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The Place and Management of Sheep in Modern Farming

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THE PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

By ALFRED LEWIS
Westacre, King's Lynn

SHEEP have for many years taken an important place in Norfolk Farming, but, important as it is at the present time, they are, in the near future, likely to take an even more important place, as with the decline in corn growing, farmers naturally turn to stock of one kind or another, and the sheep for several reasons is obviously the animal that is prominent in the mind of the man who is thinking of laying land down to temporary grass not only because, unlike all other animals, it is one that, except perhaps for a month or so at lambing time, needs no housing whatever,—but it also requires less fencing, which is an important matter on the large light land farms of Norfolk, where the fences are invariably poor,—these reasons alone are sufficient to influence those who are intending to put down land for a short period, but even those who are thinking of adding large areas to their permanent pasture, would hesitate in these days (with the surplus supply of milk in the country) to go to the expense of building modern cow houses.

There are many different breeds of sheep kept in Norfolk, the breeding flocks comprise, Suffolks, Cotswold, Oxford Downs, South Downs, Cheviots, Dorsets, Mashams and First Cross (Cotswold-Suffolk).

A large number of pure-bred Suffolk flocks are kept, a few of these are registered, from which rams and also ewes are bred.

The rams are either sold to go into other pedigree flocks or to mate with the Masham, Dorset, or Half-bred ewes. The ewes to make up the large number of Suffolk ewe flocks, which are crossed with the Cotswold or Lincoln rams for breeding First-Cross sheep. The First-Cross (Cotswold-Suffolk) sheep is a great favourite with the farmers of the Grassland areas of Norfolk; both at the Lamb sales in summer and at the Hogget sales in the spring, they usually command a higher price.

Only a few flocks of Cotswold and Oxford Down sheep are kept, these are primarily for ram breeding.

No record of Norfolk sheep farming would be complete without mention of the famous Cotswold flock at Marham, owned by Messrs.

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Thos. Brown & Sons, who have held seventy-seven consecutive annual Ram Lettings.

Every breeder of live-stock will realise what a wonderful achievement this is. I must also mention the famous flocks of Oxford Downs owned by Messrs. Case. The South Downs at Sandringham are too well known to need any comment. The Dorsets and Cheviots are not very numerous and are mainly kept for producing early fat lambs.

We now come to the Cross-bred sheep. A large number of these are kept, principally the first-cross (Cotswold-Suffolk), particularly on farms where the land is considered too cold for Suffolks, with these, the majority of breeders use Oxford Down rams—a few first-cross rams, because of this, it is essential when buying first-cross ewes, to get them from a reliable source.

There has been a tendency during recent years to use Suffolk rams, and if the object is to graze out or finish the progeny, I think this is quite a sound course to adopt, as you get a sheep of rather better quality, and of more popular weight for present day requirements, but if the object is to sell them as stores, then I prefer the Oxford Down ram.

In the last few years a large number of Masham ewes have been introduced into the county, to supply the demand for Grassland sheep for the large areas of land that have been seeded down, and if present prices of cereals continue, there is a prospect that many more sheep of this type will be required.

Much as I admire the pioneers who introduced these sheep to the Eastern Counties, I do not agree with them when the sheep are folded on roots.

In a dry season you may get through without many casualties, but the long wool of these sheep, in a wet time, gets so matted with soil as to cause them difficulty in getting about and must have a very detrimental effect on their health. I am referring more especially to the breeding flocks.

Any casual observer will have no difficulty in realizing that the habits of these sheep are entirely different to the Suffolks or first-cross to which I have already referred, for whereas the latter graze about in flocks, the Mashams will divide up into small units and graze independently.

Where these sheep are kept for breeding they are usually crossed with a Suffolk ram, occasionally with a Ryeland.

It is customary to sell the progeny as lambs, but they can be fattened on roots satisfactorily, as in the second cross you get a sheep with shorter wool. In my own case last season I found that I could make more per lb. of them as stores, than as fat lambs. It is

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important when buying these ewes from the North, not to get them from too high up in the hills, as the quality and conditions of grazing present too great a contrast.

I will now deal briefly with the changes that have taken place in the management of sheep in Norfolk in the last few years, more particularly with the time of marketing.

Twenty years ago it was the custom on several farms to run the hoggets as stores through their first winter, finishing them out the following year on the roots as shearlings.

On other farms practically all the lambs were kept till the following spring and sold at the various sheep sales in the county during the month of April, when the best would be purchased for slaughter, the remainder bought for fattening on the grasslands and marshes.

To give an idea of the change that has taken place in this direction, at the Annual Sheep Fair held at King's Lynn on the second Tuesday in April when years ago as many as 20,000 sheep were penned, to-day the number only exceeds by a few hundreds those seen at an ordinary market day at that time of the year, in fact large numbers are now sold for slaughter from October onwards, a few even before then, this indicates the strides that have been made towards early maturity in sheep, during the last few years.

The management of sheep must be divided into several sections, the breeding and grazing flocks and then again the arable and grassland sheep—the subject is a large one and time will not allow me to go fully into it. I will therefore deal briefly with the breeding flocks, and the management of them as generally practised in my own county.

In starting a flock it is first essential to decide the object in view.

If a pedigree flock for ram breeding is to be kept, then, obviously great care must be taken in selecting both rams and ewes for its foundation—if keeping a pedigree flock means that other sections of the farm must suffer because of it, I would say most emphatically don't start one; but whatever flock is kept, it will amply repay for the trouble of careful selection of the stock.

I am a very strong advocate in making a start with all young sheep, that is to say, shearling ewes. I have in the course of my farming career, started four fresh flocks and in each case, with all shearlings. Although this may be contrary to the general opinion and has disadvantages, I think the advantages outweigh them every-time,—sheep like other animals get old, soon enough.

With the breeding flock, next to the lambing season, the mating or tugging time is most important—unless conditions are right then, nothing you do afterwards will insure a good fall of lambs.

I am induced to think that sufficient importance is not made

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in providing the right kind of feed for flushing and tugging, without this you are lucky if you get a big crop of lambs.

It is customary in my own case and with most other flock masters in my district, to send ewes on to the marshes for the purpose of flushing and tugging—as a rule they are sent about a week before the rams are turned in. Marshes that have been bullock fed and then rested for a few weeks provide ideal grazing for the purpose, and I prefer this to the eddish on land from which a hay crop has been taken.

On the return to the arable farm, ewes are folded either on sugar beet tops, turnips or some such crop, with a run out on to grass during the day. From sugar beet tops they go on to turnips or swedes, and it is now my custom to provide a mixture of half swedes and half thousand-headed kale for lambing. From this they go on to savoys, unless the market price of these has been too attractive—in this case top dressing about 10 acres of seeds or grasslands at intervals of about six or seven days, provides, with mangels, an alternative or rather a supplementary food supply. From the time of lambing, both ewes and lambs should get a run out on new seeds for an hour or two daily.

I cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of putting the ewes on to a succulent and laxative diet, a few weeks preceding lambing time, which will minimise to a great extent the losses of both ewes and lambs.

It is a good plan to mark the crone ewes before they leave the lambing yard—they can then be separated from the main flock and given a more liberal allowance of concentrates—if this is done a good percentage will be ready for the fat stock market a few weeks after the lambs are weaned.

At the present time the demand is for small joints—and to meet this I would emphasize the importance of breeders concentrating on providing the compact type of sheep, that will finish early at not too big a weight.

My experience with grassland sheep is not so extensive, and confined to Mashams—with these, food of such a succulent nature is not so essential—and as it is customary to lamb them down later, very little shelter is required—but I think some should be provided, as if not, losses will be high in the event of getting very cold bleak weather, which is not unusual in the Eastern Counties as late in the year as April.

If small pastures are not available, large ones should be divided, in order to give the shepherd more control over the flock.

These sheep are good mothers, and do their lambs well on short commons—it is really surprising how they will thrive on poor quality

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grass—if, however, sufficient of this is not available it should be supplemented with an allowance of hay, in any case in very rough weather, when the grass is covered with snow, some should be allowed, a few loads of any kind of roots thrown about the pastures will be readily eaten, as soon as they have become accustomed to them.

In my own case last season I had for use several small pastures of from 7 to 18 acres, these I had top dressed at intervals of about six days, this gave me a continuous supply of grass for a long period.

I started marketing the lambs as fat for the seaside trade, but I discontinued this as I found I could make more per lb. of them as stores in lots of 50 or a 100.

I have never had to give the ewes concentrated foods, as they have always kept in good condition without them.

SHEEP MANAGEMENT

By JOHN JOYCE

Milverton, Somerset

Our farm is altogether about 500 acres, part is on the new red sandstone, and part on the Devonian formation. The red land part is situated in the Vale of Taunton and the other part is in the hill country to the west of that vale. This latter part consists of pasture land, some of it recently laid down, and our arable land is on the former red sandstone land in the vale.

Our flock is a pedigree ram breeding one of the Dorset Down variety whose breeders claim that it possesses all the best qualities of both the Hampshire and South Down breeds without their defects. It consists of 300 ewes, these with their lambs after the lambing period, and with 100 ewe tegs most of which each year go into the flock to replace what we term "off-going" ewes, make nearly 800 sheep during March and April. The "off-going" ewes consist of four kinds—those whose udders are defective, those which have had a bad time in lambing, those that we deem too old to be likely to breed another crop of lambs successfully, and last comes the weeding out of the worst ewes, which conform least to the ideal type and shape of the breed.

After the drafting of these four classes from the last year's ewe flock we count what are left, and the difference between this number