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The Place and Management of Sheep in Modern Farming

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SHEEP TRIALS AT SOUTH-EASTERN AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE

By N. V. HEWISON

THE County of Kent is probably more thickly populated with sheep than any other county in England. A portion of the county in the extreme South-east known as Romney Marsh is renowned for its excellent pastures and also for the native breed of sheep, the Kent or Romney Marsh, that are grazed so successfully there.

Situation of Farms

The college farms are not situated on this excellent farming land, but are in the main, upland, lying on the southern slopes of the North Downs, a range of chalky hills running along the north of Kent and terminating at the sea-coast around Dover.

Soils

The soil ranges from a very thin chalk at the highest point, to a richer loam in the valley. The natural drainage is, in the main, good, which tends to make sheep farming easier than on some of the wetter lying soils, although during a severe drought the pastures burn badly.

Trials

The trials (of which a summary will be given later) that have been carried out at Wye with different breeds of ewes, were designed to try to find out which breed of ewe was the most profitable on our type of farm.

Similar types of soil are fairly common in the Province served by the College. It may be assumed that on better soils the results would be proportionately better.

Breeds kept

For a number of years pure bred flocks of Kent and Southdowns had been kept on the college farms; the Southdowns were kept

PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING 61

principally on the arable. The folding proved unremunerative and the Southdown flock was sold. Our attention was then turned to sheep on the pastures only. In 1924 it was decided to try another breed of ewe in addition to the Kents. The idea was to try to obtain a ewe that would give a high lamb average, also an early maturing lamb. The main points we had in view when deciding upon a breed, were getting a sheep to be kept on the pastures, and one that was of good quality, prolific, a good milker, reasonably hardy, and a sheep that would wear well.

Half-bred

The Border-Leicester Cheviot, or more commonly known as the Half-bred, was the ewe decided upon. The Half-bred, I am sure, needs no introduction from me. They are considered a commercial, rent paying breed of sheep, and combine in a remarkable degree the best points of both parents, the Cheviot ewe and the Border-Leicester ram.

Two tooth ewes known as gimmers are purchased, either at one of the Border Country Sales, or farther north.

Rams Used

The rams used for crossing are the Southdown and the Hampshire. The Hampshire is not used until at least two crops of lambs have been bred, as trouble at lambing might occur if the Hampshires were put on to the young ewes.

This year a Suffolk ram is also being used.

Disposal of Lambs

All the lambs are sold straight off the ewes, either as fat lambs during June and July or as store lambs early in August.

Last season no fat lambs were drawn. All the lambs were taken off the ewes on the morning of 1st August and sold at a local store lamb sale on that day.

Management of Flock

The system of running the ewes all breeds is as follows. They are run almost entirely on the pastures, and kept in lots of about forty. This number is more easily shepherded, and any ewe a little

62 PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

bit under the weather stands a much better chance when trough feeding is in operation than when they are run in larger lots.

The ewes are allowed to run over the stubbles after harvest, this being the only time they are on the arable.

Mating

The ewes are mated the last week in October, allowing about forty ewes to one ram. They are run from two-and-a-half to three ewes per acre on the best fields and get little or no change of pasture. Some of the lambs are sold out of the same field in which their dams were mated, the ewes having been in the same field all through.

Feeding

Up to Christmas the ewes get their living on the pastures. After this date a little trough food is given, allowing $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. and if keep is very short $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. per ewe per day. The usual mixture is home-grown corn with cake to balance the ration. A month later mangels are carted out, allowing 6 lb. each per day. Hay is allowed only when snow is on the ground or during hard frosts.

Lambing

The lambing all takes place in the fields, the ewes are never housed or penned. As soon as possible after birth each lamb has its naval dressed with Iodised Phenol. This precaution is important and especially so where the ewes are driven in to lambing yards or any permanent lambing place that is likely to be contaminated. Thatched hurdles are erected about the field, these, with the hedges, are the only shelter. I have noticed in some districts in Kent that faggots are laid at random about the fields, and it is surprising the amount of shelter the lambs will get from these faggots. Tailing and castrating takes place nine to fourteen days after birth. The lambs are penned up in the field, care being taken not to have the pen in the same spot as the previous year, to avoid any risk of contaminated soil. Tails are burnt off.

Feeding Lambs

A month after lambing, trough feeding the ewes is discontinued. The lambs are encouraged to feed in creeps, and are allowed as much concentrates as they will clean up. Last year from birth to 1st August, the date on which they were sold, the lambs consumed an average of only 18 lb. concentrates.

PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING 63

Disease amongst Lambs

So far very little trouble has been experienced amongst the lambs with disease. As before mentioned, the fields are fairly heavily stocked with sheep, two-and-a-half to three ewes per acre and in the summer their lambs. If any scouring is noticed in an individual lamb, a pill is given, but no systematic pilling or drenching takes place.

Foot Troubles and Lameness

Probably the most difficult part of sheep management is keeping the flocks free from lameness. If a flock becomes badly infected with foot-rot it is a long and costly job to get them sound on their feet again, apart from the loss of condition of the animals affected. After lambing, as soon as the weather is favourable, all the ewes are penned up to be trimmed or dragged and at the same time the feet are pared. The ewes are then run through a foot bath containing Copper Sulphate or Cooper's Dip, whether they are lame or not. They all have the same treatment again in the autumn. The foot bath is of very little use unless the feet have been well pared previously.

Dipping

This is a most important part of sheep husbandry and should be carried out under the strictest supervision. A sheep badly dipped is worse than if it had not been dipped. The animal is only distressed and no good results come from the dipping. Any sheep we buy are always dipped immediately they have recovered from their journey. If this is not carried out they may spread ticks or something worse to a clean flock.

Flushing

No trough food is given to the ewes before mating, but the run that they have over the stubbles and after this on the young seeds, or aftermaths, brings them into good condition for mating.

We now have a flock of eleven score Half-bred ewes of various ages. A few of the original lot of Half-breds brought down in 1924 are still on the farm and are ready to come down with their seventh crop of lambs in a few days. The udders that they are making would put some heifers to shame.

In Report No. XI by Mr. Wyllie on Sheep Breeding and Feeding over four years on the college farms, some figures relating to the Half-breds may be of interest.

64 PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

The average cost per year of keeping a ewe is 43s. 11d. and is made up as follows:—

	s.	d.
Corn and Cake 134 lb.	11	5
Hay 14 "	5	
Mangels 807 "	4	11
Other foods	8	
Grazing	14	11
	—	
	32	4
(1930-31 cheap foods do not come into this)		
Labour	8	0
Other items	3	7
	—	
	43	11

The profit per ewe over the four years (Half-breds) was 13s. 9d. That was on a lamb fall of 141 per cent., or putting it another way, the cost of rearing each lamb was 36s. 9d., the average profit per lamb was exactly 10s.; 1.38 lambs sold per ewe per annum at an average of 46s. 9d. apiece.

So far as can be seen the only way of increasing the profit is to increase the number of lambs per ewe. Feeding will be less at the present prices of Cake and Corn, but it is as well to keep in mind that any saving effected in this direction is at the expense of the corn crops and does not affect the total farm profits. Labour may be slightly reduced with a larger flock, but the main source of extra profit is more lambs reared per 100 ewes. The following figures may be of interest with regard to this.

In 1927 a small lot of ewes, nineteen, gave the following lamb fall. Thirteen ewes brought up thirteen lambs and six ewes brought up twelve lambs. The lambs were weighed at birth and again the day before they were sold. The average live weight gain for all lambs, doubles and singles, was .67 lb. per day. Average age, 106 days.

The average gain live weight per day since birth for thirteen single lambs was .70 lb.

The average gain live weight per day since birth for twelve double lambs was .63 lb.

Live weight increase per ewe:

single lambs	76 lb. total
double "	131.83 " "

or

Price of lamb realized at sale, per ewe:	£	s.	d.
single	3	12	11
double	6	11	0

nearly double.

PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING 65

Kerry Hill

After working on the Half-breds for four years it was decided to try the Kerry Hill breed of ewe.

The Kerry Hill on the Welsh borders appears to fill the same place in that country as the Half-bred does in the northern border district.

Only two years' results are available as against six with the Half-breds.

The ewes are treated in exactly the same way as mentioned previously. In their first season they were crossed with a South Down ram. This cross did not come up to our expectations and a Hampshire ram was used the second season with much better results. This season a Suffolk ram is being run as well as the Hampshire.

Lamb Fall

The lamb fall for the

Half-breds for six years	. 137.34 per cent.
Kerry Hill „ two „	. 130 „ „

The Kerry Hill results are for two years only and would need to be taken through at least another two lambing seasons before a definite opinion can be formed.

Quality

Much has been written in the past about the small joint, both mutton and beef, and in certain quarters quite a wrong impression is gained with regard to this. In a great many provincial markets a large lamb or teg of good quality will realize just about the same per lb. as a small lamb or teg of the same quality, the total, of course, being much higher for the larger sheep, providing the quality is the same. Our aim must be to produce the very best quality and grow it as well as we can.

Pastures

Before closing I would like to say a word about the pastures and their treatment. I have mentioned the drainage as being important, but equally important is the sheep carrying capacity. To increase the number of sheep and lambs carried per acre, without getting the pastures sheep sick, and to increase the quality and quantity of the herbage, we started a systematic manuring of the pastures. Each

66 PLACE OF SHEEP IN MODERN FARMING

field has a dressing, every fourth year, of 10 cwt. of Basic Slag, or its equivalent in some form of phosphate. This application of phosphates in addition to improving the amount of grazing, I believe, brings old pastures more into line with young pastures, on which sheep and lambs do so well.

DISCUSSION

Mr. J. F. H. THOMAS (Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester).—This Conference has surely brought to our minds a realization of the vast knowledge possessed by flockmasters, and we must realize what a great need there is for a wider dissemination of that knowledge, not only for the benefit of other flockmasters, but also for the guidance of those research workers who are in a position to investigate important problems in sheep husbandry.

There are three types of problems needing full and immediate investigation :—

- (1) Those relating to breeding and crossbreeding.
- (2) Nutritional and management problems.
- (3) Problems relating to disease and disease control.

There is a need for the closest co-operation between the shepherd, the flockmaster, the research worker, and those who can undertake the collection and correlation of data under field conditions.

In November last the Experiments Committee of the Bath and West Show Society approved of a scheme of inquiry into sheep farming systems in south-west England. The main objects of this enquiry were :—

- (1) To remedy the present lack of any large scale inquiry into the problems of the flockmaster.
- (2) To obtain reliable information on the varied methods of sheep farming practised.
- (3) To ascertain the success of recent modifications in methods of feeding and management.
- (4) To obtain information on the main causes of loss.
- (5) To demonstrate the importance of problems in sheep husbandry which need specialised research under field conditions.

With the helpful co-operation of the agricultural organizers of the counties concerned in the scheme, a large number of enquiry forms were sent out to flockmasters. As a result of that preliminary circula-