Famous sheep breeds. 3. The Leicester

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Mr. O. G. A. Tanner's Grand Champion English Leicester ram at the 1959 Perth Royal Show.

Mr. O. G. A. Tanner’s Grand Champion English Leicester ewe at the 1959 Perth Royal Show.
THE Leicester sheep, often referred to in Australia as the “English” Leicester to distinguish it from its relative, the Border Leicester, is the oldest of the improved British breeds. Its development from the nondescript local sheep marked an advance in stockbreeding technique which did much to make Britain famous as the “stud-farm of the world.”

The Leicester is a breed that will always be associated with the name of Robert Bakewell of Dishley Grange Leicestershire, who has been aptly termed “the father of British studbreeding.” The Leicester of the pre-Bakewell era was a lanky, slab-sided, raw-boned, slow-maturing animal, valued more for its wool than its mutton qualities, but Bakewell’s Improved or “Dishley Leicester” was a meat producer par excellence, quick-maturing and symmetrical.

In the days when most of Britain’s grain was sown, harvested and threshed by hand, there was but little pasture as we know it today and the livestock of many owners grazed together on “common lands” where they interbred at will. Under these conditions it was almost impossible to improve stock by selection or by scientific feeding and although a number of different breeds had been evolved to suit conditions in particular districts, there was but little uniformity even within the breeds.

BREEDING AND FEEDING

With the introduction of land enclosure, various individual stock owners embarked upon programmes of breed improvement, and Bakewell, born in 1725, concentrated on Leicester sheep and Longhorn cattle, from about 1755 onward, with marked success.

This “father of studbreeding” was a secretive individual and little authoritative information exists concerning his methods but it seems certain that his success was achieved by selecting suitable animals and inbreeding them and their progeny to a degree that was frowned upon by breeders of that period. His critics, and they were many, voiced some caustic comments upon these “incestuous matings” but the results he achieved gained him many followers and imitators.

Bakewell concentrated upon meat production, probably having realised that the progressive industrialisation of Britain, then taking place, would result in a rapidly-expanding market for foods of all kinds. It was the era of large fat joints, and the Dishley Leicester was developed to give a rapidly-maturing animal which combined the fatness of maturity with the tenderness usually associated with lamb. Bakewell fed his sheep well and grew root crops especially for them.

We speak today of “progeny testing” as the only satisfactory index of an animal’s true value, and Bakewell realised that too. He used to hire out his rams to neighbouring farmers and closely observed the quality
of their "get." Early in his sheep-breeding career, the rams were let out for 17s. 6d. a head but a few years later we find him getting 100 guineas a head.

In 1786 he let two-thirds of the service of one ram for 200 guineas. His highest rate was 800 guineas from two breeders for two-thirds of the season's services of his favourite ram. A "Dishley Society" was formed which was incidentally the first British breed society to come into being and members pledged themselves not to use rams which did not belong to Mr. Bakewell or other members of the society.

IMPROVED MANY BREEDS

The Leicester in its improved form was highly prepotent and was used to improve many other "rough" longwool breeds then existing, and even some of the Downs breeds. It played a part in bringing the Lincoln to its present state of near perfection; the popularity of the Border Leicester is due to its Dishley foundation and the Dorset Horn and Romney Marsh sheep also benefited by infusions of Leicester blood.

The Leicester played its part in improving the early Australian flocks and soon became a popular breed in the North American settlements. Nearer home it received a particularly favourable reception on the Yorkshire Wolds where the breed was believed to have been introduced by that famous sportsman and stockbreeder, Sir Tatton Sykes of Sledmere. Today the Wolds are the chief centres for Britain's Leicester stock.

It was in the Wolds district, at Driffield in the East Riding of Yorkshire, that the Improved Leicester Sheepbreeders' Association was formed about a hundred years later (1893) and it was soon after the formation of this breed society that the Leicester Flock Book came into being.

MEAT BEFORE WOOL

Bakewell's concentration on meat production in his Dishley Leicesters is claimed by his critics to have led to a deterioration in the quality of the fleece, together with some loss of prolificacy, for the production of twin lambs was considered undesirable. He maintained that it was beyond the capacity of any ewe to bring to their full foetal growth two such lambs as he desired. Possibly his policy of in-and-in breeding also resulted in some lack of sexual vigour in the rams and a lowering of the milk production of the ewes, the best milkers among ewes being usually found in the more primitive or "unimproved" sheep except in a few breeds where breeding for milk production has taken place.

Whether these faults actually existed or not may be open to doubt, but if they did exist they seem to have been remedied by subsequent breeders.

The modern Leicester is a shapely-bodied sheep of sound constitution. According to present-day standards the meat is rather too coarse of grain and carries too much fat to be popular in its mature stage though favoured as hogget mutton. The various crossbreds with Leicester parents give excellent mutton, and the female progeny of Merino ewes and Leicester rams produce excellent export lambs when mated withrams of the Downs breeds.

POINTS

The following recognised description of the English Leicester is taken from the flock book of the Australian Society of Breeders of British Sheep:—

Head and Face.—Head carried well, not too high; neat, cleanly chiselled, wide between the ears, slightly tapering to the nostrils; no sign of horns, and carrying a light forelock. Face, in general, is wedge shaped and covered with short white hairs; lips and nostrils black; black specks on face and ears not objectionable.

Eyes.—Full-sized and bright.

Ears.—Medium-sized and alert; black spots not objectionable.

Neck.—Medium length, strong and level with back.

Shoulders.—Upright and wide over the tops.

Chest.—Breast should be deep, wide, and prominent.

Back.—Wide and level, well filled up behind the shoulders, giving a great girth, showing thickness through the heart, and carrying firm even flesh.

Ribs.—Well sprung.
**Hindquarters.—** Full-sized and square, showing good legs of mutton; tail well set on, almost level with the back.

**Legs and Feet.—** Legs straight, well set on and wide apart; short cannon bones, good pasterns, not sloping, and devoid of reddish hairs on legs; hoofs black.

**Skin.—** Healthy pink colour.

**Carriage.—** Free and active.

**Fleece.—** Dense, free, even, and lustrous; lock medium width, showing small, well-defined wave or crimp from skin to tip.

**Constitution and General Appearance.—** Alert, robust, showing style and character.

**Covering.—** The Leicester carries a fairly weighty fleece of lustrous wool nine to ten inches in length and having a spinning count of 36-40 or finer. The average clean-scoured yield is in the vicinity of 72 per cent. and the wool is dense and even in good specimens of the breed, with the fibres carrying three to four well-defined crimps to the inch. The wool is especially valued for use in damasks, dress fabrics, braids and bunting.

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**PIG LICE**

During the past 12 months action has been taken by the Department for the control and eradication of pig lice and the incidence of infestation as judged from market inspections has been considerably reduced.

Progress has been retarded by the practice of some farmers of selling their pigs under fictitious names as a means of avoiding taxation and where lice-infested consignments are involved, it is not possible to trace the pigs to their source and to take action for the eradication of parasites.

This situation can no longer be tolerated and at markets such as Northam, Merredin and Narrogin where it has become the practice to use fictitious names, action will be taken to prevent the sale of pigs found infested with lice until the owner has declared himself and his identity has been definitely established.

It has been the policy to warn owners of infested pigs upon the first offence and to furnish them with free information on eradication measures and to quarantine their properties should the offence be repeated. This has produced the desired effect and there have been few second offenders.

It should be appreciated that a heavy infestation of lice can seriously retard the growth of young pigs and that it is in the best interests of the owner to keep his herd free of the parasites.