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The Place and Management of Sheep in Modern Farming

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J. R. Wood

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THE PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF NORTHUMBERLAND AND
SCOTTISH BORDERS

BY J. R. WOOD
Cornhill, Northumberland

FROM the days of enclosure of commons ; the laying-out and developing of the farms in the eighteenth century ; and introduction of turnips and clovers in the same period ; the demand for food caused by the industrial development of England and by the European Wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ; we find that *mixed farming*, as distinct from cereal growing, grass farming, or production of any specialised crop, *has been* universal in the Scottish Borders. Because of its geographical position, being somewhat of a buffer state between two warlike countries, England and Scotland, the Border country remained almost undeveloped until the end of the seventeenth century, or nearly 100 years after the union of the countries under one crowned head. When being developed, therefore, advantage was taken of the experience and knowledge already gained by the Midlands and South of England, where agriculture developed and advanced after the time of the Wars of the Roses 200 years before. That experience demonstrated and fixed the importance of rotation of crops, and of dead fallowing at least one year in a rotation to clear the land of weeds, and to renew the soil to grow cereal crops.

The introduction of turnips about 1650 brought a crop that could be grown on the land at the same time as it was being cleaned and renewed.

In 1650, Sir Richard Weston first attempted to explain the cultivation of turnips ; and in the same year Hartlib urged the adoption of roots and the folding of sheep after the Flanders manner as a means of improving sandy common. At the same time Hartlib advocated the use of clovers. In 1669 Worlidge urged turnips on farmers ; and in 1682 Houghton says, "some in Essex have their fallows after turnips which feed their sheep in winter, by which means their land is dunged as if it had been folded ; and those turnips are a very excellent improvement."

Much as farming methods have advanced and developed during

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the 300 years since those pioneers advocated their new plants and new ideas the soundness of their work is proved by the principles they adopted being still the principles underlying all good farming to-day.

Doubtless from time immemorial sheep have been indigenous to the Island of Great Britain. Wool, whether in the raw state or manufactured, has always been a very large and important item of commerce. Even to-day very large quantities of raw wool are exported; and amongst our customers we find U.S.A., Japan, Greece, Italy, France, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany, Holland and Belgium. Home-grown wool thus forms a very large and important item of export. The sheep is the only animal (except the Angora rabbit) that produces wool. Unfortunately at the moment wool is out of fashion in favour of silk. Formerly three sheep were required to clothe a woman. Now two silk worms do the job. In more recent years, too, mutton has become one of our most favourite and important foods; and along with the value of the fleece it makes the sheep the most important and valuable of our farm animals. Sheep being indigenous it was comparatively easy to develop them and make them useful. Even so it required geniuses like Robert Bakewell of Dishley, the Culleys of Northumberland, and Robson, who developed the Cheviot, to do the work; and they did it on their own lines, without any modern science or Mendelism to help them.

Although the underlying principles of farming are the same now as they have always been, nevertheless we are compelled by stress of circumstances, foreign competition, changing fashions and tastes, to vary our methods built on those principles. In growing cereals fallowing is essential, and a green fallow, provided the green crop can be economically used is always better than a dead fallow. In avoiding cereals various methods are followed, of which the most common no doubt is by extending the length of period by temporary leys; by growing beans, peas and tares; clovers; and now in large quantities sugar beet. Those crops excepting beans, and the root of sugar beet are a most excellent feed for sheep, and amongst them with addition of fallow, green crops and roots it is possible to produce continuous feed on one farm for a flock of sheep for twelve months round. To consume these crops I believe the sheep is the animal that can do it the most economically and profitably. From that point of view I should select a breed of sheep that will forage for themselves, if allowed to do so; unless compelled to do so by climate or soil characteristics I always look upon folding as extravagant. The natural instinct of a sheep is to wander at large and to find its own food; and whenever possible that characteristic should be made use of. The animal that can live and grow and reproduce without

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any other food except grass is coming very near to the Public Benefactor who made two blades of grass grow where only one grew before.

For profit along with economy I want a sheep that will grow a heavy fleece of the class of wool most continuously in demand at a good price; that will be prolific; and whose progeny will come to maturity quickly and produce the finest quality of mutton on such sized carcass as will give the joint most in demand by the consumer.

We find in the Border country that the sheep which comes nearest to that ideal is the Half-bred—the result of crossing the Border Leicester ram with the Cheviot ewe. The progeny of the Half-bred ram with the Half-bred ewe is also a true Half-bred, and breeds very much truer to type than Mendelism would give us to expect. This Half-bred sheep is to-day in many parts of England spoken of as a Border Leicester; and in Yorkshire as a “Baumshire.” It is altogether a remarkable animal, so docile that it will graze and do well between nets and hurdles or in small fields and so naturally independent that it will thrive equally well in large fields or going at large on open commons and even to some extent on moorland. It is also so hardy that it can stand storms of rain, snow or frost; and so adaptable that it changes its characteristics very slightly even when migrated to the warmer climate of the Midlands and South of England. It thus requires a minimum of shepherding. The ewes clip on an average of years and of flocks $6\frac{1}{2}$ lb. each of washed wool of a medium texture and length, and such as is in demand from very many countries of the globe. The hogs will clip 7 to $7\frac{1}{4}$ lb. of washed wool. The ewes are prolific, and will produce 150 per cent. of lambs every year counting the ewes in October and lambs the following May. They are also very good mothers and if suitably fed are excellent milkers. They cross well with almost all other English breeds of sheep, especially of the Down type. The most popular crosses are the Oxford and the Suffolk Downs. Using probably 65 per cent. of Oxfords and 35 per cent. of Suffolks, but the Suffolks are increasing at expense of the Oxfords. The lambs bred in this way will at ten to twelve weeks old weigh 36 to 40 lb. each, carcass weight; and will produce sheep of 75 to 90 lb. dead weight when full grown and fed fat. The mutton cuts lean and admirably fills the present day public demand.

In mixed farming whether growing cereals with roots, and temporary leys in rotation; or in avoiding cereals as much as possible by extending the period of temporary leys, with peas and tares, sugar beet and all the intricacies of modern rotation the sheep is indispensable.

If the horse teams and breeding ewes on the farm are right it is almost a *sine qua non* that everything else will be right too in its proper

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sequence. The horse teams supply the power for tillage, and that in the most economical form. The ewe flock supplies the lambs and the hogs to consume the grass and green crops in the most economical and profitable way, with minimum of expense and at the same time producing wool and mutton, one an important item of national commerce, the other the most popular item, next to wheat of human food.

I was told by a relative many years ago to remember :—

“Cattle usually pay,
Sheep always do.”

In managing a flock of breeding ewes a definite object must be aimed at continuously, and all the time. Plans must be made a year or more ahead, with regard to cropping, methods, and marketing. Each item on the farm must be given its own and its one place of position, and whilst it must not be encroached on by others it must never be allowed to exceed its own sphere.

It will be necessary to make up the flock about September. The number must be considered and decided upon; and if a standing flock, then it should be composed of such ages as to allow of regular drafting at five or six or seven years old so as not to demand the introduction in any year of an undue proportion of gimmers. If a flying flock, then the question arises as to the age at which the ewes must be bought, having due consideration to the possibility of obtaining a supply each year of the desired age.

Uniformity, too, is most desirable. A maximum of profit cannot be attained where the ewes are of mixed breeds and types. The eye of an artist is required in the building up of a flock. Mating is likely to be arranged in October so that lambing may commence some time in March. The ewes should be divided into suitable lots and put on the tugging fields ten days before the rams are turned out. The pastures selected should be clean but not rough; and the best form of flushing is where the pasture and the sheep improve together. No trough food will then be necessary. After tugging the ewes should be distributed over as much grass land as possible so that they may have plenty of room.

“The greatest enemy of a sheep is another sheep.”

In Northumberland we find in a normal season no food but grass is required until Christmas. Doubtless most parts of the Midlands and North of England will be the same. About Christmas we give either hay *ad lib.* or a small allowance of roots spread out on the pasture; and increase the allowance as weather and lack of natural

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food may indicate during January. About 1st February the ewes are collected and folded on roots. A sufficiently large part of the field is cleared to make a bare break on which the ewes lie back, and where they feed on hay. The method is to give a limited allowance of roots, the amount being decided by the supply available. With an abundant crop the larger the allowance. The food requirement is made up by hay. For this purpose the most suitable hay is that made from a Wild White mixture of 3rd or 4th years ley, and it is desirable that it be free from cocksfoot or anything of coarse growth. About a week before date of commencement of lambing an allowance of concentrates is profitable. The exact nature will be decided by market prices, but it is necessary that it be palatable, and also albuminous enough to so "steam-up" the ewes as to encourage the milk flow. The object should be to get the ewes thoroughly *fit* and strong, and at the same time to avoid fatness. After lambing, if weather will allow, the ewes and lambs are drafted off daily as soon as the lambs can travel to suitable grass fields where the same feed is continued as the ewes have been having. In a favourable season, after about second week in April, grass alone will be sufficient to maintain the ewe and her lambs. If the owner feels inclined, and can afford it, the concentrate allowance may be continued, but where land is in good heart and not overstocked it is very doubtful whether it is profitable to use any box-feed from *April to July*.

In North Northumberland it is quite customary to stock good wild white pastures with two ewes and twin lambs to the acre, and a few cattle in each field to top the grasses to keep the pasture level. In East part of the County, on the stronger land, we usually find it stocked with a fattening heifer to each acre and a few ewes with their followers in each field. The object in the former case is to produce as many lambs as possible which are either sold as stores, or are carried on to feed on forage, rape, turnips, etc. The cattle are a secondary consideration. In the latter case the prime object is to produce fat cattle, and the sheep are somewhat of a by-product.

Selling of the forwardest lambs may commence at about ten to twelve weeks old. Where, however, the main object is to sell store lambs it is usually considered unwise to break into the flock earlier than the summer sales, which commence about 20th July and continue until October.

Weaning takes place from 20th to 31st July. The ewes are put to the poorest and barest pasture on the farm, while the lambs are carried forward, first on the pastures where they have been grazing, and later on forage, rape and ultimately turnips. At this stage box feeding is profitable. All lambs should be taught to eat early so that

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they can be pushed on if so desired, and also so that in stormy weather they know the troughs and will eat if necessary.

For the heavier weighted hogs there is a good demand for the Northern markets, Newcastle, Leeds, etc.; whilst for the small weights up to about 55 lb. London is usually a very good customer. Very large numbers are slaughtered weekly at Berwick, Kelso and Hawick, and are sent in carcase to London: the skins and offals are sent to the most suitable markets, and the whole system is most economical.

About a fortnight after weaning the ewes should be looked through. The age to be drafted must be drawn off; all those to be kept will be examined; and those with bad udders or any defect which would render them undesirable to keep on are put off to feed. The draft age are put to a good feeding pasture so that by September they are full of condition and when washed and dressed are attractive to buyers at the ewe sales. In selling draft ewes they are catalogued as:—

W for warranted, which indicates that she has at least six front teeth, sound and together; that the udder and teats are sound and correct; and that the ewe is fit to breed from.

U.O. or “udders only,” which indicates that the teeth are in some way defective, but that otherwise the ewe is as sound and as fit for breeding as the “*W*” class is.

Unwarranted, which covers a “multitude of sins,” of which almost invariably a defective udder is one. Such a ewe should never be kept for breeding, but should be fed off as early as possible.

The principal markets for purchase of these valuable sheep are arranged for ewe lambs in second week of August, and for ewes and gimmers about the second week in September and two or three weeks following. It is important that supplies be obtained at these sales as none others are available, and naturally the best are always sold first.

The method of management outlined has been in practice for many years and has been found to suit the district; the sheep have been evolved to suit the method. It proved the means of helping over the depression in the end of last century; and although returns have been disappointing and values have fallen during recent months sheep still constitute the brightest spot in a very dismal and depressing outlook.