Famous sheep breeds. 6. The southdown

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The champion Southdown ewe at the 1959 Perth Royal Show, exhibited by M. K. Reynolds, Meckering.
6.—THE SOUTHDOWN

by

J. A. MALLETT

THE chunky, low-set, meaty-carcassed Southdown is a popular breed wherever prime mutton and lamb are appreciated. Just as the Dishley Leicester was used to improve most of the British longwool breeds, so an infusion of Southdown blood has benefited the majority of the British shortwool sheep whose main role is meat production.

Like most of our British breeds, the precise origin of the Southdown is largely a matter of conjecture. The breed takes its name from the South Downs, a range of chalky hills extending across several counties in southern England—hills which are noted for their short, sweet grasses, but which, because of their exposure to the bleak winds from the English Channel during the winter periods, tended to develop hardy breeds of livestock.

The man whose breed improvement methods were largely responsible for the near-perfection of the present-day Southdown was John Ellman of Glynde Farm, Sussex.

Ellman, who was born in 1753, took over the management of his father’s farm in 1780 and almost immediately commenced to improve the local sheep. These were described as being of the “common heath type”—long-legged, slender-boned, light-shouldered animals with speckled faces.

Unlike Robert Bakewell, who had already improved the Leicester sheep, Ellman seems to have been opposed to close inbreeding, but practised careful selection and rigorous culling to obtain the type of animal he had in mind.

Although the Southdown is primarily a meat breed, Ellman paid considerable attention to fleece improvement, as he maintained that good fleeces made the sheep better able to withstand the bleak winters. His argument was that a well-covered sheep was more comfortable, was a better feeder and a better meat-producer.

The Glynde sheep had heavier fleeces than their unimproved contemporaries, had better carcass conformation and matured earlier.

Apart from his sheep-breeding activities, John Ellman achieved fame as a successful breeder and exhibitor of Sussex cattle. He won many awards for farming, became a Deputy-Lieutenant for the county and refused offers of a baronetcy and later a peerage.

A “GENTLEMAN’S SHEEP”

As a result of the tremendous improvement wrought by Ellman, the Southdown achieved tremendous popularity and Glynde rams and ewes brought high prices. Members of the nobility and even Royalty were keen buyers and the Southdown became known as the “gentleman’s sheep” as it was ideally suited to park life, and
produced mutton of a particularly high quality. The list of Southdown breeders in those days reads like a page from Debrett—and it is worth mentioning that the noted agriculturist, Coke of Holkham, bought 80 Glynde ewes in 1793.

Ellman’s work was ably carried on by later breeders, notably Jonas Webb of Babraham who introduced the breed into Cambridgeshire and took many of the principal prizes at Britain’s most famous shows in the “forties” of last century. Webb exhibited Southdowns at a great Parisian international show held under the auspices of Napoleon III and it is said that the Emperor paused to admire these sheep and asked whose they were.

“Yours, if you will accept them, your Majesty,” said Webb, who was standing nearby. The gift was accepted and a present of solid silver plate was shortly afterwards sent from the Tuileries to Babraham.

WIDESPREAD POPULARITY

The Southdown has achieved immense popularity in many European countries, particularly in France, where it is widely used for crossing with the native French breeds to produce better carcasses of mutton. The U.S.A. formed a Southdown breed society in 1882 which was eight years before the Southdown Sheep Society of England came into being, and exportations of Southdown sheep have been made to South America, Mexico, Canada, Japan, the West Indies and of course to Australia and New Zealand, where it has played an important part in the fat lamb trade.

As the sire of export lambs from Long-wool-Merino cross ewes, the Southdown has long been the most popular breed for producing a high percentage of first-grade carcasses. It appears to be the most suitable ram to use over the major portion of the lamb-producing areas of Australia, and Southdown-sired lambs rank highly on the Smithfield market.

Although in the old days the Southdown was renowned for its “four-year-old mutton,” the modern representatives of the breed mature early and the lambs with their ideal proportions of fat to lean are excellently suited to the consumers’ taste.

POINTS

Head—Wide, level between ears, with no sign of scur, horns or dark poll. Nostrils full and wide.

Face—Full, not too long from the eyes to the nose, and of one even mouse-colour, not approaching black or speckled; under-jaw lighter in colour.

Eyes—Large, bright and prominent.

Ears—Of medium size and covered with short wool.

Neck—Wide at the base, strong and well set into the shoulders; throat clean.

Shoulders—Well-set and top level with the back. No depression behind blades.

Chest—Wide and deep.

Back—Level, with a wide, flat loin, and well covered with firm flesh. Compact in appearance.

Ribs—Well-sprung, and well ribbed up, thick through the heart, with fore and hind flanks fully developed.

Hindquarters—Rump wide and long and well turned, tail large and set on almost level with the chine.

Legs of Mutton (including thighs)—Should be full and well let down with a deep, wide twist.

Skin—Of a healthy bright pink, not inclined to blue.

Flesh—Even and firm-handling all over.

Legs—Short, straight, and of one even mouse-colour, and set on outside the body.

Carriage—Free and active.

Fleece—Of fine texture, great density and of sufficient length to staple, covering the whole body down to the knees and below the hocks and up to the cheeks, with a full foretop but no wool round the eyes or across the bridge of the nose. No black hairs on body.

As is to be expected in a meat breed, the wool of the Southdown is short (2½ to 3 in.) and light. It is among the finest of the British breed wools having a spinning count of 56/60 but lacks well-defined staples and is inclined to have a “mushy” tip. As it possesses poor felting qualities it is well adapted for the manufacture of flannels and hosiery.
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