



Newsletter No 61 Spring 2011

May 2011

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Dear Members

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We enclose your copy of the 2010 Flock Book and apologise for the delay in publication this year.

The Society will once again be holding three show and sales. The Gaerwen show and sale will move to Ruthin market this year which we hope will encourage more entries and buyers from further afield. There will be an Open Day in June organised by Eblex in conjunction with the Wiltshire Horn Signet Recording Group and in October we look forward to the AGM which will be held in Anglesey. We will not be running show craft workshops this year but hope to be able to do so again in the future.

Thanks go to Michael Blanche for telling us about his ovine trip Down Under. Did you know that Network Rail are now employing Wiltshire Horns as maintenance staff and have you met the resident Wiltshire Horn in Swindon? Details on all are in this issue.

Email Addresses

Due to the large increase in postage charges this year the Society wishes to contact members by email wherever possible. If you have not already done so please advise the Secretary of your email address.

Email the Society @ info@wiltshirehorn.org.uk

Contacting the Secretary

The Society is still receiving correspondence addressed to the Secretary's old address in Cheshire, so do ensure you now use the correct address which can be found on the back of this newsletter.

Please note that the Society office is located within Christina's home so, in consideration of her young family, should you wish to contact her by telephone or fax please do so before 9 o'clock in the evening. You can of course email her at any time.

Brief Encounter with Wiltshires Down Under

By Michael Blanche (Flock no 743 Glenalmond)

In January last year I was lucky enough to be awarded a Nuffield Farming Scholarship. This involves being given some money to travel for a minimum of 8 weeks and learn more about your chosen study subject. Sounds mildly interesting ... but actually it has turned out to be one of the most dramatic learning experiences of my life on lots of different levels.

My study is on "The Farming Ladder". I am a new entrant to farming. I bought my first sheep using a balance transfer from my credit card. I have managed to build the flock to over 600 females. Yet most of the sheep are 35 miles from home on seasonal lets. Getting land at reasonable rates with some security is a real challenge and the extra costs of travel have detracted from good margins that are needed to expand quickly. On my travels, I wanted to find out how I could climb the farming ladder better and quicker – eventually being able to farm full time and make good money doing so.

I travelled to Cambodia and India this February but in July and August of last year I spent 6 weeks in Australia and New Zealand and it was on that trip that I had some brief encounters with the influence of the Wiltshire Horn.



Damarra Crosses

My first week in Australia was to the Outback of New South Wales. This was, and mostly still is, Merino country but significant changes have been taking place. The sheep population in Australia has more than halved. Currently around the 70 million mark it was 170 million 20 years ago. Wool is no longer a big money maker and, although many hope for a return to the glory days, probably never will be again. I visited one of the largest wool sheds in the world at Reola. It has the capacity to shear 2,800 sheep a day via 16 shearing stands. It now stands empty, the owners choosing the South African wool shedding breeds of the Dorper and Damara to produce good carcasses with minimal inputs.

At Churinga Station near Wilcannia, Garry Hannigan was one of the first to import Dorpers and Damaras. The South Africans sold these breeds very well into Australia but Garry had started using Wiltshire Horns in a three way cross to increase lambing percentages!! He had a number of crosses on the farm but it was this three way cross that he rated highest. In 2009 he had lambed at 237%, significantly higher than the other crosses. Don't worry – its so high because he lambs twice a year (another benefit of the Damara and Dorper genetics).

The second week I travelled some of South Australia and managed to meet up with Annie Hughes, President of the Wiltipoll Association. Wiltipolls are at least 96.87% Wiltshire Horn – the result of a Wiltshire Horn crossed to a polled breed then having 4 back crosses to the Wiltshire Horn. Annie had such enthusiasm for her breed and I managed to see some her own sheep. The association were really professional and market focused. Polledness and wool shedding were significant breeding goals.



Wiltipoll ewes

I saw more polled Wiltshires in New Zealand (there are no Wiltshire Horns that I know of in NZ). Mr and Mrs Sheen had some big sheep and I have to say I quite liked them. Kiwi Abattoirs will not accept lambs with more than 40mm of horn! Mr Sheen had introduced a 10 point scale for wool shedding and recorded EBVs for all other traits. As in Australia I did feel the breed was hampered by a small gene pool.

Overall, in both countries Wiltshires (polled or horned) were making only a minor impact. Wool was still worth something (approx \$20/ewe in Australia) and wooled skins also provided additional income (\$7-\$15 per lamb). In the Outback, South African wool shedders were making a much more significant impression. As breeds they suit the semi-arid conditions, they can lamb twice per year and they have been marketed really effectively. They were also proven in commercial conditions, with large flocks.

In the UK wool prices are far less significant as a percentage of a ewes financial output (I reckon 1% of output compared to around 12% in Australia is provided through wool). Given this fact alone, there has to be commercial potential for high performing wool shedding sheep.

Importantly, of all the wool shedding breeds I saw, nothing sheds wool like a good Wiltshire Horn.... It would still be handy not to have the horns though!



New Zealand Wiltshires

The Old Wiltshire Horn in Swindon



The Old Wiltshire Horn

Members visiting Swindon in Wiltshire may come across the resident “Old Wiltshire Horn Sheep” situated in Dewells Mews at the junction with Euro Way. Member Linda Rollason told us of the statue which is by the renowned sculptor Jon Buck. Intrigued to find out more we contacted Richard Thwaites and Jon Buck himself to find out the story behind the commission.

Jon Buck was commissioned by Trencherwood Homes to make a sculpture as part of the 'Percentage for Art' scheme implemented by Thamesdown Borough Council in Swindon in the late eighties. He was asked to make a proposal and decided to commemorate the old Cattle Market which formerly stood on the site of the new housing development. His initial idea was to make a traditional representation of a classic breed rather along the lines of 18th century paintings. However from his research he found there had been a breed of sheep “especially bred in that area of Wiltshire, long-legged and well-adapted to daily treks onto the Downs and an important part of the regional economy”. The Wiltshire Horn.

He then discovered that the Old Wiltshire Horn was not extinct as he believed but survived in small numbers as a rare breed. He contacted Richard Thwaites, the Secretary at the time, who put him in touch with Commander and Mrs Vernon Philips who had a small flock of Wiltshire Horns and lived close to Jon. They invited him to visit and draw their sheep and it was from these drawings that he made the sculpture which was eventually sited at Dewell Mews. He says “In creating the sculpture I believe I allowed myself a certain amount of 'artistic licence' in order to express the historic nature of the site and breed; the work did not pass without comment from the Vernon Philips' specialist's eye!”

The sculpture was completed and unveiled in 1989.

Society member is named BBC Farmer of the Year

Society member Jon Birchall of Pilkington Farms is BBC Farmer of the Year 2010.

Pilkington Farms is part of the Kings Walden Estate near Hitchin in Hertfordshire and has the largest flock of Wiltshire Horn Sheep in the Country. In 2010 Pilkington Farms hosted Wiltshire Horn Sheep Society Open Day.

Judging for the BBC award took place during a farm visit last October. Judges included former agriculture minister Michael Jack, who is now president of the National Fruit Show; and musician and journalist Alex James. The farm visit was recorded for an edition of On Your Farm broadcast on 17 October.

2010 proved to be a successful year for Jon, he completed a Masters degree in Rural Environment and Land Management at Harper Adams University College, Shropshire. and was also a runner up in the Farmers Weekly Awards for Countryside Farmer of the Year.

Congratulations go to Jon from his fellow members at the Wiltshire Horn Sheep Society.

Shows with Wiltshire Horn Breed Classes

Please be aware that closing dates for shows can be a month or more prior to the date of the shows, for further details contact the individual show secretaries.

4th June 2011	Kenilworth	01788 833910
19th June 2011	Three Counties	01684 584901
9th July 2011	Tivyside	01239 858958
18th July 2011	Royal Welsh	01982 553683
26th July 2011	New Forest	01202 661770
3rd August 2011	North Devon	01769 560205
6th August 2011	Blakesley	01327 350873
9th August 2011	Anglesey	01407 720072
16th August 2011	Pembrokeshire	01437 764331
1st September 2011	Bucks County	01296 680400
3rd September 2011	Moreton in Marsh	01608 651908
11th September 2011	Evesham	01926 651273
18th September 2011	Royal Berkshire	01635 247111

£25 Reward

The Society will once again be awarding a prize of £25 to members who win a championship with a Wiltshire Horn sheep at a show which does not hold Wiltshire Horn breed classes.

The winner of the EBLEX Improved Flock Awards for the Wiltshire Horn breed for 2011 is the Baynton Flock, owned by Bob King of Lower Baynton Farm near Westbury in Wiltshire. This is the first time that this breed has been included in these awards.



Organised through the Sheep Better Returns Programme (BRP), it is presented to the performance recorded flock that has shown the most impressive improvement in genetic merit over a 12-month period, within the breed. The competition is based on the results of Signet records for 14 Wiltshire Horn flocks.

Lower Baynton Farm is a family business run by Mr King with his uncle and father, and extends to 260ha (650 acres), with 200ha (500 acres) of arable and 60ha (150 acres) of permanent pasture. Nearly half the pasture lies within an SSSI, and all the farm is in an ELS agreement. Steep downland slopes that cannot be ploughed are grazed by the sheep.

The Baynton Flock was established in 2005, and now numbers 65 pure-bred ewes. The sheep are run in a mixed grazing system with 100 beef cattle which are reared and finished each year. With their arable commitments to consider, the Kings' wanted sheep that could easily fit into their farming system. One of the attractions of the Wiltshire Horn breed is their natural ability to shed wool, saving time and money on shearing.

In 2007, with the help of funding from the Regional Development Agency, a group of 12 Wiltshire Horn breeders including Mr King, started recording traits such as eight-week and 21-week weights; as well as assessing muscle and fat depth using ultrasound. They are also working to introduce an Estimated Breeding Value (EBV) for woolshedding.

"We need a lot more information and results before we can draw any definite conclusions on this, but as a group we are already starting to see some correlations," says Mr King. "Our aim is to make the Wiltshire Horn a breed that commercial farms will want to have, not only for their maternal and meat producing qualities, but also because they shed their wool."

Within the Baynton Flock, Mr King is seeking to improve muscle depth and conformation. Using the Signet figures, the flock is divided into two groups at tupping. The best ewes go to Wiltshire Horn rams, while the poorer half is mated to a Hampshire Down. These produce solid, meaty cross-bred lambs, most of which are sold liveweight mainly off just grass. Around 15% of the lamb is sold through a box scheme and Mr King gathers important feedback on taste and quality from his retail customers.

Lambing takes place indoors in March to mid April with turnout as soon as conditions allow. The lambs are weaned at the end of July and August when the ewes and ram lambs to be kept and/or sold for breeding are selected. This is done based on figures not looks. The best three or four ram lambs which are grown on to sell to other breeders as shearlings, must have good maternal traits and a high overall index, and be positive on all factors across the important individual EBVs. All the Wiltshire Horn ewe lambs not retained as replacements are sold as breeding stock as shearlings, either off the farm or through the pedigree sale at Stoneleigh in September.

"Having Signet figures helps me to make these management decisions," explains Mr King. "And when it comes to selling stock, buyers know what they are getting if they can see the figures behind each animal. We are finding that even pedigree breeders who are not yet recording themselves are starting to come to us for recorded rams." In the future, Mr King hopes to increase flock numbers to 100 breeding ewes and to continue developing the woolshedding EBV.

The latest breeding reports for all Wiltshire Horns in the recording group can be found at www.signetfbc.co.uk.

Congratulations to Bob on receiving his award.

The Wiltshire Horn Signet Recording Group is holding an Open Day in conjunction with Eblex on Thursday 9th June. This should be an interesting event for those of you interested in recording your own flocks or buying recorded sheep. We hope many of you will be able to attend.



Breeding sheep without wool

Manor Farm, Sutton Mandeville, Salisbury, SP3 5NH

Courtesy of Tim White, Flock Manager, Richard Strang, Farmer & Wiltshire Horn Performance Recording Group

Thursday 9th June 2011 | 1.00pm – 4.30pm

Join EBLEX and the Wiltshire Horn Sheep Society at this FREE afternoon meeting to highlight the characteristics and benefits of wool shedding sheep. Delegates will learn about the genetics of wool shedding, selecting rams using Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs), breeding wool shedding rams, and breeding from ewe lambs. There will be plenty of opportunity to ask questions.

Programme

- 1.00pm **Registration** with refreshments and lunch
- 1.30pm **Welcome** – Sam Boon, EBLEX Signet Manager
- 1.40pm **Farm breeding policy plus farm walk** – Tim White, Farm Manager
- 2.30pm Workshops on:
- The genetics of wool shedding (including practical recommendations for commercial flocks)** – Geoff Pollot, Senior Lecturer in Quantitative Genetics, The Royal Veterinary College
 - Selecting rams using EBVs and scoring of shedding characteristics** – Sam Boon, EBLEX
 - Breeding wool shedding rams (including management, genetics and meeting customer expectations)** – Tim White
 - Breeding from ewe lambs** – Dr Liz Genever, EBLEX Livestock Scientist
- 4.30pm **Questions and close**

To register for your free place ring Hellen or Sandra on 0870 609 1840 / 01904 771211 or email brpevents@eblex.ahdb.org.uk

This training event is organised by the Duchy College Rural Business School through the RDPE Skills Programme, which is a SW RDA initiative, funded through the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE).



Network Rail employs Wiltshire Horns to save wild orchids

Faced with accusations of extravagance, Network Rail has enlisted the help of a flock of sheep to cut costs.

The company, which is responsible for maintaining the country's track, has been loaned the animals to help tend a 35 hectare field packed with rare orchids and wild flowers. It is one of 146 sites of special scientific interest (SSSI) for which the company is legally responsible. Until now Network Rail has been paying £50,000 a year to protect the flowers at Great Stukeley, Cambridgeshire, where the field runs alongside three kilometres of the railway line from King's Cross to north east England.

The main flowers are lady's bedstraw, bird's-foot trefoil, hairy violet, cowslip and fairy flax as well as pyramidal orchids. It is also the habitat of the great green bush cricket and marbled white butterflies.

Until now Network Rail has had to pay staff or rely on volunteers to keep the brambles and hawthorn scrub, which poses a threat to the rare orchids, in check. Regular and careful maintenance is required because rare flowers and native grasses would otherwise be crowded out of their natural habitat. But it has discovered that the job can be done just as well by the Wiltshire Horn, a breed of sheep with short fleece that naturally moults in the spring. This makes the animals less likely to get tangled up in the scrub and bushes. While they do eat the scrub, apparently the sheep do not touch the rare flowers. They are also not members of the RMT rail union, and therefore unlikely to take industrial action.

The sheep and shepherd – described by Network Rail as its High Output Ovine Vegetation System (HOOVES) – have been provided by Huntingdonshire District Council. But at a time when it is coming under pressure to cut costs where it can, the four-legged intervention has been warmly welcomed by Network Rail chiefs.

“Britain's railway network provides a 20,000 mile green corridor spanning the length and breadth of the country, home to some of our rarest species and a major source of biodiversity,” said Steve Featherstone, the company's maintenance director. The partnership we've put in place with the Council means we can continue to improve standards at Great Stukeley while driving down costs – which is good news for nature lovers and taxpayers alike.”

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Do these sheep belong to one of our members?

If you have any further information about them please contact the secretary

Annual General Meeting

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The AGM will be held in Anglesey over the weekend of 22nd and 23rd October.

The event will be hosted by Iolo Owen who this year is celebrating the centenary of the formation of his Gedwydd flock. The formal AGM will be held on the Saturday afternoon, a buffet lunch will be provided and members will have the opportunity to see the Gedwydd flock. There will be a dinner for members in the evening at the Nant-Yr-Odyn Hotel followed on the Sunday by a tour of other Wiltshire Horn flocks and places of interest on the island. Members wishing to stay at the Nant-Yr-Odyn should contact the hotel direct on 01248 723354 where accommodation is available for £65pp for dinner, bed and breakfast.

Should members not be able to stay for the whole weekend they are welcome to join in on any of the activities. The weekend should prove to be an interesting and enjoyable event and we hope to see many of you there.

Neil Morris

Neil Morris has recently died at the age of 85. His father JB Morris was one of the founding members of the Wiltshire Horn Sheep Society and his Hoggston flock number 52 is one of only three of the original flocks which survive today.

Neil was a well respected member and past president of the Society who gave many years of service as a council member. It is thanks to the hard work, dedication and tenacity of long standing members such as Neil, who supported the breed through many difficult times, that the Wiltshire Horn is able to enjoy its popularity today. In acknowledgement of his contribution to the Society Neil was made a life member in 2004.

Members have spoken fondly of Neil saying he was a "good chap" and a "lovely man". They have commented on the quality of his stock and are pleased that this old flock continues under the ownership of his son George. Neil will be sadly missed by his friends in the Society.

We send our condolences to his wife José, his daughter Laura and George.

Official Society Show and Sales 2011

Make a note in your diaries now of the show and sale dates for this year.

Ruthin

Welsh Border Region Show and Sale

Thursday 8th September 2011

Stoneleigh

National Show and Sale

Saturday 17th September 2011

Exeter

South West Region Show and Sale

Friday 7th October 2011

Please note there will be no entry fees for females entered in the Ruthin Show and Sale

Entry forms will be set to members in July

Come and Buy a Ram

Why not come to the Society sales to buy your ram this year or some ewes to put to your own tup?

At Society sales there is a wide choice of rams and other stock for sale. Buying from an auction gives buyers the opportunity to view and compare stock from many different breeders and bloodlines all under one roof. If you are nervous about buying at auction council members will be on hand to offer help at the sales and further guidance will be sent out with the catalogues.

Christina Cormack
Stickle Heaton Farm
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