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The Place and Management of Sheep in Modern Farming

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The Southdown

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To anyone proposing putting more land to grass, I cannot too strongly recommend common sainfoin if their land will grow it. It produces a good hay crop for several years, and there is nothing like the aftermath for lambs. If sainfoin cannot be grown, don't forget wild white clover and cocksfoot. I'm aware of the many criticisms of cocksfoot, but provided a leafy variety is sown thickly and kept well grazed by horned stock, I've found it invaluable.

Another word of warning to prospective buyers of ewes or ewe lambs from the North of England and Scotland, beware of buying stock from a flock infected with scrapie. This is an insidious disease which may not show for several years, and cannot be detected at time of purchase. It is a good plan to take the auctioneer into your confidence and ask him to recommend flocks to you.

In conclusion, I would like to express my appreciation to the work done by pedigree breeders. Without the good foundation which they provide, we could not hope for the results we get.

THE PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

By H. W. DREWITT

Colworth, Sussex

THE SOUTHDOWN

THE Southdown breed takes its name from the South Down range of hills which stretches across Sussex from Eastbourne to the Hampshire border. Here they have been kept from time immemorial, and at an early date were introduced into Norfolk and Dorsetshire. Lately many flocks have been started in Gloucestershire where a rather different type is favoured. In the United States and in New Zealand many pure bred flocks are kept, chiefly for the breeding of rams for crossing, as the Southdown sire is usually very impressive and leaves an indelible mark on any other breed of sheep.

Almost all the modern breeds of short-wooled sheep have been built up by an infusion of Southdown blood.

The traditional method of management was to run the ewes on the Downs during the day in the care of a shepherd and to bring them back at night to a fold of clover rape or roots according to the time of year. While thus of course enriching the arable land at the

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expense of the Downs, the latter seem to have attained a state of equilibrium and to have altered but little either in amount or quality of herbage during the last century.

While it may seem a simple matter to mind sheep on a Down, the skilful shepherd would take care to make the sheep feed the Down evenly and to have a sheltered piece for bad weather.

The last twenty years, with their urgent need for economy in labour, have brought about many changes in the methods of management. Very few of the flocks are now minded on the Downs; either cows have taken pride of place on many of the more accessible and better farms, or on the poorer and more out-of-the-way watered; on one with the capital required to stock a flock farm can be found to take such a place. The result is that a much larger proportion of Southdown flocks are kept on the maritime plain between the Downs and the sea, where sheep used to be kept in hurdles throughout the year, but here again changes are taking place in the methods of management, and these I propose briefly to indicate in the hope that some among my audience may find something of interest and possibly of profit.

While probably a shepherd has always looked after more capital than any other man of the farm, the present price of labour makes it imperative to lessen the labour cost per hundred sheep if arable sheep farming is to survive. The cost of the ewe up to the time of her first mating can be kept down by running the ewe tugs on the meadows during their second summer; or to go to the other extreme the ewe lambs can be mated in their first autumn and produce a lamb at one year old, to do this successfully they must be done well from the time they are born until their first lamb is weaned.

Another laborious job is pecking up turnips and swedes during the autumn and winter months; this can be obviated by folding the ewes on such crops as rape, mustard, beet tops where sugar beet is grown, marrow stem or thousand headed kale, turnips drilled and drag harrowed to thin them. In growing these crops there is a double saving in the hoeing and pecking. Hay is necessary to the Southdown while on these crops, although a saving can be made in this respect if a grass field is at hand for the ewes to run out in for an hour or so each day.

I have been asked to provide some information on costs and prices. Costs will vary so much from one year to another and from one farm to another that any statement on this point must be of a very general character. When sugar beet growing began we had to find some basis upon which to value the tops which were consumed on the ground by sheep; to arrive at some figure for comparison we took out the cost of growing several fields of marrow stem kale

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and found that in the winter a ewe could be kept for an average cost of 5d. per week with the help of one pound of hay per day, which at £3 per ton works out at about 2d. per week. In passing I may say that forty years ago 3d. per head per week was the figure adopted for book-keeping purposes as we passed the flock from one farm to another in the winter.

My own flock of Southdowns does not cost me so much as they are frequently invited out by other farmers who have more keep than they want; in this way I get an average of about 100 ewes kept for nothing the year round. I should keep more sheep in this way, but in a year when the root crop partially failed no one would have much to give away and I might have more sheep than I knew what to do with. Another advantage is that these farms have usually had few or no sheep on them for some time, and it is a common experience that sheep do best on land that has carried no sheep for some time.

All sheep and lambs have access to mineralized salt licks which have proved valuable in keeping sheep free from the troubles which affect them when they are folded on the same land too often, but there is one disease for which no cure has yet been found, that is the dysentery which lambs suffer from when they are folded on land which has already had sheep on it in the same season.

We begin to sell our lambs—which are mostly dropped in March—as stores in October, and last autumn sold in October and November 500 lambs at an average price of 5s. 5d. After they were weaned in the first week in June, they had been folded first on vetches, then second cut clover, followed by rape from which they were marketed. They had a gradually increasing amount of mixed dry food until they were eating $\frac{3}{4}$ of a pound per head; the mixture was composed of three parts crushed oats, three parts dried grains, one part cracked peas, with a little crushed linseed for the last six weeks. Half of the trough food is given in the morning and the other half in the afternoon. If we can grow a piece of rape next to a piece of clover, the lambs have a fold of clover in the morning and a fold of rape in the afternoon, but it is not always possible to do this.

The ewe flock can be brought in to clear up behind the best lambs, and can frequently be kept cheaply on food that would otherwise be wasted; thus the ewe lambs run on the young clover seeds from the middle of September until the end of October, this is good both for the young seeds and the sheep.

The ewes are kept in the flock as long as their teeth are sound and are then fattened out, the first draft going out in July and August and the second from November to March as the state of the market may dictate, but they must be gone before the ewes from the flying

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flocks come on the market as their fat lambs are sold. These draft ewes are finished for market with about one pound of whatever food is cheap; last year it was oats and cotton cake, this year it is maize and cotton cake. They go to the butcher at about 72 lb. carcase weight and are from 9d. to 10d. per lb.

There is one point upon which the Southdown always scores, that is the demand for small joints; no other breed can supply the small joint with but little fat as the Southdown can, and butchers find no difficulty in disposing of the carcase throughout the district in which I farm which becomes more of a residential character every year.

From the time lambing begins until the lambs are weaned there is little that can be done to economize in labour as many who have tried to have found by bitter experience. If the lambs are kept going with the help of trough food the forwardest can be sold for fat lamb, although this outlet is being rapidly curtailed by the competition of lambs from the grass breeds. The remaining lambs can be sold at the autumn sales to farmers who still adhere, either from custom or necessity, to the growth of hoed crops such as swedes; but as far as my experience goes, nine years out of ten the advantage is with the breeder rather than the feeder.

Shearing is another expensive item in these times in spite of the use of shearing machines; in fact it is doubtful if, at present prices, wool leaves any margin after the cost of cutting and marketing has been met. As no doubt there are some chemists amongst us to-day, perhaps they will consider the possibility of introducing a dose of medicine which will make the sheep shed its coat as naturally as the horse does.

It is rather by the closest attention to detail than by any spectacular changes of method that the cost of keeping Southdown sheep can be kept down; and it must not be forgotten that the pure breeds must be kept going if for no other reason than the necessity of supplying the numerous farmers in the South and Midlands with rams suitable for mating with ewes of the mountain breeds for the production of early grass lambs, and for this purpose I, as a life-long student of Southdown sheep, know of no more useful and profitable ram than the Southdown.