

SHROPSHIRE SHEEP

There is no doubt, Shropshires are one of the oldest breeds of British sheep, there is little available data, as to their origin, but there is ample proof, they were the principal breed in Shropshire & Staffordshire in the early years of the nineteenth century.

In volume 16 of the R A S E Journal, Professor Wilson, mentions The Bristol Society, when collecting information regarding British sheep in 1792, state that Morfe Common, Bridgnorth, was the habitat of large numbers of Shropshire sheep, and again Youatt refers to these same Morfe sheep, as producing wool, that in 1343 was the choicest & dearest in England. Smith in his history of Wool & Wollen Manufacturers, published in 1641, quotes the Shropshire wool as being the choicest and dearest in England, & this is confirmed by Anderson, in his Origin of Commerce, giving prices of English wool.

About the year 1881, Shropshire Breeders brought into being the "Shropshire Sheep Breeders Association" with Alfred Mansell & Co. as Secretaries & published the first Flock Book in 1883. The Association being the first Breed Society of its kind in Great Britain. I must here make mention of the stirring judgment & immense amount of untiring work, done for the Association, by the late Mr. Alfred Mansell. He was the acknowledged authority on Shropshire sheep in his age, and Shropshire Breeders all over the World owe a great debt of gratitude to this fine Old English Gentleman.

The first appearance in the showyard of Shropshires in the short-woolled classes, was at the Royal at Gloucester in 1853. It should be noted however, that several Shropshire Rams, were exhibited at the Shrewsbury Royal in 1845. Shropshires were next seen at the Great National Show at Salisbury in 1857. Reporting on this show the "Farmer's Magazine" says;- "At the Gloucester meeting in 1853, we said, the best sheep in the show were Shropshires. From that time our eye has been upon them & taking them in every point, we have yet to be convinced that they are to be surpassed by any other breed."

Mr. Alfred Mansell, writing in the R A S E Journal, volume 74 published in 1913, says;- "The present Shropshire is the result of great skill & judgment on the part of Breeders, during the last eighty years. By degrees, nice soft black (not sooty) face & legs have supplanted the brown or speckled face sheep, a straight spine has been obtained, the head of the male now possesses strength & character, & in both sexes the head is beautifully covered with wool of a valuable staple, which in addition to its charm against sore heads & flies, is a distinct improvement to the general appearance of the sheep. The wool is now the most valuable of all short-woolled breeds, when weight, denseness, & length & fineness of staple are taken into account, & it is this fact which has proved of great value when crossing the Shropshire ram on the Merino or Com-back ewe, the result being an ideal mutton sheep, whilst the wool loses little of its Merino character for density & fineness.

None of these great improvements in the contour & appearance of the present-day Shropshire have been obtained at the sacrifice of essential points, for the sheep of today is wider, deeper, & fuller of flesh, whilst its quality of wool & mutton have been greatly improved, & in addition the breed enjoys the reputation of being the hardiest, most prolific, & the earliest maturing of all the short-woolled varieties."

At the 1884 Shrewsbury Royal, 875 Shropshire sheep were exhibited as against 420 of all other breeds. Sixty competitors from fifteen Counties exhibiting. From this time until the early part of the twentieth Century, Shropshires were supreme. There was an exceptional export demand, principally from Canada & America, 2314 sheep being exported in 1907, & home Breeders concentrated on producing the small heavily covered type, required in the United States. Home Breeders however favored a slightly larger sheep with the head not quite so heavily covered & the breed lost a good deal of its earlier popularity with the British Farmer. During recent years however the breed has been greatly improved & the Shropshire of today is a bigger, more open faced sheep, with ability to thrive & feed on the poorest of keep, a high production factor of from 150% to 175% & producing a heavy clip of wool of the highest quality.

Since the advent of artificial fertilisers, folding sheep on arable land has lost many of its original adherents, but how much trouble is it to move an easily erected wire fold, & how much better do the sheep do on a daily allowance of fresh untainted keep, to say nothing of how much longer a given amount of keep will last when folded.

Speaking of my own flock, the sheep winter on sugar beet tops, carrot tops, & a small acreage of kale & common turnips, usually sown after early potatoes or some other crop grown for sale. What is more, our sheep are a prime factor in maintaining the land in a high state of fertility.

The first entry from the Tern flock appears in volume 9 of the Flock book, published in 1891, but there is evidence to show that Tern maintained a Shropshire flock for a number of years prior to that date. The Flock has been prominent in the showyard from 1925 to 1939 when owned by Brigadier J N Ritchie & since that time, when I took over a portion of the flock, I have endeavored to uphold its reputation, 1950 being our red letter year, when we succeeded in winning every class at the Royal, the Shropshire & West Midland, & the Three Counties shows.

With regard to our breeding policy, the emphasis has been on the use of home-bred twin rams, & having several blood-lines we have been able to use our own sires, without inbreeding to any extent, thus eliminating the risk of reversion. No ewes & very few rams have been purchased, & when a sire has been introduced from another flock, it has generally been sired by a Tern ram. We have practiced some line-breeding, but only to outstanding individuals of exceptional constitution. By these methods we believe the factor for prepotency has been improved, uniformity of type established, fecundity increased, constitutional vigor maintained and the fleece has lost none of its weight quality. We seldom cull a good ewe on account of age, if she has proved a consistently good breeder, for example;- Ewe No. 12, 1937 won at the Wolverhampton Royal in the pen of three, she remained in the flock until 1947, having reared 15 lambs in 8 seasons.

Article by J Gibson Whittles, published in "The Field" 28/10/50.