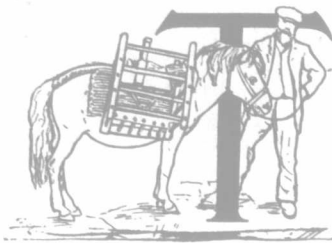


HORSES OF THE ORKNEY AND SHETLAND ISLES

By John Robertson, Orkney Isles



THE horse is in many ways a remarkable animal. It presents us with an example of one of the most perfect models of nature, and offers us the demonstrative evidence of evolution, in that series of extinct animals which culminates in the horses and their allies, the ass, the zebra and the whole group of existing equine animals. On considering the question of the evolution of the horse we may state that no fossil remains of the horse are found in the Orkney and Shetland Isles. Recent horses have sprung from ancestors which reached Europe during Pliocene times, probably from America. For our knowledge of horse evolution we are indebted to Professors Marsh and Osborn, who have discovered numerous species of equine fossils in America.

The original breed of horses found in Orkney were of a diminutive form, similar to those of Shetland at the present day, and it is likely that they came from the northern parts of Europe. In shape and size they differed very little from the Norwegian horses. The Scandinavians, when they invaded the western and northern islands, brought over horses with them, and notwithstanding the fact that they were crossed with the Norse horse, the original breed has been preserved in a more or less pure state in the Shetland hills. The origin of the Picts horse is obscure. The Picts lived in mound dwellings called Broughs, or Brewehs, of which there are many still in existence. The Pictish towers are buildings of a different kind, and are also common in Orkney. Great skill and labor must have been required for their erection. They are of a later date than the Picts houses, and from the remains found in them we learn that they were occupied by a people who cultivated the ground and kept domestic animals, including horses. The mound dwellers had a race of horses of very small size, to judge from the size of horse bones found in these mounds.

In the records of Shetland in the county town hall there are some references made frequently to the wild horses, which horses appear to have been small in size, as compared with the domestic horses. It is the opinion of many that these

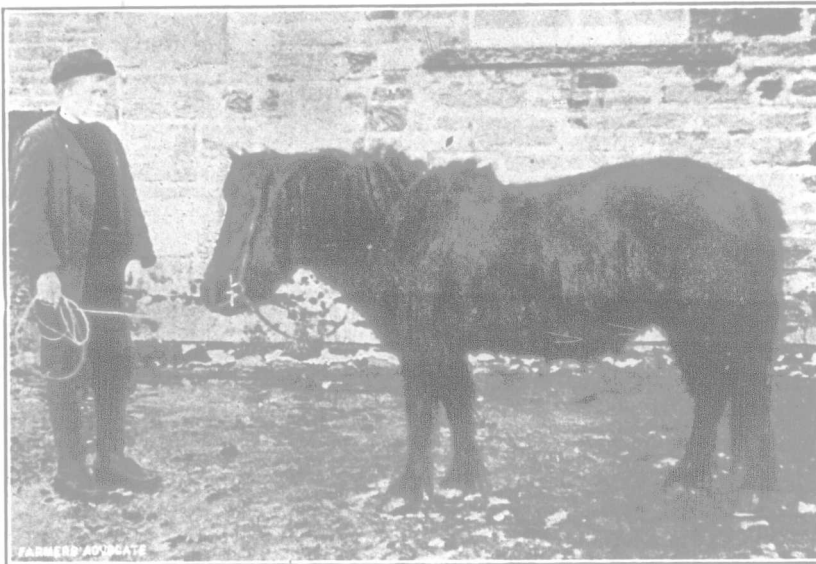
wild horses were found in these parts of the far north by the first settlers of the human race, and the breed exists at the present time distinct and uncrossed by the blood of any other race of pony, except in one or two districts, which can at once be distinguished, the cross-bred animal being larger than the pure-bred.

There were also wild horses in Orkney, likely of the same breed, the bones of which are found in these mounds. Very likely these were hunted down and eaten the same as the wild deer, which were abundant in these pre-historic days. The first differences in size among Orkney and Shetland horses must be due to the influence of a rigorous climate, and when horses become partially wild and are left to natural selection they

are full of vigor and life, and some not so high as others often prove to be the strongest. Summer and winter they never come into an house, but run upon the mountains in some places in flocks."

As in olden times the horse dwindled in size to form the Shetland pony, they increased in size to form the garron, supposed by some people to be a distinct breed of horse, but such is not the case, the word gearran (garron) is Gaelic, and means a gelding or castrated horse, and the name garron came to be used in regard to any big, strong pony, male or female.

The true horses during the reindeer period in Europe were of a considerable size. It may be asked: How could these indigenous horses come to our isles? In bygone times when our islands formed a part of the mainland of Great Britain and when the ice age ended, horses and other mammals pushed their way gradually northward to become the ancestors of our garron and pony breeds, once supposed to be a special creation. The true pony is a diminutive or stunted horse. The dwindling mainly affects the legs. Take a ragged pony from the hills and give it nourishing food and shelter from the winter weather, the limbs grow much more than the rest of the body. There were two types of garrons and ponies, as at the present day, one with a liberal amount of hair on the legs, the other with comparatively little. The older generation of farmers speak of the lighter variety as the best animals either for fast or slow work. The crofters of the island of Skye seem to value clean



PURE BRED SHETLAND PONY

degenerate in size. Hence the first differences in size between Orkney and Shetland horses may be due to their domestic or wild ancestry.

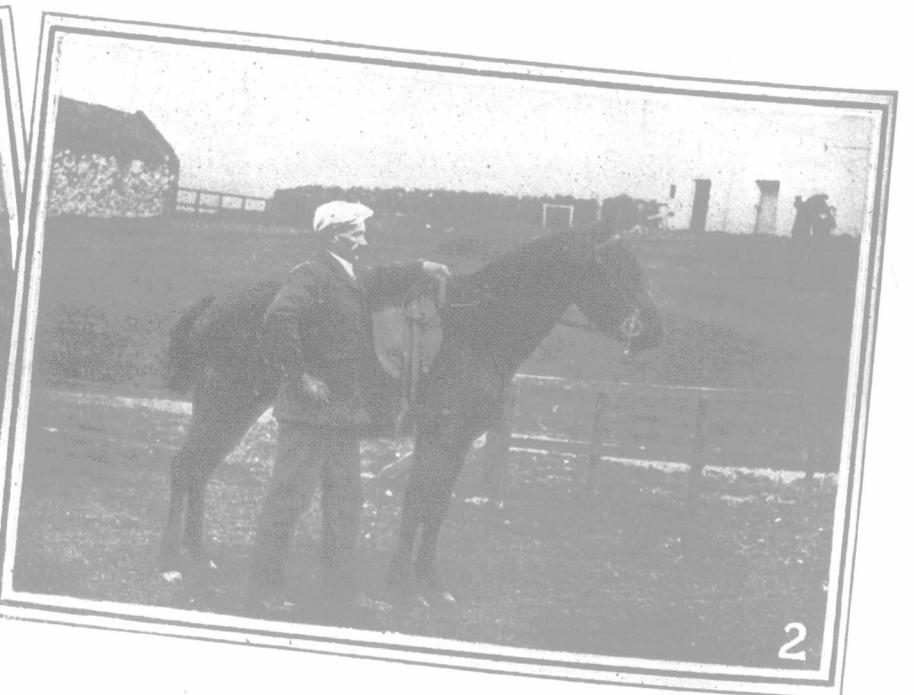
The Bressay stone, a sculptured slab discovered in Bressay in 1864, bears the figure of a horse on which a human figure is seated. As the horse is lifelike the Celtic inhabitants must have known this animal to depict it so faithfully, and there is no doubt but that the horse existed before the Norsemen came. The first reliable record is that of Brand, who visited the islands in 1700. He writes: "They have a sort of little horses called Shelties, than which no other are to be had, if not brought hither and from other places. They are of a less size than the Orkney horses, for some will be nine, others ten knives or hand-breadths high, and they will be thought big horses there if eleven. Although so small they

board was asked to withdraw a Highland garron stallion from the district, it being explained that the animal had the hairy heels of the Clydesdale, causing the stock of such an animal to be less valuable than those with clean fetlocks. They were advised, however, that "Hairy heels are not a sign of Clydesdale breed, but of the absence of Arab blood," and that they appear in the native breeds of Northwestern Europe. It is supposed to be a provision of nature to preserve the heels of horses in cold, damp climates.

The ancestors of those native horses were probably striped, but when they took to a life in the open plains or moorland found this coloration unsuitable to their surroundings and accordingly assumed a color to harmonize with the environment, and being best adapted for



1—PURE BRED ORKNEY GARRON



2—TYPE OF OFFSPRING FROM GARRON