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The Place and Management of Sheep in Modern Farming

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Chairman's Opening Remarks

J. Egerton Quested

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CHAIRMAN'S OPENING REMARKS

J. EGERTON QUESTED

Chairman

I HAVE been farming and grazing in the south-east corner of the County of Kent for forty years, and my flock consists of about 2500 pedigree Romney Marsh ewes. These ewes are all individually numbered and pedigrees have been kept since 1895 so that I can carry the pedigree of any sheep that I have bred since that date through thirty-six years.

The system that I adopt is that when the lamb is born the mother's number is put on one side in paint figures and the sire's number on the other side. These lambs are all tattooed in the ear with a number within about three to four weeks from birth. The sires, dams, and lambs numbers are all put into a small book which is copied afterwards into the large pedigree flock book.

I have exported specimens of my sheep to practically all countries in the world, but the majority have been taken by South America which is our best market. In South America the Romney has gone ahead by leaps and bounds and I think I might say has become more popular than any other breed of sheep in the world through its natural characteristics of foraging and grazing. For instance, if a flock of 100 Romney sheep are turned into a 20-acre field within a few minutes you will see them dotted all over the field. On the other hand, if a flock of 100 Down sheep are turned out into the same field, you will see them moving in a mob and hardly separating at all. This of course makes a material difference to a grazing sheep, if they are distributed evenly they do not soil the pasture so quickly.

The home of the Romney sheep is of course in Romney Marsh, a big flat stretch of land which has been reclaimed from the sea. In Hasted's "History of Kent" it is stated that it was a grant of King Offa to Archbishop Janibert about the year A.D. 795. It was then known as Rommonne. It is said that the breed of Romney Marsh sheep has probably the longest traceable history of any in the country. Under hard conditions of flood and storm, fighting for existence against the forces of nature, the Romney has found its own salvation,

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and by the survival of the fittest has gained that strong constitution which is one of its principal characteristics to-day. Hence its popularity in the big continent of South America.

There are a good many thousands of Romney ewes used for crossing purposes, principally with the Southdown; but also a good many with Hampshires and Suffolk, and it is claimed that the cross of Romney Southdown produces a lamb which thrives and fattens more quickly on grass than any other cross. I myself have had lambs killed in the month of August that were born in March-April and fed on nothing else but grass, weighing up to 56 lb. per carcase and the quality of the flesh has no superior.

In the autumn there are thousands of these lambs bought for exportation to other counties, in the Midlands, to be fatted off. This has become quite an event during the month of August, sheep have very big sales up to 15,000 to 20,000, and buyers come from about twenty outside counties to purchase them.

So far as the grazing of the Romney Marsh is concerned, a great many lambs are put out to keep there, but many go to Surrey, Sussex Buckinghamshire, etc. about the beginning of August; and are brought back in the following April for grazing purposes and then finished off on the rich grazing lands without ever seeing an ounce of artificial food.

The Romney Marsh is unlike most districts in England, for its pastures are never free from sheep and probably have not been for centuries. My own land carries, in the winter, two to two and a half per acre and that is gradually increased as the grass grows in the spring up to eight, nine, or even ten sheep to the acre. In a grassy summer probably I should want half a bullock to the acre to eat off the surplus grass. This will give one a little idea as to the richness of the soil whose equal I claim never to have seen in any part of the world.

The one drawback to the Romney sheep to-day is that its joints are rather big, and it is well known that the public have been educated to small mutton. This of course has militated very much against the Romney sheep, and we find that our principal trade for large wethers, which weigh from 90 to 120 lb. per carcase, is in Yorkshire where they appear to appreciate the quality of mutton and do not mind the size of the joints.

I think I have said enough to make my listeners interested in the Romney Marsh land and the Romney breed of sheep. The latter I claim to be the kindest, hardiest and best stock master's friend in the world.