



CULTURE AND NATURE: THE EUROPEAN HERITAGE OF
SHEEP FARMING AND PASTORAL LIFE

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY OF SHEEP FARMING IN THE UK

RESEARCH REPORT FOR THE UK

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INTRODUCTION

Sheep play an important role in the life of Britain, its landscape, food, clothing and industry. This report introduces the subject and aims to set the scene with the history and main aspects of sheep farming. It can be read as the introduction to the whole project and avoids the need to repeat this at the beginning of each thematic report.

1. HISTORY OF SHEEP FARMING

Britain was once covered in forest with the exception of the highest mountain peaks yet already by late Neolithic times extensive clearance of the landscape had taken place for agriculture and while some areas were directly cleared to make fields, other areas were gradually deforested as a result of grazing of animals, initially cattle and pigs being dominant as the forested land was not so suitable for sheep except for the higher altitudes where the forest soon gave way to moorland or heath. In association with changing climatic conditions, many drier eastern upland areas became podsolised and upland heath vegetation of *Calluna* and *Vaccinium* spp, managed by a combination of grazing and also burning developed, while more northern and western uplands developed peat layers and a more grass-dominated landscape emerged. Lowland areas were also affected by sheep breeding but they were limited to lowland heaths, salt marshes and forests unless part of mixed agriculture when they were kept in enclosed fields.

In Bronze Age times sheep were widespread and took a role equal to that of pigs and cattle, while later on they were the dominant animal. Wool was one of the first textile materials to be spun and woven and formed the clothing of the people, especially when the wet and colder period of the Iron Age took place. In Roman times Britain was famous for producing high quality woollen products and while this declined to some degree in the post Roman Dark Ages, nevertheless it was important in Anglo-Saxon times and records show that woollen cloaks were desirable items and good for the climate. At the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066 and the Domesday survey that soon followed, sheep were recorded as the dominant farm animal by far and they continued to be so for the next several centuries.

1.2 Breed development

The original sheep breeds did not arise in Britain but were the result of selective breeding from the small, heady types brought with the Neolithic farmers. There are some breeds today, such as the Soay, which closely resemble the primitive types. It grows a short fleece and moults annually. Its wool contains mainly kemp or short bristly fibres and fewer longer truly woolly fibres so is called an primitive woolly breed rather than a primitive hairy breed. Sheep continued to be similar in body size and meat production for centuries as wool was more important – the images of sheep in Mediaeval times show them to be quite small, even though the wool they produced became better owing to its importance for industry. A large number of sheep breeds emerged which are suited to the specific climate and landscape conditions of different regions and most of these are still to be found associated with specific regions and landscapes. A few breeds are used more widely or were introduced into other areas, often over 100 years ago. There are also some very old breeds still farmed by specialists which probably resemble the Neolithic varieties. All upland breeds are very hardy and thrive on the semi-natural vegetation of the areas, which imparts a good flavour to the meat.



The Soay sheep which resembles the primitive original breeds

An example of a breed which may resemble a mediaeval type is the Cotswold.



A Cotswold sheep

Sheep breeds were not described or discussed much before the early 18th century and breeds from those times, even if mentioned, may have been quite different from how they appear today given the amount of breeding activity in the period since. In the 18th century, too, sheep breeds changed quite a lot, usually to produce better meat at the expense of the quality of the wool. Sir John Sinclair (1791) was the first to divide sheep breeds into short wools (used to make woollens) and the long wools (used to make worsteds) while omitting the more hairy mountain breeds whose wool is used mainly to make carpets. Youatt (1837) categorised Scottish blackface sheep as middle wools. It seems, according to Sinclair, that until 1750 the sheep thrived on a wide range of pasture types and concentrate don short fine wools but that when crop rotation was introduced and turnips were first grown as a fodder crop they could breed bigger animals to produce more meat. The short wools disappeared as a result of cross breeding with the long wools. By 1800 there were around 20 breeds while today there are some 30 British breeds.

Sheep breeds fall into several categories (see Table 1 reproduced from Ryder, 1965):

TABLE I
CLASSIFICATION OF MODERN BRITISH BREEDS

<i>White-faced, horned mountain</i>			<i>Black-faced, horned mountain</i>		
Shetland*	0·69		Scottish Blackface**	0·72	} heather hills
Herdwick*	0·71		Rough Fell**	0·81	
Cheviot*	0·54	} “Green Hill” breeds	Swaledale**	0·85	
Welsh Mountain*	0·54		Dalesbred**	0·63	
Radnor*	0·47		Lonk**	0·45	
			Derbyshire Gritstone	0·57	
<i>White-faced short-wools</i>			<i>Black-faced short-wools</i>		
Kerry Hill	0·42		Clun Forest	0·41	} Down breeds
Wiltshire Horn**	0·14		Shropshire	0·25	
Dorset Horn**	0·49		Oxford	0·26	
Exmoor Horn**	0·65		Suffolk	0·42	
Devon Closewool			Hampshire	0·54	
			Dorset	0·49	
Ryeland	0·23	(woolly faces)	Southdown (almost lost black face)	0·44	
<i>Demi-lustre long-wools of medium length</i>		} white-faced polled	<i>Primitive sheep</i>		
Romney Marsh	0·53		Norfolk	1·00	
Border Leicester	0·12		Soay	0·96	
<i>Lustre long-wools</i>			Wild Mouflon	0·70	
Wensleydale	0·59				
Teeswater	0·54				
Leicester	0·06				
Lincoln	—				
Dartmoor	0·13				
Devon	0·13				
South Devon	0·20				

* Only rams horned; ** both ewes and rams horned.

The figures indicate the gene frequency of high blood potassium (HK) (from Evans *et al.*).

The gene frequencies for high blood potassium shown in this table, and those for haemoglobin A shown in Fig. I, provide supporting evidence for the affinities of different breeds. But too much reliance should not be placed on these alone because they are likely to change by selection in different environments. Haemoglobin A gene frequencies are likely to change less, however, and these are discussed in the text.

¹ J. A. Scott-Watson and May Elliot Hobbs, *Great Farmers*, London, 1937; R. Trow-Smith, *op. cit.*

Some examples of these types of breeds:



A white-faced horned mountain breed: the Cheviot



A black-faced horned mountain sheep: the Swaledale



A white-faced shortwool sheep: the Wiltshire Horn



A black-faced short wool: the Oxford Down



A demi-lustre long wool: the Teeswater

1.3 History of sheep husbandry

Sheep husbandry in England as an extensive and large-scale activity linked to the widespread production of woollen cloth can be traced back to mediaeval times, to the major monastic orders, especially the Cistercians, who accumulated large estates in the north of England and ran them as vast sheep breeding enterprises. After the Black Death in the 14th and 15th centuries, with the loss of rural population and the breakdown of the feudal system as a result of labour shortages, extensive sheep rearing took over in upland areas as this required less labour. England became a major producer of wool and woollen cloth and exported it to Flanders in huge quantities. Following the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in the 1520s, the new estate owners continued to practice sheep breeding and the woollen industry became one of the backbones of the industrial revolution, with many towns in Yorkshire, such as Bradford, rising to prominence in the production of woollen cloth and products, while cotton manufacture was carried out west of the Pennines in Lancashire (using imported raw materials).



Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, one of the great Cistercian monasteries where wool was produced on a vast scale in the Middle Ages

The land management system in England was - and still is in many areas - based on a post-feudal system where the landowner rents out farmland – often known as “in-bye” to tenant farmers who pay a rent for the fields used for meadow, crops or pasture and who have common rights to graze a certain head of sheep on the associated moors, fells or heaths. Nowadays some of these estates still exist (and some were bought by the National Trust) and the system still continues, or else the in-bye land was sold off to the farmers and the moorlands were retained for their other use as grouse-shooting moors, for example, but are still grazed by sheep. One of the characteristics of these moors or fells is that they are unenclosed and the sheep are let out to graze on them for most of the year (including over the winter) without shepherds to accompany them, yet they rarely wander off too far beyond the individual farmer’s territory. These flocks are termed “hefted” and they are bred to the specific territory.

Today the main areas of sheep rearing in England are still the Pennine Hills, the North Yorkshire Moors, the Lake District and the other uplands such as Dartmoor, Exmoor and to a lesser extent the North and South Downs. It should be noted that in each of these areas there are also National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, meaning that the open grazed landscapes with associated features such as field walls and barns are highly appreciated and valued as important cultural landscapes. If the sheep grazing ceased then the forest would return – which some people desire, there being only small areas of forest in these landscapes – and indeed the landscapes are possibly more open now than they were in the past as a result of heavier stocking. It is likely that some areas may be less-heavily stocked in the future as fewer people wish to continue the demanding life of sheep farming and sheep walks become vacant.

Lowland sheep are also reared and these live in enclosed fields, usually as part of a mixed livestock farm. Special breeds evolved which were suitable for grazing on salt marshes and lowland heaths which were or are more open landscapes in lowland areas.

In Scotland there are two main divisions in the landscape which concern sheep rearing and its history of development and the resulting landscape. In the south of Scotland the Border region (the zone of the historic border with England when they

were separate countries) is a region of upland hills and moorland contiguous with the northern Pennines in England. These are very extensive and large-scale moorlands which, if dominated by heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) are usually also used for grouse shooting and the moorland vegetation is managed by burning – good for the grouse and also for the sheep. This is also an area of large landed estates with in-bye land and open grazing. The sheep management is as often carried out by shepherds as sheep farmers, shepherds being employed by the estate directly. The wool from the sheep became the raw material for a cloth industry still present in the towns of the Borders, although not to the extent it used to be, famous for the production of the cloth known as tweed, a hard wearing material usually composed of different checked patterns dyed using soft colours or else used in tartan cloth for kilts and other items typical of Scotland.



Typical upland sheep country

In the Highlands of Scotland sheep rearing was only introduced on any significant scale in the late 18th or more usually the early 19th century, by the estate owners. The way this was carried out is often regarded as a dark chapter in Scotland's history, as the highland social structure was destroyed in the process. This is what is known as the "Highland clearances", when the population of small farmers who used to raise black cattle and drive them in herds to the lowlands to sell were unable to produce enough rent to keep the estate owners satisfied. They were evicted from their homes, often with little regard for their well-being, as their goods were thrown out of their small cottages which were then demolished. The people had to go to the cities, to emigrate or to live along the coasts while the whole of the interior of the Highlands was more or less depopulated and sheep flocks, managed by shepherds from the lowlands were brought in to provide a more profitable enterprise for the estates. Thus in this area the landscape of sheep husbandry has many other connotations and is not as valued as in England. In Scotland there are also extensive areas managed for deer so that while these are grazed and browsed the landscape is not the result of sheep. There is and has been much more land use change as former sheep grazing areas are converted to forest.

In the remoter Highlands and islands of Scotland there is the practice of “crofting” where the local people live on a croft, a small patch of land with a house and some fields. They normally have other jobs, such as working on oil rigs or fishing, as council workers etc, and farm the crofts part-time, also raising sheep on common grazings. The land is still owned by estates – normally nowadays in trust – and they have special rights as crofting tenants. In the Hebridean islands the wool is used for the local production of a special cloth known as “Harris tweed” – a protected name under the EU. This is woven on hand looms in the homes of the crofters and is then used in the tailoring industry for hard-wearing, high quality suits and jackets. The landscape of the crofting areas is a very unique one.

In Wales sheep farming is also widespread in the mountains and uplands. The landscape is less dominated by heather and more by grass so the landscape is greener. Similar management systems are used, with flocks allowed to live on the hill almost all the year round, with farmland on the lower and better soils. In Wales there are three types of land – the fields, the mountain (*mynydd*) and a kind of in-between area called the “*fridd*” which may be partly enclosed – perhaps as a large field of rough grazing – and partly open. Several national parks in Wales are also in these mountainous areas where sheep husbandry is the main land use. There are very few deer in Wales (compared with Scotland) so that all open landscapes are the result of sheep grazing.

2. Sheep statistics

The UK has 5% of the world’s sheep but some 20+% of Europe’s and UK sheep numbers were largely unchanged in December 2010 at 21.3 million head. The breeding flock was stable at 13.86 million head. Recently the UK pulled ahead of Spain as Europe’s number one sheep producer. The UK produced the most sheepmeat with 324,000 tonnes in 2008. This accounted for 34.3% of total sheepmeat produced in the EU during the year.

The pattern of sheep numbers over the last 100-110 years shows quite a lot of variability (see Table 2) with a low point in the 1950s, a dip in the 1970s and a jump up in the 1980s. This fluctuation reflects in part the variability in sheep prices but also the effect of subsidies, both national and later, EU CAP payments..

Total sheeps and lambs	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Ewes for sheep breeding (Numbers)	6,011,818	6,140,062	3,777,237	4,933,363	5,053,605	3,104,468	5,034,240	4,454,664	6,544,829	7,745,588	7,829,104
Other sheep 1 year and above (Numbers)	3,454,142	3,338,401	3,338,401	1,838,059	2,135,570	1,565,386	1,740,016	1,484,788	1,751,100	2,270,980	1,596,231
Other sheep and lambs under 1 year (Numbers)	6,378,753	6,795,055	4,084,874	5,442,016	5,980,532	3,836,473	6,257,376	5,688,003	7,427,117	10,759,310	9,719,010
Total sheeps and lambs (Numbers)	15,844,713	16,273,518	10,224,664	12,213,438	13,169,707	8,506,327	13,031,632	11,627,455	14,554,451	20,775,878	19,144,345

Table 2: Pattern of sheep numbers over the century 1900 to 2000 (Source UK Agriculture)

Conclusions

The history of the development of sheep farming and the sheep industry extends back over the millenia in the UK and it remains oen fo the biggest if not the biggest in Europe. Thus it can be seen that the landscape, food, woollen and other products arising as a result of sheep husbandry has and continues to have a big impact and role in society, a role not always appreciated or understood.