

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Managing the Folded flock

Lambing is now well under way. I have the privilege of being the custodian of a superb flock of Hampshire Downs. This was established in the late 19th century by my great grandfather and has grazed the downs here ever since. At one time, there were over 3000 breeding ewes with 14 shepherds to care for them.

The breed was incredibly popular in its heyday; my great grandfather achieving an average price of 23 Guineas for a run of 100 ram lambs at Wilton Sheep Fair before the 1st World War. Cull ewes would make more than £5 each and this in the days when a man was paid 7 shillings and six-pence per week. The flock was managed according to the principles of forward 'creep' grazing. This achieved by the use of enclosed areas, secured by hurdles, known as 'folds'. The flock was 'folded' across fields of root crops (Brassicas) in the winter and Vetches and Sainfoin in the summer.

In a thick crop, the fold would be made of 25 by 25 hurdles, allowing 4 sheep per hurdle, thus 200 ewes in the fold. A thinner crop would have a fold of 30 by 30 hurdles. Hurdles were secured by a 'shore'; this being a hazel post driven and then hit into a hole made by a shepherd's bar and then secured by a coil of hazel known as a 'shackle'. A shepherd's boy could carry 4 hurdles and 4 shores and a man 5 hurdles and 5 shores.

Folding, if it were affordable, would be the best way to manage sheep in this part of the country. They eat the crop in its entirety, wasting nothing and cover the ground with a layer of droppings. The main flock was retained in the fold for one day but the lambs had access to the next fold via a 'creep' this being a metal barrier with bars, placed in the middle of the hurdle fence between the old fold and the new. In the meantime, a new fold would be constructed above the one containing the lambs. On the following day, the ewes would be allowed into the fold which the lambs had grazed and the lambs could then access the fold that had just been built.

The last Master Shepherd on the estate was Sid Rayment. A most endearing man with a face, tanned and leathery, deeply fissured, torn by winter squalls and spring hail and yet locked in an expression of permanent benevolence and joviality. He was born in Dorset; White Hazel Cottages on the Crichel Down Estate. He spoke with a soft Dorset burr; his father and grandfather before him had been exclusively Hampshire Down shepherds. Not for him "them other dratted things"; for a dog only an 'Old English Bobtail' would do. 'They others, them's too fast'.

Lambing was then conducted in an elaborate rectangular pen with small cubicles around its periphery made from hurdles and partially thatched with straw. This was placed in the middle of an open field, and was always, given those winters of the 50' and 60's absolutely freezing. Sid lived in a shepherd's hut drawn up close to the pen and there he stayed until lambing was over, caring for his stock throughout. His very supportive and immaculate wife, Pearl, would bring him provisions every day. The hut, squat with blue oxide timber sides, always seemed to have a lazy coil of grey smoke oozing from its ancient chimney, as bacon was fried and coffee brewed on the cast iron stove in its corner. Sid slept on a bunk. I can see him now leaning on a hurdle, with a piercing frost and 6 inches of snow on the ground, gently toying with a roll your own 'ciggy' in the calloused fingers of his right hand. My father, rather portly, with a steaming pipe

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in hand is speaking to him. "How's it going then, shepherd?" and Sid replies "The water carts froze but lambs is good Capt'n", (my father was known as The Captain) "but they ewes wants some better hey and the turnips is a bit thin. The boy and I will pitch they hurdles this afternoon and move 'em on". My father always considered the shepherd the most important man on the place and his requirements for his sheep were the rule of law. Sid worked 7 days a week and always wore a round felt wide brimmed pork pie hat, black with sheep's grease and an army great coat with leather spats and boots to protect his legs. He carried a holly crook "ollies the best" he would tell me. He carried a "lightnin' stone in his pocket, a skull like fossil echinoid found on the down. This would protect him from thunder strike if he were caught out in a storm. He would accept no overtime and took his holidays when he was around the country showing his sheep. With a comb and a pair of shears, he had no equal, turning rough fleeces into an immaculate trim and pairing up animals so they would appear to be Siamese twins. Sid, as well as being probably the last of the great downland shepherds, also had a sharp wit, never at a loss to find a humorous touch to every situation. He was an expert on bell ringing and would listen and describe the peels from all around the country. He also had a fine taste in whisky. He once advised me, with a twinkle in his eye, that "mister 'Enry, you know the Good Lord, he n'er made two things, a silent woman and a contented farmer".

When he was in his 80's, he was struck down with pneumonia and had to go to hospital, a complete novelty to him. I visited him a couple of days later and he told me that "I'm fed up with them women a fussing o'er me, all I wants is to be back with my sheep". He was taken later that week and I have no doubt that somewhere on those Elysium hills, he is still looking after his sheep with the same unremitting care, through snow and tempest that he demonstrated throughout his long and remarkable life.

Henry Edmunds FRES

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