

THE HERDWICK SHEEP.

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THE Herdwick sheep is a breed of sheep little known beyond its native hills—the Fells of Cumberland, Westmorland and North Lancashire. The unique characteristics which eminently fit the breed for the poor high pastures are not those to commend it in the fatter lands and more populous places. The writer has never seen Herdwick sheep nor heard of their existing outside the counties of Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire, and in these counties they exist only on the Fells or hills.

The first volume of the Herdwick Sheep Breeders' Association published in 1920 registers flocks of breeding ewes to the number of 13,600, and there are many flocks not in the Herd Book. Though numerically comparing unfavourably with the other and better known breeds of sheep, they are nevertheless of great importance. In the writer's opinion they are the only breed of live stock capable of existing on and exploiting agriculturally that huge stretch of high-lying poor land which constitutes the picturesque mountains of the English Lake District.

The exceptional hardiness of the breed is evidenced by their habitat, some of the runs or heafs reaching more than 3,000 feet above sea level, *e.g.*, Helvellyn, Skiddaw, Saddleback. The sheep possess original characteristics and apparently have no affinity to any other British breed, though it has been suggested that they may have been the progenitors of the Black Faced Sheep. Attempts to cross them with other breeds to improve their wool or weight have without exception failed, their hardiness always being impaired.

The name Herdwick (*Herd*, a number of animals under charge of a man; and *wick*, a district or here a run) signifies a tract of land under charge of a herd or shepherd employed by the owner or Lord of the Manor.

The following extract is from a charter of lands at Furness Abbey, dated 1537, and brings out the meaning of the word Herdwick: "Pastures and Agistament and brusying occupied to those of the said late Monastery for the sustentacyon of the catell and . . . devyded into sundry herd wycks and shepe cots." Also, referring to lands in same district in 1564: "Those parcells following, that is to say the Herdwick called Waterside Parke—the Herdwick called Lawson Parke, &c."

The name of the breed is derived therefore from the peculiar custom associated with feudal grazing rights (and still seen in



Photo]

[Mayson, Keswick.

Herdwick Ram King Dick : Owner, F. R. Searle, Lonsdale, Threlkeld.



photo]

[Mayson, Keswick.

Herdwick Ewes on Skiddaw Fell.



Photo]

Herdwick Ewes and Lambs on typical Fell.

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[Moyson, Keastick.

fetlock and covered with strong bristly hair, and the feet are wide and white. Especially in one flock the presence of an extra or 14th rib is often found.

The rams are generally horned; of 570 examined, only $4\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. were hornless, and some of these latter had rudimentary horns. The ewes are always hornless.

The Fells, the habitat of this breed, are high up, 3,000 feet or more, steep, hard, dry, and poor grazing. On these Fells perhaps no other breed of British live stock could exist, yet except when the snow is too deep or is frozen for a lengthy period the Herdwicks receive no hand feeding. The winter death rate is high, but only the existence of such a breed allows those poor heights to be exploited. Bracken covers the Fells, and maggots are a serious summer cause of wastage.

A Typical Tenancy.—Some of the Fells have recently been fenced, but generally the Herdwick farm is unfenced, the grazing rights being described in the lease as “unlimited Fell.” This fact dictates, though the Feudal system may have had its influence, the unique custom, still the general rule, that a regular breeding flock of sheep, the “heaf (heath) going flock” is let along with the land. The flock, like the land, is the property of the landlord. The tenant finds security for redelivery of this flock at the end of the tenancy. The let stipulates that “the heaf going must be maintained,” and a like number of sheep of condition, quality, age and sex be handed over to the incoming tenant. Oversmen act for both parties at the turnover, and the landlord may pay for “betterment” or the tenant for “worsement.”

A typical heaf going flock would consist of the following sheep, as in a place which was advertised last year:—

200 Wethers: 80 4-year-old, 120 3-year-old.
 300 Ewes.
 250 Hoggs, half male, half female.
 150 Twinters, *i.e.*, two winters, half male, half female.
 3 Rams.

Total 903 Sheep.

Heaf going flocks vary from 50 to 2,000 sheep. The 69 flocks registered last year in the Herdwick Sheep Breeders' Association Flock Book shows an average ewe stock of 169 ewes. These represent the hill farms, but many much smaller flocks are kept as part of the smaller stock raising hillside farms.

Especially on the fenced places the custom is growing of keeping all “gimmer,” *i.e.*, female hoggs.

On these unfenced Fells, it is only by keeping sheep reared on the place that straying can be prevented, and the full resources of the Fell can be exploited. The older sheep lead the others well out towards the boundaries. For these reasons wethers are kept to the age of four or five years, a custom now considered elsewhere unsound economically.

The fact that these flocks can be maintained on unfenced lands is entirely due to the quite exceptional homing instinct of the Herdwick sheep. A Herdwick born on a particular place will spend the rest of its life within a few hundred yards of that place, and a shepherd knows where he will always find particular sheep. Herdwicks sold away from their native heafs will return from incredible distances, crossing rivers and even lakes en route. To-day they are brought from 3 to 7 miles for dipping, &c., through the flocks of several owners. On being released, if unrestrained, they return to their own heafs.

The rams are put out on the Fells from Martinmas to the end of November. In the higher places they are "ruddled," *i.e.*, coloured all over with red so that they may be easily seen by the ewes on the open Fells during snow. At the autumn shows at Eskdale and Keswick, the rams are generally shown "ruddled."

The peculiar custom of "Ram Letting" is general, and at Keswick on the first Saturday in October and at Eskdale on the last Friday in September large numbers of rams and ram lambs are exposed for sale or hire. The writer knows one farmer who at present keeps seventy stock rams. Many of the best rams are bespoke for years in advance. The hiring fee varies from 30s. to £5 or more—one famous ram was let for seven days at £1 a day, and another for 10 days for £7. Ram lambs are let out to farmers to winter—the farmer wintering them, then having the option of claiming their use for two or more years free of charge.

In the cold spring weather after the season, the rams are kept inside, hand fed and turned out to water, and some of the smaller flocks are housed this way in winter and hand fed. Up to £50 has been paid in the open market for a Herdwick ram.

The lambs are dropped not before the end of April; 90 lambs to 100 ewes is good, 80 to 100 not bad; 10 per cent. of ewes with twins is quite good.

It is essential that the lambs be wintered on low land the first year. The usual Herdwick farm not having sufficient low land for this nor to grow hay to hand feed them, wintering "outside" must be found. Owing to the difficulty of finding this near, to the high cost of freightage if carried to a distance, and

to the high charge for wintering (now 12s. 6d. a head from 10th October to Ladyday) this unfortunately essential charge is a very serious drain on the hill farmer.

As the majority of the farms are unfenced it is especially necessary that the sheep of each flock can be easily identified. Each flock therefore has its characteristic ear and body marks. These are registered in the Shepherds' Guide, where engravings of both sides of the sheep of each flock are given, showing the position and description of the various marks. Marks have become part and parcel of certain places, remaining with them through any changes of tenancy, *e.g.*, just a raven clapped on the near side will always mean Ravenscrag farm. Flockmasters were wont to meet annually at Kerkstone Top (2,000 ft.) to exchange strays, but this is now done mostly at the various sheep fairs and ram hirings.

The best ewes are generally kept for the production of pure bred lambs, but on those places where any low land is available a proportion of ewes will be crossed with Leicester or Wensleydale rams for producing grey-faced lambs. The former give the quicker-growing lambs, the latter the longer-backed selling sorts. These grey-faced lambs are sold to the lowland farmers who fatten them off or keep them as breeding stock.

The average weight of the dressed Herdwick carcass is about 12 lb. per quarter for adults. The mutton is unexcelled by that of any British breed of sheep, and 4-year-old Herdwick mutton is claimed to be the best finished and most valuable mutton produced. Four-year-old Herdwick wethers sold last year at prices ranging to over £5 each.

The average ewe fleece weighs about $4\frac{1}{2}$ lb., but rams and ewes fed for shows often yield twice that weight. The wool is coarse, and was used for carpet making, but at present, like the wool of other breeds, it is a drug on the market. In 1908 the price fell as low as 4d. per lb.

Among these mountains innovations come slowly and many ancient and interesting customs still survive. The Shepherds' Meets, at which formerly "strays" were handed over, partake now more of the holiday, and at the Dun Cow at Mardale (soon to be 20 feet below the surface of Lake Haweswater) there is annually a great meeting of shepherds; the day is given over to fox hunts, hound trails and Fell races, the evening to song and sentiment, where yet one may hear many a lusty hunting song and many a strange toast—such as "Confusion to the scab," and "Full sheets and ready money."