Famous sheep breeds. 4. The Border Leicester

J A. Mallett

The Champion Border Leicester ewe at the 1959 Perth Royal Show. This was also exhibited by Messrs. C. R. and A. J. McGlew of "Seaton Roos," Beverley.
ALTHOUGH the Society of Border Leicester Sheep Breeders was formed only 62 years ago and the first volume of the Border Leicester Flock Book appeared in 1899, surprisingly little authentic information is available concerning the origin of the breed.

It is generally accepted today that the Border Leicester originated from a cross between the Improved English Leicester and the Cheviot. This belief is strengthened by the fact that the Border Leicester head is free from wool to a point behind the ears—a characteristic found in no other British breed except the Cheviot.

When Robert Bakewell of Dishley Grange, Leicestershire inaugurated his revolutionary stock improvement techniques from about 1755 onward, the results he obtained were so dramatically successful that many progressive breeders went to Dishley Grange as pupils.

Among them were Charles and Robert Colling—who later became famous for their work in developing the Shorthorn breed of cattle—and George and Matthew Culley. Both pairs of brothers took back Dishley Leicester sheep to their homes in the north of England where they established studs.

They sold rams and ewes to breeders on both sides of the English-Scottish border and many of the Border flock-owners also purchased stock or hired rams from Bakewell and members of the Dishley Society.

Records of the Highland and Agricultural Society show that up to the year 1868 classes were provided for Leicesters only. From 1869 to 1872 and 1875 to 1881 there were classes for both Leicesters and Border Leicesters but after 1881 the classes were for Border Leicesters only.

CROSSBREEDING

The chief value of the Border Leicester is for crossbreeding with other types of sheep. In Scotland, the rams are crossed with Scottish Blackface and Cheviot ewes to give “Greyface” and “Halfbred” progeny. Greyface and Halfbred ewes are mated with Down rams to produce a good type of butcher’s lamb in the same manner that we use the ewe progeny of Border Leicester—Merino crosses to mate with Downs rams for the export lamb market.

The Border Leicester being a thickly-fleshed and easily-fattened animal, transmits these desirable qualities to its progeny, which, in the case of the hill sheep matings, produces an animal with mutton of better quality than that of its sire and in greater quantity than that of its dam.

Although it ranks among the largest of the longwool breeds, the Border Leicester, by reason of its comparatively small head and fine bone, may be safely crossed with the small mountain ewes without causing lambing troubles.
LOCAL POPULARITY

In Western Australia, the handsome Border Leicester ram is highly regarded. Numerically, the Border Leicester ranks second only to the Romney Marsh among the longwool breeds. Mated to selected Merino ewes it produces excellent crossbred progeny. The crossbred ewes from Border Leicester x Merino matings are particularly popular among export lamb producers for mating with Southdown or Dorset Horn rams to produce shapely lambs for the overseas market.

Wether lambs from the Border Leicester x Merino matings sell well on the local meat market or may be carried over to produce good crossbred fleeces if the season is not suitable for them to be "finished" as sucker lambs.

The excellent milking qualities of the first-cross Border Leicester-Merino ewes make them particularly suitable for use in the northern and eastern portions of the lamb-raising areas where seasons tend to be short. Their lambs are noted for high growth rates.
Attempts are being made in Australia and elsewhere to "fix" the Border Leicester-Merino cross and inaugurate a new breed, in a similar manner to that by which the Corriedale was evolved from a Lincoln-Merino cross.

POINTS

Head.—Medium sized; smooth crown; wide in forehead. Full and even down the face to a slightly roman nose perfectly free from wool and covered with pure white, soft hair; occasionally a black spot will appear.

Face.—Strong jaw and clean cut. Nose wide and dark.

Eyes.—Full and prominent, but mild and placid, with a quiet, gentle expression.

Ears.—Lively; mobile; medium sized and semi-erect; white inside and out; black spots sometimes appear with age.

Neck.—Tapering nicely from the head, and strongly set in at the shoulders.

Shoulders.—Wide, with plenty of heart room.

Chest.—Broad, deep and well formed.

Back.—Straight, level and broad.

Ribs.—Well sprung in a fine circular arch, more attractive for width than for depth.

Hindquarters.—The loin should be wide and firm, and the quarters long and deep.

Legs.—Squarely set under; strong; with clean, flat bones, covered with perfectly white hair, and quite free from wool.

Skin.—Pink, and mellow to the touch.

Fleece.—Border Leicester wool has a staple eight to nine inches in length with five to seven crimps to the inch, bold-stapled and ranking as a "First Demi-Lustre." The spinning quality is 44/46 and the wool is used for fine serges, coatings and dress fabrics.

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