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The Place and Management of Sheep in Modern Farming

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THE PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

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THE extraordinary number of acres formerly under cultivation in both England and Scotland which have ceased to be ploughed and which have been laid down to pasture, will entirely change the conditions of modern farming and in these changing conditions sheep, of necessity, must play an important part. It may be of interest to note that in Scotland alone the decrease in arable land, although only 1·1 per cent. of the total acreage, amounts to over 33,000 acres, and the increase in the sheep population in the corresponding period shows an increase of over 94,000. Of this increase 93 per cent. of the total represents the increase in ewe stock and in sheep under one year old. The poor return from cereals, the cost of producing the said cereals, the cost of growing roots, has resulted in many acres of the poorer land being left in grass for which stock has to be provided. In every county one finds that the plough has ceased to be used and to meet these changing conditions, one has to look for the most profitable animal to compensate for the loss in arable farming. We naturally must consider whether we can look to better returns from cattle or from sheep, and in the minds of most we find, we must consider the question of breeding and feeding sheep rather than in the possible profit from cattle grazing. Unless we live in an area in which cattle can be out wintered without extra or additional feeding we will have no option but to graze our winter pasture with sheep. We may have to summer graze these same pastures with cattle, but to me there will be little profit in this as we will have too many buyers all desiring cattle in the first of the year and all coming back into the market at the same time. An artificial demand is being created at one time and an over-supply at another.

The question then before us is: "what class of sheep stock is most suited to our individual requirements and from what source ought we to purchase." Great care has to be exercised in the selection of sheep stocks, far more so than in the selection of other farm stock, care that the animals are taken from poorer soils to better soils, care that the land from which the animals come is healthy and not subject to disease peculiar to sheep, and that the change in conditions will result in monetary advantage to the purchaser. One

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must also bear in mind that certain land may not be good feeding land although good breeding land and *vice versa*. We must keep in view that our main object is that the ultimate test of our selection must be the usefulness of the carcass to the butcher and through him to the public. The days of the heavy weight bullock has gone and so have the days of the greasy or fatty carcass of sheep. The demand for a carcass full of meat with only a small percentage of fat is now what we must try and achieve or else we must accept a corresponding reduction in the price of our mutton. To what breed then must we confine ourselves if we desire to put before the public what they want and in so doing, bring to ourselves the profit we so much desire and require at the present time.

Are we to confine ourselves to pure bred sheep or should we consider the question of the cross of two pure breeds which will suit our farms. The supply of pure bred sheep required in any area is limited, and the breeding of these should then be better left to those whose farms are especially adapted to this purpose. There is a demand and there will be a demand for a cross which supplies a carcass not too heavy and a sheep which will be easily fed.

In bygone days it is recorded that the Border sheep breeders went to England to buy the improved Bakewell Leicesters, and further east to Lincoln to get pure bred Lincoln tups to mate with the sheep of the Cheviot Hills, and at a more recent date we have been indebted to the breeders of the Down breeds for sires to be used in crossing Scotch ewes for the production of early fat lambs.

I should like to refer to the chief breeds of sheep in Scotland which are and will be a factor in the "back to grass" movement of the present day. First of all we have that great improver of other breeds, that sire which imparts to his progeny, when used in crossing, all his good points and omits all his defects, I mean the Border Leicester. As a breed by themselves they are too much inclined to put on useless fat and are of a weight not much in demand, but when used as a cross they are exactly what is wanted. On our two mountain breeds—the Blackface and the Cheviot—they produce ideal sheep.

The hardy Blackface sheep of our heather hills, living at an altitude where they have to withstand severe weather conditions and have to live on land where other breeds of sheep would have a poor existence or die, are only fed with other foods, than what they gather, for themselves, when the ground is snow-bound. The existence of Blackface sheep and heather go together. As their name implies these sheep have black faces or may be black and white, are horned and have been endowed by nature with coats or fleeces suitable to the climate in which they have to live. The wool is long in the

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fibre and is such that rain does not easily penetrate, as it can do in other kinds of fleeces. On the higher hills a proportion of the ewe lambs are kept to make up the ewe stock, but the wether lambs and the rest of the ewe lambs find their way to the open market. If these wether lambs are put on to fairly good arable land they put on flesh rapidly and come to the market in light carcasses of 25 to 40 lb. for which there is a ready demand. On the lower ground where Blackface ewes are kept they are usually crossed by a Border Leicester tup and we have a cross which in Scotland we call "greyfaces"—they would resemble your mules. These animals have usually black and white, or brown and white or white faces, may have small scurs or horns, have better wool than Blackfaces, commanding more money, have deep well sprung ribs, good gigots, are hardy and being from land either at a fair altitude or poorish land—once arable—will, when brought to more congenial conditions, prove good "doers" and put on mutton rapidly on good keep. It should be kept in mind that lambing does not usually start in these flocks till April, and that in August or September when these lambs are sold they are just off their mothers and are at an age when they can adapt themselves to a change in conditions and so improve rapidly. Again, if it be our desire to carry them on as store lambs they can be wintered on grass land, and require no artificial feeding except in time of snow. The carcass weight of these are when ten to twelve months old round about 55 to 60 lb. I can thoroughly recommend those sheep to those desiring a hogg or tegg with a good carcass not over fat and a sheep which can be sold at any time of the year. The purchase of these in forward condition by anyone desiring to have them for short keep cannot be too strongly advocated. Before we pass to other breeds I should like to say, for a farmer farming poorish or thin land, that the ewes usually cast from the hill at five or six years old will provide excellent stock to cross with a Border Leicester or similar tup. Do not attempt to cross them with a tup of certain of the Down breed as they appear to be too far apart and the cross resulting, in my experience, was disappointing, too many being nondescript, of which one would not be proud in any market.

The other mountain breed of sheep in Scotland namely the Cheviot may be said to be of two types, those bred in the Cheviot Hills and those bred in the extreme north of Scotland, in Caithness and Sutherland. It is not for me to go into the way in which these have been bred, but suffice it to say that they have the more important points in common and suit the land on which they have been bred. They have white faces, black muzzles, sharp eyes in their heads, erect ears, good wool, well-sprung ribs, good shoulders, and good in their gigots. Their wool is very much finer than the Black faced

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sheep and commands a better price. From the north of Scotland a considerable number of Cheviot lambs go to the north of England counties to be fed off. They are easily fed and finished. The same applies to this breed as applied to the Blackfaces—they are cast on the hill, at a certain age and if these are put on to good low ground, crossed with a Black Leicester or similar ram will produce great lambs.

Then we come to a breed which has increased in popularity in recent years. These are the first cross between a Cheviot ewe and a Border Leicester ram. They are known as Half-breds. It has also been a common practice to cross the Half-bred so produced with Half-bred with good results. This has often been the custom in districts where the land was considered too good for Cheviots and not good enough for Border Leicesters. Opinion differs as to which are the better sheep, but this is a point we need not enlarge on. Half-breds are undoubtedly valuable animals. They have the hardy constitution of the Cheviot, with a better or closer fleece than the Border Leicester allowing them to withstand colder climatic conditions. They produce a considerable weight of wool, grow to a big size, are long in their backs, have bold heads, and are very productive. On the semi-arable farms of the south of Scotland they are the mainstay of farming, are often crossed by a Border Leicester again to produce what are known as three-part-bred sheep. They are mostly reared on low ground and are often fattened on the farms on which they are born.

The place of sheep therefore in modern farming depends entirely on the class of land we farm, its altitude and its suitability in other respects for carrying sheep. If one lives in a favoured district both as regards climate and market and desires to meet that market, one will undoubtedly consider the early fat lamb trade. For this purpose I do not think anything can beat the Half-bred ewe of Scotland when crossed with a Suffolk or Oxford ram. You have then in this cross a mixture of Cheviot, Border Leicester and Suffolk or Oxford blood. At the same time, I think that if a proportion of the lambs are to be carried over beyond the fat lamb trade and to be carried to the hogg or teg stage, one will be equally as well with an Oxford tup.

If one desires to cross two pure bred sheep for this same purpose I think the best cross is the cross between a Down breed and the Border Leicester. This can be used either way, but my own experience has been that the better sheep as lambs have been got when the ewe has been of the Suffolk breed. The ewes are fully better mothers, are better milkers than the other breed. This Half-bred cross is your sheep on good rich land where there is an abundance of grass. They cannot be recommended for poor soils. For land not so good

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as the land on which Half-breds will do the breed to use is the greyface which I have referred to as the progeny of the Blackface ewe and the Border Leicester ram. You will also have equally good results from the pure Cheviot ewe used with a Down breed, say the Oxford or the Suffolk. The greyfaced sheep having a blend of the mountain Blackface blood in their veins are not so heavy feeders as the Half-bred sheep and will therefore do on land hardly in the same condition as that of your finest pastures. Half-bred ewes are very prolific and with care they will rear some 175 per cent. of lambs. The lambs from the greyfaced sheep are hardly so numerous, but the mothers are good nurses and do well with what are born producing a slightly better mutton—at least it is considered so by some—than the Half-bred. It has been considered by some that the risks in lambing have been greater when a tup of the Down breed has been used than where others have been the sire, but with ordinary care there is, to my mind, really nothing in this.

If, however, the intention of the English farmer is to feed, rather than breed, then he can find from Scotland what he requires whether it be for high or low ground. If he desires a hardy type to carry through for some time, to sell as stores, he can always get a useful selection of Blackface sheep or Cheviot for slightly better pasture. I do not see, however, what could be more profitable to anyone than buying the Scottish hill ewes, cast at the usual ages, and putting them on better pasture than they have been accustomed to and rearing two or three crops of lambs from them. For the really good feeding ground the wether lambs from the Cheviot-Border Leicester cross or those of the Blackface-Border Leicester cross are unsurpassed.

One cannot too strongly impress on those who intend to purchase sheep from a district where the flocks are not too well known to them, that care must be exercised and advice should be sought from those who know that area. As in every other country, we have areas not so good as others, and we have areas because of their goodness that to remove sheep from them to poor soils would be fatal.

In conclusion, we cannot get away from the fact that the place of sheep in modern farming was never so important as at the present time, for it has become necessary to stock large areas which formerly did not require to be stocked, each year, and to dispose of the herbage from this land successfully there is no better way than to graze it with sheep and sheep of the best kind to yield the largest revenue possible; as revenue from this land, as arable, is now unknown.