

On the Sheep's back

The rise and fall of English wool

By Richard Martin

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, 'half the wealth of England rides on the back of the sheep' was no idle boast. 'Sheep turned grass into wool'¹ to provide the raw material for the woollen cloth-weaving industry that was by far the most dominant component of the medieval economy. For this reason, the growing of sheep for wool was not just a matter for farmers: its management was an integral and important part of the governance of the realm.

1000 years earlier, the Roman Empire had brought sheep to many parts of Northern Europe, and English looms had clothed the Mediterranean legions fighting in these colder latitudes. Indeed there is evidence that there was an important and growing export trade in English woollen cloth. But with the break-up of the empire, the more disparate way of life of the successive waves of Scandinavian invaders reduced the sheep to a subservient part of subsistence agriculture. Even by the conquest, milk and manure were probably the most valuable products of the sheep², with both having little importance beyond the boundaries of the village.

However, during the following three centuries, the sheep population ballooned everywhere but in parts of Southwest England and Wales. The climate and geology, the system of manorial and monastic land tenure, and the voracious market for good wool, particularly in Flanders and Northern Italy³, all played a part.

A spectacular part in turning England into a 'wool factory' was played by the large monastic estates. By 1322 Canterbury priory ran 14000 sheep on 40 manors⁴, with an average flock size of about 340. Cheese, made from sheep milk, was still an important product, but fleece was already being sold into Italy, and a sophisticated trade in forward options on future clips had begun. Overall, sheep product accounted for over 20% of the priory's income. These widespread monastic land-holdings allowed for the movement of sheep from one manor to another, helping to make the best use of available pasture, to replace sheep lost to disease, and to introduce better rams.

The monastic masters of medieval sheep-keeping were the Cistercians, whose desire for simplicity lead paradoxically but inexorably to unlooked for success. Firstly they were attracted to isolated 'badlands' like Strata Florida, near Tregaron in West Wales which were ideal for extensive sheep

¹ Trow-Smith, Robert. *A History of British Livestock Husbandry to 1700* (1957)

² Ryder, ML. *Sheep & Man* (1983)

³ These areas were urbanised earlier than most of England, so there was the money to buy good cloth, but not the land to grow good wool.

⁴ Ryder, ML. *Sheep & Man* (1983)

farming. Secondly the imposition of a rigidly centralist system, with all Cistercian communities under the direct control of the mother house at Citeaux in France dictated a common pattern for their farms which greatly encouraged orderliness, common working methods and the sharing of experience which led inevitably to efficiencies and prosperity.

At Strata Florida the monks greatly improved the existing pastoral agriculture based on sheep-keeping. They cleared vast tracts of land, and extended the practice of transhumance, the shepherding of the flocks onto upland sheep pastures during the summer months. The ancient, but persistent even today, popularity of the words 'hafod' (temporary summer house) and 'hendre' (permanent winter house) in farm and village names shows how widespread was the annual movement of the Cistercian sheep flocks.

Elsewhere in Britain, as a medieval pilgrim gazed in wonder at the spires of the extensive ecclesiastical 'town' of Hailes Abbey near Winchcombe in Gloucestershire, and paid homage before the phial of Christ's Blood, he was also bowing before the economic power of wool. For almost everything at Hailes was paid for off the back of Cistercian sheep. The pilgrim, and the country, was witnessing the absolute domination of wool as 'the sovereign merchandise and jewel of this realm of England'⁵

By the early 14th Century, there were probably 150,000 sheep in Yorkshire, of which half ran in monastic flocks. Even more tellingly, Eileen Power⁶ suggests that at roughly the same time, there were 12 million sheep in England and Wales, already 2/3 of the total of the national flock just before WWII.

There is a great deal known about medieval land tenure, about sheep numbers, and about wool prices, for these are matters for the lawyers, the merchants, and the tax gatherers: generally literate all. Farmers (like most practical men then, and in many cases, now) lived on their experience, not their records, so it is difficult to be precise about what these growing flocks of medieval sheep were actually like.⁷ There is a continuing debate about whether, for instance, Cotswold sheep have always been the big, lashy-woolled animals they are now, or if they were once much smaller, and finer woolled.

The problem is that domesticated sheep have never been more or less immutable like, say, tigers, but have changed constantly, generation by generation, as flocks were moved around the country inter-breeding as they went.

⁵ Trow-Smith, Robert. *English Husbandry* (1951) quoting the Ordinance of the Staple

⁶ Power, Eileen. *The Wool Trade in Medieval History* (1941)

⁷ Even paintings are not necessarily a good guide to appearance. There was for centuries a vogue to portray farm animals as grotesque 'barrage balloons with four legs', because great size and fatness were the characteristics most prized.

There were probably three main, original strands intermingled in the medieval national flock. The first was the primitive sheep, similar to the modern Soay, first farmed during the Bronze Age⁸, the second was the sheep introduced by the Romans which may well have been white and hornless and which evolved into shortwool Ryeland types and longwool Romneys, and the third was the black-faced horned sheep which probably came with later, Viking invaders.

Over the medieval centuries these sheep interbred and began to exhibit distinctive and regional variation, but could not safely be said to have evolved into different breeds in the modern sense. Once again it was largely the monastic flock-masters who led the way, with their breeding policies based on a system of moving rams or whole flocks from abbey to abbey as required.

Indeed, the earliest classifications were based not on the sheep themselves, but on the different grades of wool they yielded. In the mid 15th century, the finest wool came from around Leominster in Herefordshire, and was known as 'Lemster Ore', which was compared, for fineness, with silk. And in general, throughout the medieval centuries, the glory of the English clip was the gradually improving longwool fleece, absolutely essential for the manufacture of lustrous worsted yarns, until the coming of sophisticated combing machinery in mid 19th century which could cope with much shorter, finer merino wool.

The 16th century saw fundamental changes in agricultural practice. The manorial system finally ebbed into history, and with it the army of peasants tied to their villages or tending the huge medieval flocks, both lay and ecclesiastically owned. This was hastened by the dissolution of the monasteries, and the break-up of their estates, under Henry VIII. Early enclosures of arable land into sheep-walks, may have turned cottagers into 'landless vagabonds', but the countryside also became, as Trow-Smith has it, 'thickly dotted with the solid, well proportioned homes of the middle-class husbandmen.'⁹

Although it was said at the time that 'sheep have eaten up our meadows and our downs, our corn, our wood, whole villages and towns', sheep also brought a new era of prosperity to the countryside. The sturdy yeoman-farmer of Old England had arrived. By 1600, more than 20% of them had actually become free-holders.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, these New Men began to approach sheep farming in a far more systematic fashion. Many of them were literate enough to take advantage of the advice expounded by that equally new phenomenon: agricultural writers.

⁸ An excavation of a farm in East Sussex yielded sheep bones and loom weights dated to about 1200BC

⁹ Trow-Smith, Robert. English Husbandry (1951)

Tusser¹⁰ offered tips about stocking levels (too many, and the sheep would ‘loseth their wool’), Markham¹¹ advocated hornless sheep as less likely to injure their lambs, and Fitzherbert¹² demonstrated how best sheep should be folded,¹³ the efficacy of tar or brome salve against lice, scab, or ‘pymples as brode as a farthynges.’, and that farmers with good spring grass should put the ram to the ewes as early as possible to give early lambs. This was simple, practical advice but it was revolutionary at a time when thitherto farmers had relied exclusively on their own and their fathers’ experience. As late as the 1720’s, the wisdom of these writers was still admired. Lord Molesworth proposed that ‘a school for husbandry be erected in every county, and that Tusser’s old Book of Husbandry should be taught to the boys to read, to copy, and to get by heart.’¹⁴

By the mid 17th century, writers like Henry Best¹⁵ understood the practicalities of what later became the science of genetics. Not only did he realise that characteristics could be bred down the line (‘omne animal generat sibi simile’ - every animal throws offspring like itself), Best saw the crucial importance of good rams: ‘a bad ewe may bring a bad lamb, yet she spoils but one, but an ill tup is likely to spoil many.’

It is important not to overplay this new knowledge. It was certainly not based on ‘scientific’ theory, but was almost wholly empirical. When Tusser maintained that the cure for an animal with a loose tooth was to slit its tail and apply a plaster of soot and garlic, he was no doubt reporting some old custom which he had seen: perhaps slitting its tail took the animal’s mind off its tooth.¹⁶ It was more the keenness of the observations, and the wide dissemination of them, which made these writers so important.

So although Henry Best continued in the folk-belief (as farmers had done since Roman times) that lambs should be castrated when the moon was waning, he also describes in exact detail how he fed his ewes hay and pea stalks in winter, lambed them in warm ‘enclosed groundes’ in mid February, and continued to give extra feed to the nursing ewes for two months before moving the flock to the poorer, common pastures. In this way, he says, he had fat lambs for sale at the best price by ‘St Hellen-masse’ in early May.

During this period, the growth in both population and prosperity of the towns was leading to increasing demand for mutton, and some farmers were beginning to see meat as a product for which to breed, rather than a by-

¹⁰ Tusser, Thomas. Five hundred points of Good Husbandry (1573)

¹¹ Markham, Gervase. A Way to Get Wealth (1638)

¹² Fitzherbert, Anthony. The Boke of Husbandry

¹³ Although Fitzherbert describes various methods of folding sheep, he did not really like folding because it stopped the sheep from seeking shelter during bad weather. He describes a novel method of allowing sheep to run more freely by encouraging them to rub against stakes driven into the ground. He says that each sheep will afterwards only graze near to its own stake. ‘it will follow that stake... and syt bye it.’

¹⁴ That Tusser’s advice was still being lauded 150 years after he published it, is also, perhaps, an indication of the innate conservatism of some sections of the farming industry.

¹⁵ Best, Henry. Rural Economy in Yorkshire... (1641)

¹⁶ An 18th century cure for human toothache was to ‘put a hot roasted turnip as hot as can be borne behind each ear.’

product of culling worn-out sheep. Nevertheless, wool was still the primary product of their flocks, and the growth in sheep numbers matched that of weavers. At the beginning of the 16th century West Oxfordshire was full of sheep, and in Witney 40% of all recorded occupations revolved around the manufacture of woollen cloth. Besides the reliance on the sheep, ‘the two great spheres of England’s realm’ by now often overlapped in terms of ownership. Throughout the 15th century graziers also became manufacturers, and manufacturers also became graziers. Thomas Fermor of Witney, for instance, was a major importer of woad (which he used in dyeing the cloth he made), but also left at his death in 1485 sheep flocks on his farms in seven parishes.

In the sheep farmer’s yearly round, shearing was the most logistically intense of all operations. Modern mechanical textile processing calls for absolutely clean wool, and scouring has become the first process in the mill, but until the 19th century, washing the fleece on the back of the sheep before shearing was the norm, and the wool was spun ‘in the grease’. Hurdles would be erected along a suitable river, and the flock driven through the water with shepherds on hand with specially shaped dipping-crooks to ensure the sheep were fully immersed. Henry Best describes how his sheep were given bread mashed in ale and milk, laced with nutmeg and pepper, to sustain them through this ordeal.

In many places, permanent and elaborate stone sheep washes were built, and the importance of the operation is otherwise shown by the existence of several villages of Sheepwash, from Devon to Northumberland, and Shipston-on-Stour was also known as ‘Sheepwash Town’.

Shepherds were essentially solitary, spending many months alone with their flocks. Tony Foster¹⁷ recalled how Jack Bond (a retired Cotswold shepherd) asked him for a lock of wool. Later, Foster found that the shepherd was buried with the wool in his hand ‘so that when he rises on the Day of Judgement, he may wave the lock of wool aloft as reason why on earth few Sundays saw his face in Church.’

Shearing-time, was generally the only regular opportunity to gather together with other shepherds and with other farmhands drafted in to help.¹⁸ Shearing-time was not just a highly disciplined business (19th century shepherds in Sussex organised themselves into companies, with a captain and lieutenant both with gold and silver-laced hats¹⁹), it evolved into a great social occasion. As an old Sussex song goes:

‘Our shepherds rejoice in their fine heavy fleece,
And frisky young lambs, which their flocks do increase;
Each lad takes his lass
All on the green grass...’

¹⁷ Tony Foster was Chairman of the Cotswold Sheep Society at the time.

¹⁸ Adelaide Gosset in *Shepherds of Britain* (1911) quotes a shearing team which involved the local tailors, shoemakers and a stonemason.

¹⁹ Blencowe, RW. *A Sussex Sheep-shearing*.

An ancient trade like shepherding has naturally accreted a wealth of specific custom and folklore as well as its special tools. Apart from his dog, a shepherd had his hook (or crook), tar-pot and shears. Primitive shears first appeared during the Iron Age, and by the Middle Ages had more or less evolved into the spring-bow pattern still used today. Similarly, the practice of rolling and packing the fleeces into sacks, or sheets, is an ancient one. Sacks impregnated with greasy wool-oil are particularly difficult to grip, and so it has long been a custom to tie a stone into each corner of the sack to provide a convenient 'ear' to get hold of.

Cushions with decorative piping to form similar 'ears' at each corner appear in depictions of medieval wool merchants²⁰ just as they can still be bought in the high street today. They, as the woosack in the House of Lords²¹, are a vestigial reminder of the important place that sheep and wool has played in our history.

The very first book in English entirely about sheep did not appear until the 1740's, and rather than start with a synopsis of sheep breeds, the author opens with, 'A lame shepherd, and a lazy Dog, are accounted the best Attendants on a Flock of Sheep, because these necessarily drive them leisurely...'²² Eccentric advice it may be, but Ellis putting the shepherd at the head of his Chapter One is a tribute to the importance of the shepherd's role over the centuries.²³

If the 16th and 17th centuries saw huge improvements in husbandry, agricultural change in the next 50 years was more about organisation.²⁴ Enclosure of common land during the 18th century gathered pace, from around 1000 acres under Queen Anne to nearly 3 million under George III.²⁵ This finally sealed the demise of the peasantry, but the new great estates also offered new opportunities. The growing economic power of the towns allowed men unfettered by lingering medievalist tradition to buy into the country, and bring fresh ideas about agricultural improvement and progress which were to bear fruit in the latter half of the century.

The growing towns also began to suck in agricultural product on an unprecedented scale including, increasingly, meat. During the 18th century

²⁰ A memorial brass (c 1485) to an unknown wool merchant in Northleach church, shows his feet resting on such a cushion, which is emblazoned by his personal mark which would have identified his woosacks even to illiterate labourers.

²¹ Lord Hailsham, when he was Lord Chancellor complained about the woosack, saying it seemed to be 'stuffed with carpenters' tools'. Even if this true, this does not reflect on the qualities of English wool, since the woosack is stuffed with New Zealand wool, a gift following the refurbishment of the Palace of Westminster following WWII.

²² Ellis, William. *A Complete System of Experienced Improvements made on Sheep, Grass-lambs and House-lambs...* (1749).

²³ AG Street in his autobiography, *Farmers Glory* (1932) refers to the 'autocracy of shepherds', and that at a time of relative decline for the sheep industry.

²⁴ In fact many writers have suggested that the 17th century marked the highpoint of animal husbandry improvement, and that standards in the early 18th century slipped below that which had obtained on the great medieval monastic estates.

²⁵ Trow-Smith, Robert. *English Husbandry* (1951)

the sheep very definitely came to be regarded as something to eat, as well as something to wear.

In the meanwhile, the hinge around which the sheep economy turned was the question of the trade in wool. In 1614, James I banned the export of wool to stymie the Flemish weavers 'so that we may not be killed with arrows from our own quiver'. Later, English weavers managed to persuade successive governments that without English longwool (to mix with shorter Spanish (merino) wool or coarser French or German wool) there could be no foreign opposition to the home weaving industry, and the export of wool was banned absolutely. The ban was not lifted until 1824.

This was, of course, bitterly contested by English farmers. Arthur Young railed against the stupidity of 'the gentlemen of the landed interest quietly laying themselves down to be fleeced', and John Smith pointed out that stopping the free trade in wool depressed the price of it, and so impoverished English farmers while falsely enriching English weavers. It was, said Smith, 'a monopoly against the grower.' It is certainly true that having a monopoly over English wool at a depressed price was unnecessary to secure the astonishing success of the English weaving industry, and ascendancy over all continental weaving industries during the 18th and 19th centuries. And free trade would have put more money into English agriculture and hastened improvement.

From time to time during the battle, particularly draconian measures were introduced to enforce the ban. In the coastal regions of Kent and Sussex, the owling (smuggling) of wool to France was rife, because of the higher price which could be achieved there. An act of 1698 (renewed several times over succeeding decades) decreed that sheep-keepers living within ten miles of the coast 'shall be obliged to give an exact account in writing, within three days of shearing', of the number and weight of their fleeces, where they were stored, if they were moved, and to whom they were sold. And we like to think that only modern government micro-manages!

During the second half of the 18th century, what Trow-Smith calls the 'new science of Agriculture' began to have an impact on 'the old crafts of husbandry'. Strip-grazing to better control the use of pasture by sheep, and the hugely extended use of turnips and other root crops were two of the results of this impact. Feeding ewes turnips, and thus improving their condition, led for the first time to the survival of twin lambs as the norm, and so to the general increase in lambing rates.²⁶

But the glory of the 'new science' was its influence on sheep breeds. Men like Robert Bakewell, of Dishley in Leicestershire, gave direction to the process by which the old vaguely differentiated regional sheep types were bred into the specific sheep breeds we know today. The engine for change was the growing importance of mutton, and Bakewell took the weak-

²⁶ Ryder suggests that by 1750, Lincolns and Teeswaters had already improved to an average litter size of 1.5.

carcassed Leicester sheep, and created a more compact, much faster maturing New Leicester.

There was an almost messianic zeal with which the improvers set upon, for instance, the old Norfolk Horn (Arthur Young called it 'wretched' and 'contemptible'), and introducing Southdown blood, eventually created the Suffolk.

The result of this frenzied era of improvement, coupled with much more movement of sheep around the country, was that by the end of the 18th century, there were around 40 significant and recognisably distinctive, sheep breeds.

In 1809, George Culley 'An experienced Farmer of Northumberland' not only set out a systematic analysis of the different categories of sheep (longwool, shortwool and heath), and of the different breeds, he also advocated that a farmer should not necessarily keep the sheep traditional in his area. 'Could any of these people be prevailed upon to make an experiment... the result would be a conviction that there were other breeds of sheep better adopted to their situation, and more profitable, than the breed they had been in possession of for so many years.'²⁷

This really is agricultural science, and a contemporary could justly maintain that the establishment and improvement of the new breeds was 'a work of human skill worthy of being classed with the great inventions.'²⁸

The treatment of agriculture as a science also extended to the establishment of learned societies (analogous to the general scientific societies like the Royal Society 100 years earlier). Sir John Sinclair busied himself with the general improvement of the Scottish Highlands, and sheep figured very much in his plans. In 1791, he founded the British Wool Society with an ambitious agenda of research, particularly using Shetland sheep, and imported merinos from Spain. He also investigated the very 'modern' ideas as biannual shearing, and the protection of the sheep in the field after the Autumn shearing with canvas coats.²⁹

The war with France at the beginning of the 19th century, followed by protective corn laws, and the easy availability of cheap imported animal feed gave English farming a huge boost.³⁰ But it was short-lived. For the rest of the century depression was endemic: Trow-Smith speaks of a 700 acre Wiltshire farm fetching £27,000 in 1812, and £7000 in 1892.

During the 19th century English sheep became essentially a meat animal. An interesting sidelight illustrating how far this had happened as the century dawned is provided by the 'Merino experiment'. When supplies of Spanish wool were blocked by the war with Napoleon, there was a great push

²⁷ Culley, George. *Observations on Livestock...* (1807)

²⁸ Quoted by E Lipson in *A Short History of Wool...* (1953)

²⁹ Mitchison, Rosalind. *Agricultural Sir John* (1962)

³⁰ Wheat fetched 42 shilling / quarter in 1792, and 126 shillings in 1812.

(largely under the direction of 'Farmer' George III) to import Merino sheep, and grow fine wool in England. The experiment was surprisingly successful: 'The practicality of producing in the British Isles, fine clothing wool, equal in quality to that from Spain, has already been sufficiently demonstrated... and has awakened us to a just sense of its importance.'³¹ The problem was that the carcass quality of the merino crosses deteriorated, and since it was now meat, not wool, which ruled the roost, the English merino more or less disappeared by 1850.

Keeping sheep for wool became largely the preserve of the Southern hemisphere: Australasia, South Africa, South America, with their huge flocks of merinos, whose soft fibre world markets increasingly preferred. The first few Spanish sheep sent out to New South Wales in 1788 grew in a few decades into a national flock of millions. In 1800 England imported about 5m lbs of wool, and in 1900 the figure was 400m lbs. England no longer needed English wool to feed its looms, but meat to feed its people.

John Luccock, reviewing presciently what he saw as the decline of English wool quality in 1809, declared 'The domestic sheep is an animal so feeble and defenceless, that it depends for its subsistence, almost entirely, upon the care of man'.³² True enough, but for a 1000 years the prosperity of England had depended upon these same feeble and defenceless sheep.

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³¹ A Practical Treatise on the Merino by An Experienced Breeder (1809)

³² Luccock, John. An Essay on Wool... (1809)