

The Golden Fleece of the Cotswold Sheep

By Richard Martin

SHEEP HAVE GRAZED on the Cotswold hills for more than 2000 years - and the most famous breed was The Cotswold, whose lustrous, curly fleece was famous throughout Europe. Here is the story of that sheep - justifiably known as The Lion of the Cotswolds... Today there is not much more than a ton or two of Cotswold fleece-wool available each year. It is long-stapled (more than six inches), reasonably lustrous and of mid 40's quality (For comparison Merino is mid 60's plus, Lincoln about mid 30's). Until recently, Cotswold wool was for many years lumped in with other English lustre-wools - and used mainly for carpets and industrial cloths.

During the early 1980's Cotswold Woollen Weavers recognised its potential and revived its use. In particular, the natural lustre and the clarity with which it accepts dye made the wool ideal for loose-twist worsted spinning, and weaving into soft-furnishing cloths - a range of dramatic block-weave throws and rugs. Visitors are welcome all year at the mill to see both the processes involved and the products.

Cotswold Woollen Weavers' activities have been coincident with a renewed interest in the Cotswold breed, so this is a good time for re-appraisal. For too long the illustrious historical pedigree of Cotswold wool has been ignored as irrelevant.

But it was not always so. The Cotswolds are indelibly marked with the history of the Cotswold sheep and its fleece. But it is a puzzling, clouded history. When Aldous Huxley nearly said that facts begin as heresies and end as superstitions, he might have been thinking of the Cotswold sheep. For although the great Wool Churches stand four-square in many a Cotswold village, as solid testimony to the power and wealth of the medieval merchants who endowed them, not much can be said with certainty about the wool which the Cotswold sheep provided. There is certainly a lot of superstition: even a bogus derivation of the very word Cotswold (sheep cot on the wold, or open hillside) has been widely used to puff the influence of wool in the area.

Certainly wool has long been an important English commodity, and the Cotswolds an important source for it. 500 years ago wise men agreed that half the wealth of England rides on the back of the sheep - wool exports paid for Richard the Lionheart's ransom to the Saracens. The Lord Chancellor sits in The House of Lords to this day on a sack stuffed with wool to show the pre-eminent position which the wool industry has played in this country's affairs. The medieval weavers of 12th century Flanders happily sang:

*The best wool in Europe is Cotswold
And the best wool in England is Cotswold*

But what sort of wool was it that they prized so highly?

The Medieval Cotswolds

There is evidence that the Romans brought sheep with them as they battled northwards, and perhaps they introduced them to the Cotswold hills around the important Roman settlement at Corinium, the modern Cirencester. They would have valued these sheep for their milk and for their fleece: shivering Southern European mercenary soldiers needed warm winter coats. There is further evidence, based mostly on scanty skeletal remains, that these Roman imports were the ancestors of the great flocks of Medieval Cotswolds - and indeed of all the English long-wool breeds.

The temptation is to look at a Cotswold sheep today, to sink one's hand in its thick lustrous long-wool fleece, and think fondly of an unbroken pedigree stretching back 2000 years to those early Roman farmers. The problem is that for most of the intervening years virtually nothing is known for sure. Shepherds reasonably enough have rarely thought it sensible to spend their time writing down descriptions of their flocks: the first book in English entirely about sheep was not published until 1749 (Ellis- The Shepherd's Sure Guide), and the first comprehensive resumé of English wool not until 1809 (Luccock - An Essay on Wool). But by then, the early 19th century, the heyday of the Cotswold sheep was over. And of course, woollen cloth gets worn out, and is attacked by moth and mould: there is very little extant medieval woollen cloth available for analysis.

During the Early Medieval centuries England was a relatively under-populated country, with plenty of rolling hill-pasture to sustain vast land-hungry flocks of sheep kept for their fleece. Perhaps 500,000 sheep roamed the Cotswolds, and most of their wool was exported to Flanders and Lombardy; more densely populated countries which could not spare land for wool growing. Thousands upon thousands of pack-horses laden with wool-bales wound their way down from the High Cotswold hills to The Thames. They crossed the river at Radcot and proceeded southwards to Southampton, or saw their loads shipped on barges to London. The continental weavers paid royally for the wool, the Cotswold merchants grew rich and built their churches, and the English crown paid its way with the taxes levied on the trade.

But was this Golden Fleece (the Cotswold sheep was long known as The Lion of the Cotswolds) the long, heavy, lashy wool that the modern Cotswold bears, or something shorter, softer and more like the Ryeland wool from Herefordshire which was equally important to the medieval weavers?

There are memorial brasses in Northleach church which show what look like newly shorn Cotswolds just like those which crop the grass today, and some commentators suggest the Cotswold was always a big, long-woolled breed (Youatt, for instance, quotes that sage Gervase Markham to this effect). But others suggest that the wool was once much softer: Michael Drayton, writing at the end of the 16th century suggests that Cotswold wool was very

fine: it comes very near that of Spain, for from it a thread may be drawn as fine as silk.

This Spanish comparison is important, because one conundrum revolves around the export - widely noted by contemporary commentators - of Cotswold sheep to Spain, particularly by Edward IV but up to 1425 when the export was banned as part of the increasingly draconian network of laws to safeguard the interests of the burgeoning English wool-weaving industry. Spain was the home of the fine-woolled merino sheep, and it is inconceivable that English, and specifically Cotswold sheep, could have been so fine as to be worth cross-breeding with merinos. The most likely explanation is that Cotswolds were different from merinos: long-woolled enough to provide fleece to make alternative cloths.

Clattering Loom-shuttles

Until the late 19th century, and advanced mechanical innovation, it was not possible to spin worsted yarn from short fibre. The wool from which worsted yarn was spun had to be combed by hand to eliminate short hair (noils) and to align every fibre parallel to the direction of the yarn. Then tight, flat yarn could be spun and tough, sleek cloth could be woven: quite different from the spongy, less sophisticated cloths which could be woven from yarn woollen spun from shorter merino and down-breed fleece. Perhaps medieval Cotswold sheep were shorter and softer fleeced than they are today, but their wool was still lustrous and strong enough to be ideal for worsted spinning. If nothing else, Cotswold fleece could provide Spanish soldiers with tough, resilient serge uniforms, and nobles with flowing, draping cloaks to wear over their shirts of soft, fluffy merino.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the rising clatter of loom-shuttles in the valleys around Stroud presaged England's transition from raw-fleece exporter to major woollen cloth manufacturer. So complete was this change that the crown eventually forbade the export of fleece altogether, and it remained illegal until 1824. Although, gradually, vast amounts of wool began to be imported from the wide open spaces of Australia and South Africa (ideal for extensive sheep-rearing) it was the pre-eminence of English combing wools (including Cotswold) which helped establish England's superiority as a woollen textile manufacturer.

To some extent this issue of the nature of Cotswold wool is one of semantics: as William Marshall wrote, after he rode the Cotswold hills at the end of the 18th century, the Cotswold is a breed which has been prevalent on these hills, [since] time immemorial: it has been improved, but has not changed. (During the Improving Years of the 18th century, the Cotswold certainly increased in size as shepherds learnt new husbandry techniques.) Or as Ezra Carman wrote disarmingly in 1892, as he strove to sum up the evidence of three hundred years of literature about Cotswold fleece: It is difficult to reconcile these opinions, nor indeed is it necessary; the

Cotswolds beyond the memory of our day have long been a long-woolled race and valuable... for their wool.

So, superstitions and all, in this volatile world perhaps it is acceptable, even necessary that there are these noble, mythic links with the past. If this be so then The Golden Fleece, which might have provided uniforms for the Roman legions, paid for the Crusades, clothed 18th century Europe with West of England Broadcloth and today makes splendid block-weave rugs, is certainly an ideal candidate.

Long live the Lion of The Cotswolds!

Select Bibliography

The bibliography of English wool and woollen textiles is vast. Here are a few of the more interesting sources and historical reviews of the literature. Many of these books contain more detailed bibliographies. (Cotswold Woollen Weavers maintains a library of several thousand textile-related items - and welcomes inquiries about any aspect of textile history and procedure.)

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