated, the paintings show some of the different ponies which used to live wild in Wales. There is a common thread across these breeds. All have been the subject of some form of misinformation, hoax or mistaken belief.

On the 19p (second class) stamp is the well known Welsh Mountain Pony. These do not get their name because they live on Welsh Mountains. Well they do, but that's not the origin of the name. Prior to 1066 England was settled by Saxons, Angles and Danes. Wales was settled by Celtic folk. Then came the Normans, who tried to make inroads into Wales. When they saw the Welsh Ponies they thought that they looked as big as the mountains, but no-one was brave enough to tell them that it was an illusion caused by the ponies being much closer. Stubbs has cleverly hinted at this in his painting. The Normans had absolutely no clue about perspective, and this is clearly borne out by the Bayeux Tapestry. And while they had seen horses before, mountains were a new concept to them, and they had difficulty getting their heads around anything bigger than a hummock or a castle mound.

On the 27p (first class) is the famous Welsh Cave Pony. Many people assume that the pit ponies used in coal mines were just ordinary ponies, but most of those used in Welsh coal mines were from this breed. Like those Mexican cave fish you see in aquaria they are white or colourless and have evolved to have lost their eyes. Creatures living in the total darkness of caves many miles long and a thousand feet deep have no use for sight. In their natural habitat they are poorly studied due to the difficulties in reaching them so far underground. What they eat for example is unknown, though it has been hypothesised that they exist on their own dead. The bodies are thus recycled and this keeps the population static. Certainly it is a fact that some teams of naturalists have gone down to study the ponies and never returned. After these events there was evidence of an increase in herd numbers.

Apart from the coal pits these ponies were also used on the early London Under-ground. Even now there may be a few herds living in the tunnels of abandoned parts of that rail system. Next time you travel on the tube, have a look down by the rails and you will see clumps of horse hair, shed when it is shut down for a few hours per night and the ponies can move freely

The 37p stamp depicts the Whitland Marsh Pony, which unique in the equine world in having webbed hooves. They roam free on the saltmarsh on the north side of the Gower Peninsula in South Wales. Here the ground is soft and damp. Having webbed hooves helps to distribute the pony's weight over a larger surface area, so it doesn't start to sink in the mud when it stands still for a few minutes. The webbed hooves will also help it swim to safety if it gets caught out when the tide comes in. The Marsh Pony is now a threatened breed, as it feeds only on sea samphire. This plant has suddenly become popular in gastropubs and bistros due to over-exposure in the glut of fine dining TV programs, and is extensively collected by unscrupulous chefs and foragers.

This breed was the subject of a April Fools Hoax by the Porthcawl Morning Star newspaper in 1924, when they reported them being used by a local water polo team. They even had a photo of a mounted player, mallet in hand, entering the water. Everybody fell for it with BBC and Pathe news teams and photographers rushing there to record the event. Those hoaxed tried to sue the paper but the courts found in favour of the Star and told the news corporations that they must be stupid or something.

Lastly there is the Welsh Rocking Pony on the 42p stamp. This unusual breed moves by a method unique in the animal kingdom. First it leaps forward by its two powerful hind legs, land on its forelegs, and then uses these to leap back half that distance. And so it goes. To a rider it feels like a rocking motion. Zoologists and engineers have studied this locomotion and have actually found it to be more efficient than a normal equine canter, in terms of energy if not outright speed. The engineers have yet to replicate this successfully in a robot.

Popular wisdom is that the first rocking horse was made in imitation of these ponies, but the reverse is true. They are a relatively recent breed which lives on the commons of Radnorshire in Mid Wales. And it is here, using wood from the conifer forests nearby, that Welsh rocking horses were traditionally made. It seems the ponies learned how to move like this watching the carpenters test riding their finished products. They are believed to be the most intelligent horse breed. You may have seen on TV horses that can count. The Welsh Rocking Pony can do mental arithmetic, so could clearly have worked out the rocking motion all by themselves. So next time some clever dick declares something is 'as rare as rocking horse poo' you can correct them, in your best Stephen Fry voice, with a QIesque reply.