

Shropshire Sheep Breeders' Association  
and Flock Book Society,

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# History of Shropshire Sheep

BY

ALFRED MANSELL.

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Secretaries :

ALFRED MANSELL & Co.,  
COLLEGE HILL,  
SHREWSBURY.



The *Farmers' Magazine* alluding to the 1857 Salisbury Meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society, contains the following:—"The disposition of the Royal Agricultural Society to recognise more generally the different breeds of sheep in England by instituting a prize at the last meeting (Salisbury) for any short-woolled sheep not Southdown, has already had a beneficial tendency, inasmuch as it had been the means of bringing more immediately before the public a breed which even now is but partially known, and which but a few years ago was in utter obscurity. The original Shropshire can be traced to the Longmynd and other adjacent mountains in mid-Shropshire, and in its improved state may be thus described: a small but wide and well-formed head with a good countenance, a dark grey and somewhat speckled face with a whitening tendency towards the ear, somewhat erect and thickset in the neck, short, but symmetrically fine in the leg, broad in the shoulder, with very deep, full and well-developed brisket, rather long and particularly broad and level in the back, with ribs well covered and of a rounded tendency, low in the flank with exceedingly heavy hindquarters, and a leg very thick, round and low. The average weight at sixteen months would be about 20 to 22 lbs. per quarter, and a good flock would average 6—8 lbs. fleece. Their original mountain-breeding has stamped them with a remarkable hardihood of constitution. They will thrive and do well on land of a sterile nature, while in more generous districts the rapidity of their growth and their natural tendency to fatten are most extraordinary. Thickly depastured in the undulating districts of their native county they are ever a source of ready profit to their owners, who, beginning now to generally understand their superiority, tend them with the greatest skill, care and management. Hence this sheep, hitherto so little known, is now taking its proper place, and the few real Shropshire breeders who have been so indefatigable and untiring in their efforts to produce a perfect animal have at length been rewarded by obtaining for them a name and first class position amongst the sheep of this country. They possess to a singular degree the quality and symmetry which have made the Southdown so famous, but are much larger in scale, earlier at maturity and heavier in their wool-cutting properties. They cannot compete with the Hampshire Downs for size, but when weighed against their larger antagonists the compact and well-developed points of the Shropshire render the apparent disparity in size amply compensated for by the actual weight, while in fineness of quality they are very far their superiors.

It will be remembered that at the 1857 Royal meeting the Hampshire Down No. 722 took the first special prize awarded to its class, and being eligible to compete also in the class "Short-woolled sheep other than Southdown," was shown against the Shropshires, and with the others exhibited was defeated by Messrs.



The Shropshires which Messrs. Thomas Horton, George Adney, Samuel Meire, W. O. Foster, J. & E. Crane, Mrs. Baker, Messrs. John Coxon, Edward Holland, Thomas Mansell, Thomas Horley, John Stubbs, Sampson Byrd, Col. Dyott, Messrs. E. Thornton, and H. J. Sheldon successfully exhibited at the Royal Shows of 1853 to 1865, were for the most part brown with speckled faces and speckled legs, fine in the bone and devoid of wool, with bare bellies, and too often sickle hocked and crooked spines were the rule rather than the exception. The head of the male lacked masculine strength and character and carried little or no wool on the poll, and the sheep generally stood on much longer legs than the modern Shropshire. Little attention at this early date had been paid to the wool, which was generally of a soft open character and greatly lacking that density, length of staple and fineness which is now one of the leading attributes of the breed.

The present Shropshire is the result of great skill and judgment on the part of the breeder during the last eighty years. By degrees, nice soft black (not sooty) face and legs have supplanted the brown or speckled faced sheep, a straight spine has been obtained, the head of the male now possesses strength and character, and in both sexes the head is beautifully covered with wool of a valuable staple, which in addition to its charm against sore heads and flies, is a distinct improvement to the general appearance of the sheep. The wool is now the most valuable of all the short-wooled breeds when weight, denseness and length and fineness of staples are taken into account, and 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 and fineness.

The extensive foreign trade for the last 45-50 years and the demand for black faces and legs has done much to eliminate the brown face and legs, and it is found in practice that the black leg which the Shropshire always puts on the cross-bred is a feature when they have to be marketed in London or elsewhere.

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

The spread of the Shropshire sheep is amongst the most remarkable features of the latter day livestock trade, brought about largely by the magnificent display of Shropshire sheep at the Royal Agricultural Show at Shrewsbury in 1884, when 875 sheep were exhibited as against 420 of all other breeds of sheep. No less than sixty competitors hailing from fifteen counties exhibited Shropshire sheep.