

Thank you for using eradoc, a platform to publish electronic copies of the Rothamsted Documents. Your requested document has been scanned from original documents. If you find this document is not readable, or you suspect there are some problems, please let us know and we will correct that.



ROTHAMSTED
RESEARCH

The Place and Management of Sheep in Modern Farming

[Full Table of Content](#)



The Place of Sheep in Modern Farming

A. C. Hill

A. C. Hill (1932) *The Place of Sheep in Modern Farming* ; The Place And Management Of Sheep In Modern Farming, pp 29 - 34 - DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23637/ERADOC-1-205>

THE PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

BY A. C. HILL

Hatfield, Hertfordshire

THE tendency to-day is to feed sheep, more and more, on grassland—this is necessary as the old system of folding on arable is so expensive that there can be no profit.

For very many years now I have made a practice of buying lambs from Scotland each autumn—these lambs are either Cross or Half-bred; by Cross-bred I mean what is commonly known in this county as “Masham,” but this is really a misnomer. To make sure that my meaning is clear, the Cross-bred lamb I refer to is between a Border Leicester sire and a Black Face ewe; the Half-bred on the other hand is known locally as White Face or Leicester—but they are really a cross between Border Leicester and Cheviot ewe. “Masham” on the other hand is a cross between the Wensleydale ram and the Black Face or Swaledale ewe—and, owing to their mottled face and character, they are all called Mashams in the South of England.

What is usually done, is to buy the lambs in the autumn. I try to get some suitable for short keep, that is, for feeding on any aftermath such as clover leys and young grass seeds. When I say clover, I mean anything of that family—Sanfoin being probably best of anything.

The majority of the buying consists of the best top lambs off the hills, and if these are bought with a touch of good condition, and given a good run on good keep, it is surprising how many will go away fat after six or eight weeks, and up to Christmas.

Those which do not fatten off before Christmas are kept and hand fed on grass or roots if available. If grass wintered as stores and the pasture is bare it is best to give them some form of hand-feeding in the shape of oats or hay from January to March.

In former years I used to carry some through the following summer, but that is now finished, as the taste of the public has changed, and they will have lamb-mutton.

One word on the autumn clover feeding.

To be successful don't over-stock whether you have 20 or 200 acres to run over. If you think you will keep and feed 200 lambs, my advice is to buy 150. You know farming and grazing is much at the mercy of the elements, and some weather might come which will cut off the food prematurely or, even if the food lasted as long as you

30 PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

expected it to do, when it does go done, you might be faced with low prices, and, if too heavily stocked, would be forced to sell on a falling or low market.

In all that I have said—don't forget that I am talking of the sheep running loose—not in bundles. (They do much better loose, and it is cheaper.)

One thing more, if you have a certain number of acres or fields it is best to have one or more fields vacant so as to give a change.

I have always noticed that they will stay quietly enough with poor, or no fences, until the food gets somewhat short, but the minute they begin to roam or break out, it is a sign that they are tired of that field—so, shift them elsewhere for a fortnight, or what time you can give them. By that time the field they were on before will have grown and cleaned—you can then take them back and they will stay again for a time. That is how I handle what we call a *Dry Flock* in the autumn.

I am now to say something on what, I am sure, to-day is the most important flock of all—

The Breeding Ewe

Owing to the high charges on arable land, and low prices for the produce, the farmer has to cast round to find out what will stop his losses and try and leave some profit, so that much land is going down to grass.

No one thinks that hay is to leave him any great margin of profit, so I think he must turn his attention to the breeding ewe—(fed on grass). And of any of the breeds none has proved so suitable as the Cross ewe known as "Masham," or, undoubtedly best of all, the Half-bred ewe already mentioned.

In proof of this, they are to be found to-day all over England. There is no doubt that they are more suited for the raising of lambs on grass than any of the English breeds. They have excellent constitutions, are long lived, easily wintered and requiring no roots. They are also very prolific, raising $1\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{3}{4}$ lambs per head.

My flock consists of 500 Half-bred ewes.

Notice that all the ewes are Half-bred. It is true that the Masham is an equally good mother, but she gives the shepherd more trouble in warm weather, with fly, and scalding of the udder with urine. I think, also, that the Masham has a shorter life—by a year.

The Half-bred should give 4, 5, or even more crops of lambs. I cull out each year all broken mouthed ewes, but they are invariably purchased from me by a farmer who runs a small flock, to breed from

PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING 31

again, so that many ewes produce in their lives five crops of lambs with me, and one or two afterwards elsewhere.

My standard purchase of young ewes is 100 per annum, to keep up the 500 standard.

These are kept on, from 200 to 250 acres during the summer months, according to the flow of grass.

I should here mention that I have an off-lying rough grazing where I send the ewes after the lambs are weaned, for a month or six weeks. This allows my fields at home to clean and so be ready for the mating season.

Sires.—In my lifetime I have used several of the leading breeds, including Suffolk, Hampshire, Southdown, Ryland, and Border Leicester on these ewes. Of these breeds, I have no hesitation in saying that on my land the two best sires are Suffolk and Hampshire for a quick return and profit.

The Ryland I have tried last year and this—and I don't propose to use them again.

The *Southdown* is the favourite with the butcher and to anyone who sees the carcase.

If—in the open market—the butcher would give 1s. per stone more for the Southdown Cross, then I would be pleased to supply his needs.

However, from my experience, the Suffolk Cross lamb at the same age as the Southdown, always makes about 10s. per head more—so that I am forced to produce the article which pays best. My choice must therefore fall on the *Suffolk*; although for best product there is very little to choose between the Suffolk and the Hampshire—the latter is the better of the two, when the lambs do not go fat, from off the mothers—they come much kindlier and faster during winter root feeding. I put the rams to the ewes, so that lambing begins about the 11th February.

Management.—About the beginning of January I begin giving them chaffed hay and oats and later on add dried grains—bringing it up in all to one half-pound a day.

When the ewes begin lambing, the mixture is improved with an addition of bran and also a good supply of mangels during lambing and until the grass comes.

Lambing Pen.—I would like to point out that with this way of getting lambs, very little preparation is required for lambing—the most that is necessary is a good, dry, and well sheltered meadow. After the ewes lamb, we see that they are driven to the sheltered side of the wood or hedge—that is all that is wanted, if the lambs are strong, and the weather moderately good—but, as often happens, you get a rough day, a weak lamb, or an accident—for this con-

32 PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

tingency before lambing begins we prepare hurdles made with straw, and erect small pens of five hurdles—four square and one on top—and dot these pens about the various meadows. These are of the greatest service on a rough day—or with a weak lamb, if put in one of these pens at night he is usually ready to turn out next day; also the labour of a flock running on grass is much less than is required for hurdling an arable.

One man with me sees to anything from 900 to 1200 sheep and lambs all the year round,—except for help given at lambing, clipping, and of course drawing for market.

I should here add that the lambs you may say are fed, from the day they are born, with some kind of concentrated food. When they are ready to eat, feeding pens are erected, with hurdles, in which lamb troughs are placed, and these are replenished night and morning, and the lambs are allowed to eat *ad lib.*, beginning to draw for market at ten to twelve weeks old.

What are not sold fat, by the beginning of August, are weaned and then fed like the Scotch lambs.

Now the last word is on root feeding of Scotch lambs. This they do, as well as any other, provided the ground is light and not too sticky, but the method has to be different from any of the local breeds.

It is simply this—that you cannot run them along in small pens as you do the Down sheep, for two or three reasons. The first and greatest is that you could not keep them in; the second, they would not eat each pen clean to begin, as they are rather a shy and dainty feeder. The best method is to have wire netting and run it up the outside of the roots, and then run another line about the same distance wide as you would give in hurdles, and, of course, have the dividing fence in between, done with hurdles making the first pen rather big so that they do not learn to jump out.

When the first pen is partly cleared or dirtied begin by giving them a fresh bit every morning. Never mind though they have not cleared the first, second, or third pens, they will do so later, and will come back over it days afterwards and clear up. By going on in this way, to the top of the roots, you simply begin coming down the fields, by moving out the existing netting, a fresh break every day, and still allowing them the run of the first strip cleared coming up the field.

By this way you give them plenty of room and they settle down and do not jump. Of course, occasionally, you get an inveterate jumper—there is only one thing to do, get rid of him, or he will soon have companions.

I know that some one will say that you do not get the ground

PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING 33

evenly manured this way. I agree, but at the same time, it is on the ground somewhere, and that is better than none at all.

On reading over the foregoing, I just thought the picture I had drawn seems very easy and rather rosy, and that all the struggling farmer has to do to live easy and get money is to turn his farm to grass, get a flock of sheep, a stick in his hand, call the dog to heel, and march out among the sheep, and the thing is done. Well—it is not quite so easy as that. It is true that sheep while well and thriving require no tonics—but they are subject to many ailments and as soon as they are affected they are quickly wrong or gone. I will just mention two, and they are the bane of a sheep farmer's life, and play the very devil with the sheep—*viz.*: foot-rot, and fly. If either is neglected—well goodbye to profits.

TREATMENT OF MEADOWS

The treatment of meadows should be very different from ten to twenty years ago. Sheep must have young sweet grass. I make a practice, therefore, of managing the grass so that every field is close-grazed once during the year.

In a wet year like 1930, when the stock could not keep the grass under control, I freely used the mowing machine. In addition, I top-dress about one-third of the grass land every year with phosphate and potash—this enables the carrying of a larger stock on sweeter grass—and helps to fatten the lambs more quickly.

NEW ZEALAND

In conclusion—may I say that I have had the benefit of seeing something of the methods adopted by our chief competitors in land production, namely—New Zealand. As a result of my visit to that country, early last year, I have every confidence in saying that we have nothing to learn from them so far as general feeding and management are concerned.

A hundred ewes, here, will produce considerably more lambs, than the same number of ewes over there—which must mean a profit to us. They, however, have great advantages in climate—which provides them with growing grass for eleven months in the year. This means that lambs are produced entirely from grass—no artificial feeding being required or given. Apart from some minor features with regard to dipping and clipping, there are no outstanding lessons which they can teach the Home Country. The breed of ewe largely predominating out there is the *Kent Ewe*, which has been crossed with several breeds of rams, but they are now using practically nothing but the South Down, which produces very even uniform

34 PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

carcases, commonly called Canterbury Lamb, as seen in our butcher's shops to-day.

The financial aspect of the position, however, is all in favour of the Half-bred, and if abattoirs or cold storage is introduced into this country, I do not think it will be necessary to sacrifice the greater advantages of the Half-bred ewe.

THE PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

By H. G. MILLER

Farm Director, Rothamsted

ONE of the most urgent problems in *English* agriculture to-day specially from the Midlands south, is that of how best to utilize our grassland. The area of permanent grass, in England and Wales, has increased by over 1,000,000 acres since 1921, and by nearly 300,000 acres since 1927. There has also been a large increase in the area of "rough grazing." Yet since 1921, the increase in cattle (all ages) has been only 330,000 and in sheep 2,500,000; that is rather less than five sheep or their equivalent for each additional acre of permanent grass if we assume that the additional acres of rough grazing have carried no stock. More noteworthy, however, is the fact that, while we now have 300,000 acres more permanent grass than in 1927, we have 400,000 fewer cattle and about 750,000 fewer sheep. This is a sure sign of shortage of capital amongst farmers. It is an equally good indication of the problem facing farmers who have followed a "back to grass" policy.

There is no point in carrying on any department of the farm at a loss for an indefinite period of years. If an agricultural revolution is now in progress which will render certain crops and farming systems unprofitable, the situation must be met by drastic changes. At present the most favoured division of the land on a farm is for one-third to be arable and two-thirds grass, the arable being used largely to produce winter fodder for sheep and cattle, and straw for litter, except where profitable cash crops can be grown. If present tendencies continue, it will be necessary to change these proportions of arable and grass and to discover means for making our sheep and cattle less dependent on, or even independent of, arable land.

The uses of grassland are strictly limited and its growth highly irregular. Apart from a few acres for poultry, pigs and horses, we must use our grassland for grazing milking cows, cattle or sheep, or