



Yearling ewes. The Wiltshire Horn has excellent carcass conformation

The original wool-shedding sheep

For busy smallholders who aren't interested in wool production, the Wiltshire Horn could be the perfect choice, says **Tim Tyne**

A traditional native breed, the Wiltshire Horn has little or no wool at all, and what little it does have is shed naturally each year to leave a short, hairy coat. In fact, the Wiltshire Horn is the original wool-shedding sheep whose genetics have been widely used

in the development of modern composite breeds, such as the EasyCare and the Exlana (*Country Smallholding*, August 2020) and, looking further back into the breed's history, they were also used in the creation of the Hampshire Down sometime in the mid 1800s (*Country Smallholding*, April 2020).

Wiltshire Horn sheep have also been used to improve the size of certain strains of Welsh Mountain sheep. When newly shorn, some types of improved Welsh sheep show black spotting on the skin, a trait that they inherited from the Wiltshire. Anglesey in North Wales is still a stronghold of the Wiltshire Horn, with the

breed society holding one of its annual sales in the livestock market at Gaerwen. It was one of the original Anglesey flocks (established in 1911 and still in existence) that provided the foundation stock for the creation of the EasyCare breed. The exact origins of the Wiltshire Horn are not known, but they are indeed ▶

an ancient type of sheep which rose to the fore and became the dominant breed of the chalky Wiltshire downland during the 18th century, numbering possibly as many as 700,000 in that area alone. A description of the breed written by Luccock in the late 1700s appears very much the same as what we see today, although at that time it appears that the fleece of the Wiltshire Horn was also valued, as William Youatt, commenting in 1837 on the earlier work of Luccock, writes: “The wool was at that time much prized: it was of medium length and fine, and the fleece weighed from 2-2½lb.”

However, he goes on to say that “the ewe had not any wool beneath the belly”, which is perhaps an early indicator of the direction in which selection of the breed was progressing, resulting in the wool-shedding characteristic that we now associate with the Wiltshire Horn, and which has, in fact, become the breed’s principal feature and USP.

By the beginning of the 1900s the breed had fallen out of favour and was in danger of becoming extinct, so in 1923 a society was formed to “place the breed into pedigree status, to stimulate home demand and to explore export trade”. The inaugural



A penned flock of Wiltshire Horns. The slight black spotting on the undercoat can clearly be seen, a characteristic that has carried across to some strains of the Welsh Mountain breed

“A dedicated group of enthusiasts ensured that the breed continued to thrive in its pure, undiluted form”

meeting was supported by 40 farmers, placing the breed on a firmer footing for the future. However, some turbulent years followed, with both the agricultural depression of the 1930s and World War II influencing the popularity of the breed in one way or another.

By the beginning of the 1970s the Wiltshire Horn

was once again in trouble, but a dedicated group of enthusiasts ensured that the breed continued to thrive in its pure, undiluted form until popularity began to surge once again in the late 1970s due to the increasing use of artificial fabrics in the textiles industry and a resulting decline in the value of wool. Currently

the Wiltshire Horn isn’t considered to be a rare breed in the UK, and in fact it ticks many of the boxes that make a breed attractive to commercial sheep producers.

DID YOU KNOW...? According to Iolo Owen, founder of the EasyCare breed, wool accounts for up to 80% of shepherding costs. Taking that into consideration, the merits of a wool-shedding breed such as the Wiltshire Horn are immediately apparent.

HEALTHCARE

The Wiltshire Horn is reputed to be resistant to many of the common

BREED DESCRIPTION

Horned in both sexes, with the rams having particularly impressive heavy spiralled horns.

Medium-sized strong head, with long broad ears, large eyes, Roman nose and wide nostrils.

Pink skin.

White ‘fleece’, with occasional black spotting on the undercoat.

Grows a thick, short

fleece in the winter which naturally sheds in the summer to leave a short hair coat.

A fairly large breed, with rams weighing around 125kg and ewes in the region of 70kg.

Easy lambing.

Strong maternal ewes that milk well.

Excellent carcass conformation.



A Wiltshire Horn ram. The Wiltshire Horn, as the name implies, is horned in both sexes

ailments that plague sheep flocks, and owners report that far less intervention and medication is required than would be the case with other breeds. However, despite what you might have heard to the contrary, the breed is not immune to flystrike. Although the lack of fleece makes them significantly less susceptible to this problem, they can become flystruck around the base of their horns and so some summer fly repellent may be required in this area.

WILTSHIRES ON THE SMALLHOLDING

Any smallholder wishing to keep trouble-free sheep of a traditional native breed for the purpose of meat production need look no further than the Wiltshire Horn. The reduction in cost and workload associated with the lack of fleece, combined with the breed's easy lambing characteristics and excellent carcass qualities, make pure-bred Wiltshire Horns a very attractive proposition.

In addition, Wiltshire rams are ideal for crossing onto ewes of other breeds to produce top grade prime lambs. What's more, this situation can only get better as there is a Wiltshire Horn performance recording programme taking place, run by Signet (part of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board/AHDB) and endorsed by the breed society. Over time this will improve the genetic merit of participating flocks, and the gains made will filter down through the rest of the breed, resulting in ewes with improved maternal ability producing faster growing, heavier

and better muscled lambs. It is projects like this that ensure that native breeds have a secure future, so if you are thinking of keeping Wiltshire Horn sheep I would suggest that you also consider joining the performance recording programme.

THE CUTLET COMPETITION

Many sheep breed societies hold competitive classes for fleeces, a type of competition denied to the Wiltshire Horn being an out-and-out meat breed with no fleece to speak of. Instead, the Wiltshire Horn Sheep Society came up with the fantastic idea of holding an annual Cutlet Competition which showcases the breed's superior carcass qualities and provides additional promotion to those breeders who sell lamb directly to members of the public or to local shops and restaurants.

Using insulated packaging provided by the society, entrants are required to submit one of their fresh, pure-bred, pedigree Wiltshire Horn cutlets to be cooked and judged by a professional chef. Last year this honour went to Neil Campbell, head chef for Ottolenghi's Rovi restaurant in London, with the top accolade going to the Morris family's Hoggston flock, one of the oldest established flocks in existence and listed by the society since its inception in 1923. The judge for 2021 was Adam Taylor of The Feathered Nest Country Inn, Nether Westcote, Oxfordshire, and the winners were Steve and Sarah Cowle of the Highhedges flock in Buckinghamshire (see News).



A yearling ewe. Wiltshire Horns were once on the RBST Watchlist, but now they aren't considered to be rare

'A PLEASURE TO HAVE AROUND'

Breeder focus: Paul McAvoy

Paul McAvoy keeps what he calls "a typical smallholder's flock" of Wiltshire Horns near Lymm in Cheshire. He had land that had previously been used for horses and was in need of grazing, so he decided that keeping sheep — about which he knew nothing at the time — would present an interesting new challenge while, at the same time, they would solve his land management issues. The only thing he knew for certain was that he didn't want to be burdened with the annual task of shearing and so research soon led him to the Wiltshire Horn, which at that point was on the Rare Breeds Survival Trust's Watchlist.

Initially purchasing a complete 'starter flock' in 2000, Paul's first lambing season coincided with the 2001 Foot & Mouth Disease outbreak, which no doubt added to the stress considerably. Livestock movement restrictions remained in force for several months, with every possibility that they would impact on the next year's breeding programme as well.

However, having joined the Wiltshire Horn Sheep Society, he obtained plenty of help and guidance from the then secretary, and was subsequently able to hire a ram from another local breeder who he made contact with through the society.

Paul limits the size of his flock to around a dozen breeding ewes, a couple of rams and a wether, which is sufficient for the area of land at his disposal. The ewes give birth at Easter, so from April to October the size of the flock is augmented by around 21 lambs, which are ultimately processed through a local abattoir and butcher for sale to a loyal group of customers and for home consumption.

Paul describes Wiltshire Horns as "elegant sheep, and a pleasure to have around. They make excellent mothers, lamb easily and really look after their lambs. Their meat is special, too". In fact, such is his enthusiasm that he has never even considered keeping any other breed, and, since taking on the breed, he has taken over the role of secretary of the Wiltshire Horn Sheep Society. ■

PICTURES: PAUL MCAVOY



All about Tim Tyne

Career smallholder Tim Tyne was brought up on an eight-acre holding in East Anglia. He studied agriculture at Aberystwyth and then spent a few years living self-sufficiently on an offshore island. He now farms on a small scale in North Wales together with his wife, Dot, and their three children. Tim believes passionately that smallholding should be a financially viable lifestyle choice for young families.