



Critical Selection of Shropshire Sheep

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Disclaimer

The information provided in this booklet has been given in good faith, and while every effort has been made, the Society cannot be held responsible for any inaccuracies or omissions.

Introduction

As an aide to the critical selection of stock for breeding, exhibition and sale, this booklet, with its pictorial references, sets out to define the breed characteristics for the Shropshire Sheep and the points of a sheep in general. It also offers some thoughts into the use of breeding animals which may exhibit some of the undesirable traits included in the standard.

Breeding programmes are planned to combine and enhance desirable breed characteristics which will positively influence the future make up of a flock. However careful visual selection cannot identify the genetic influence of a sheep and with each lamb crop a different undesirable trait or fault may be identified. Some faults are hard to eliminate while some with selective breeding can be eliminated relatively easily and it is only with experience and knowledge of breeding the sheep in question that one is able to identify and assess which may be which.

Aspects of conformation which adversely affect the longevity or breeding capability of an animal make rejection an easy choice for both pedigree and commercial use, whereas a single undesirable trait e.g. very small horn stubs, may not be sufficient reason to reject an otherwise acceptable animal that offers an important attribute lacking in your flock. Similarly what may not be acceptable for the pedigree breeder may be deemed inconsequential for the commercial farmer.

First and foremost, the Shropshire Down is a terminal sire breed for the production of prime lambs when crossed with commercial ewes. Fleshing qualities and growth rate are as important for the selection of stock as are breed characteristics and selection will be based upon compromise and the needs of your chosen market.

It is hoped that the information that follows goes some way to helping with critical selection.

Official Breed Description

The Shropshire is medium sized, with typical mature rams and ewes weighing 120+kgs and 70+kgs respectively. Shropshire Sheep are active and alert with a free action.

Head Naturally clean, soft black face, with a covering of wool on the poll. Rams should possess a bold masculine head.

Ears Soft black in colour, of medium length and well set on.

Neck Muscular and not too long.

Body Well fleshed, long, deep and symmetrical. A broad, straight back with well-sprung ribs.
Rump – quarters long and wide, dock well set on and gigots full and deep.

Legs Medium length, of strong bone and upright joints, well set apart and soft black in colour.

Skin & Wool Cherry pink skin covered with dense, fine quality wool of good staple.

Undesirable Horn stubs

Traits White specks on face, ears and legs

Thick, coarse, long, pricked or drooping ears

Drooping rump (dock set low)

Throatiness

Roman nose

Coarse wool on breeches

Coloured wool in fleece

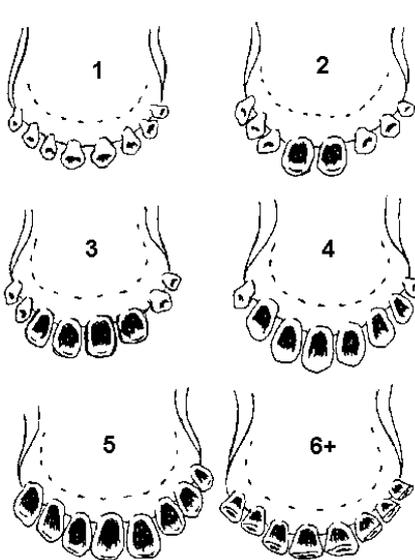
The registering of animals with undesirable traits should be carefully considered.

NOTE: Judges/inspectors are requested to adhere to the above type

Critical Selection – Head

Naturally clean, soft black face, with a covering of wool on the poll. Rams should possess a bold masculine head. Ears are soft black in colour, of medium length and well set on.

The Ideal	Undesirable Traits
The head of the Shropshire is strong and butt-nosed, not long and thin.	Ear size, head colour and horn stubs (bony protrusions) are a visual reminder of the origins of the breed and their influence.
Medium sized ears should be well set on at the side. They should not be overly long or pendulous.	Head shape and ear size can be easily influenced by choice of breeding animal.
The soft black (liquorice black) head should have a good covering of wool which extends to the cheeks.	Occasionally a black area devoid of wool may develop between the ears of rams and this should not extend any further back than the ears. The female offspring of such rams may exhibit reduced head covering and may also pass on this trait.
Pale, tan faced sheep are not desirable.	Pale, tan faced sheep occur occasionally and may become paler as they mature.
Teeth should be even, upright and sit well on the pad, not protruding beyond the edge of the pad (overshot or bulldog mouth), or be set too far back (undershot or parrot mouth).	Note that young lambs teeth may look suspect, particularly if initially reared inside. Splayed or slightly overshot teeth can come right once lambs are outside and pulling at grass. Teeth faults may be hereditary.

 <p>Head ✓</p>	 <p>Ears ✓</p>	 <p>Jaw ✓</p>
 <p>Long & Thin Head ✗</p>	 <p>No Wool on Head ✗</p>	 <p>Age of Sheep Under 1: no broad teeth 1 – 2 : 2 broad teeth 2 - 3 : 4 broad teeth 3 - 4 : 6 broad teeth 4 – 5 : 8 broad teeth Over 6 : worn teeth</p>
 <p>Overshot Jaw ✗</p>	 <p>Undershot Jaw ✗</p>	
 <p>Pricked Ears ✗</p>	 <p>Drooping Ears ✗</p>	 <p>Pale Ears ✗</p>

Critical Selection – Body

The neck is muscular and not too long and the body is well fleshed, long, deep and symmetrical. A broad, straight back with well-sprung ribs. Rump – quarters long and wide, dock well set on and gigots full and deep.

The Ideal	Undesirable Traits
The neck should be well set onto the shoulders creating a smooth outline to the back.	A swan neck is undesirable
The back should be level and strong from shoulders to rump.	Weakness behind the shoulder is suggestive of a weak back which could affect the longevity of a ram.
The shoulders should be well fleshed and level with the spine. They should not be narrow and pointed nor too heavy and coarse.	Shoulder blades which are close together are generally indicative of narrow chested animals with close front legs. (like an A frame) This may adversely affect the performance of a ram.
When viewed from above, the ribs should spring out well from the sides of the spine to create a broad back. The width should be carried through to the loin which should be well fleshed and not fat and then through to the hips ie not narrowing to the tail head.	If there is insufficient width, when viewed from behind the animal will look 'fish-backed' and narrow.
Back legs should be well muscled with the gigot being both wide and deep giving plenty of meat below the tail.	Making allowances for hard working breeding females, poorly muscled lambs/adults lack muscle between the back legs and below the tail. Therefore when viewed from behind this empty space is seen as an inverted 'V'.



Shoulders ✓



Neck ✓



Back & Ribs ✓



Gigot ✓



Lacking Back End ✗



Drooping Rump ✗



Prominent Shoulders ✗



Uneven Back ✗

Critical Selection – Legs and Feet

Medium length, of strong bone and upright joints, well set apart and soft black in colour.

The Ideal	Undesirable Traits
The sheep should stand squarely, with a leg at each corner, on feet with good broad cleats.	Bodyweight which is not evenly distributed onto the feet can lead to the development of pastern faults which will be exacerbated if the cleats are narrow.
When viewed laterally the hock should be well defined but not too bent or too straight.	A straight hock can affect the ability of a ram but, not being highly heritable, would only be of concern in a large flock/commercially.
When viewed from front and back the legs should be vertical	The legs should not go in or out at the knees, hocks or pasterns.
Pasterns should be strong and upright when viewed from all sides.	The breeding activities and longevity of a ram will be adversely affected if he has 'flat pasterns' ie not upright. This is heritable.
<p>The legs should not be too light of bone so as to provide good attachment for muscle.</p> <p>Good balance with a free moving straight action is important.</p>	<p>General Note:</p> <p>All leg and foot faults should be regarded as heritable unless caused by accident/ foot rot. For the exhibitor these types of faults are serious.</p>

	Normal	Large Outside Claw and Curled Toe	Scissorclaw
Side			
Sole			
Front			



Feet ✓

Good	Too Much Angle	Too Straight



Pastern ✓

Rear View		
Correct	Bow Legged	Cow Hocked
Side View Rear Legs		
Correct	Sickle Hocked	Post Legged



Back Legs ✓

Front View			
Correct	Splay Footed	Pigeon Toed	Knock Kneed
Side View Front Legs			
Correct	Galf-kneed	Buck-Kneed	



Front Legs ✓

Critical Selection – Skin and Wool

Cherry pink skin covered with a dense, fine quality wool of good staple.

The Ideal	Undesirable Traits
The skin should be cherry pink.	Skin should not be discoloured e.g. grey, mauve or blue A poor /dark skin colour may be indicative of the future development of coloured wool.
Wool covering should be dense and tight.	A fleece which parts along the spine does not afford protection against inclement weather and allows rain penetration.
A good fleece will not contain black hairs or areas of black or brown wool.	As a rule pigmented wool growing from pigmented skin will not disappear. White skin patches/hair should not break the soft black head and ear colouring. Note: lambs may exhibit soft brown wool on the head or in other localised areas, or have mottled birth coats which grow out as the lamb matures.
The wool quality should be consistent throughout the body.	Wool quality should not deteriorate into hair-like, coarse wool around the rear end (britch). Note: Grey or black wool or hairs may be observed in the regrowth after shearing, particularly if the skin is damaged. This should grow out but may be an indication of possible future deterioration of wool quality as the animal ages



White Specks ✘



Black Wool ✘



Black Patch ✘



Black Wool on Head ✘



Black Skin ✘



Grey Skin ✘



Skin ✔



Skin ✔



Fleece ✔



Loose Fleece ✘

Critical Selection – Udder and Testicles

The Ideal	Undesirable Traits
<p><u>Udder & Teats</u></p> <p>There should be two teats and the udder should be free of lumps and hard areas.</p>	<p>Supernumerary teats should not condemn an animal if they do not interfere with the main teats. Hard areas in the udder could lead to future problems and reduced milk production.</p>
<p><u>Testicles</u></p> <p>Tone- testicles should be firm and springy (like a flexed bicep), The epididymus should be very firm and the testicles should move freely within the scrotum</p> <p>Size- testicles should be about as large as a medium to large baking potato and of equal size. The tail of the epididymus should be prominent.</p>	<p>The testicles should not be hard, soft or spongy.</p> <p>Lumps- there should be no lumps in the testicles, the epididymis or spermatic cord. There should be no lesions to the scrotum</p> <p>Small, unequal sized or soft testicles are associated with reduced fertility.</p>



Lumpy Udder ✘



Pendulous Udder ✘



Udder ✔



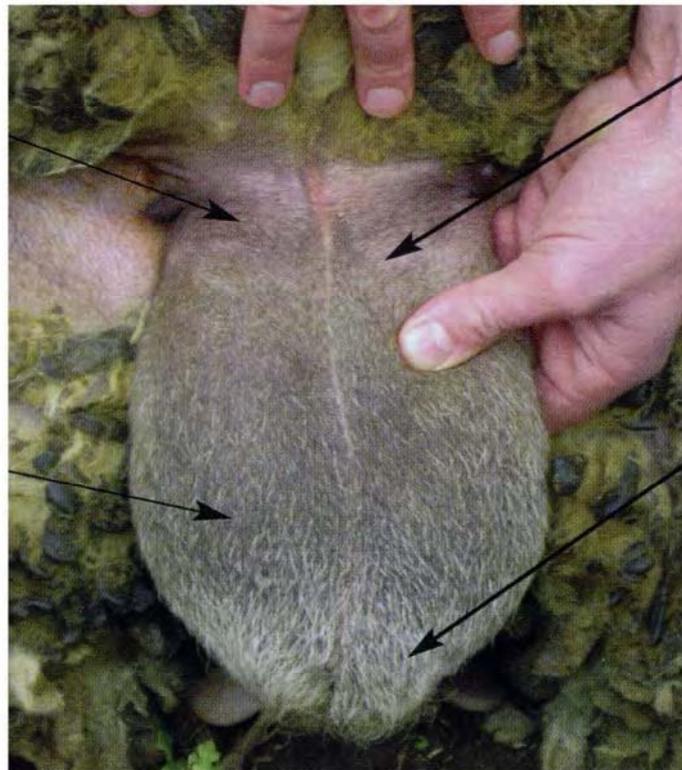
Extra Teats ✘



Teats ✔

Spermatic
cords

Testes



Head of the
epididymis
located on
the top of
the testes

Tail of the
epididymis

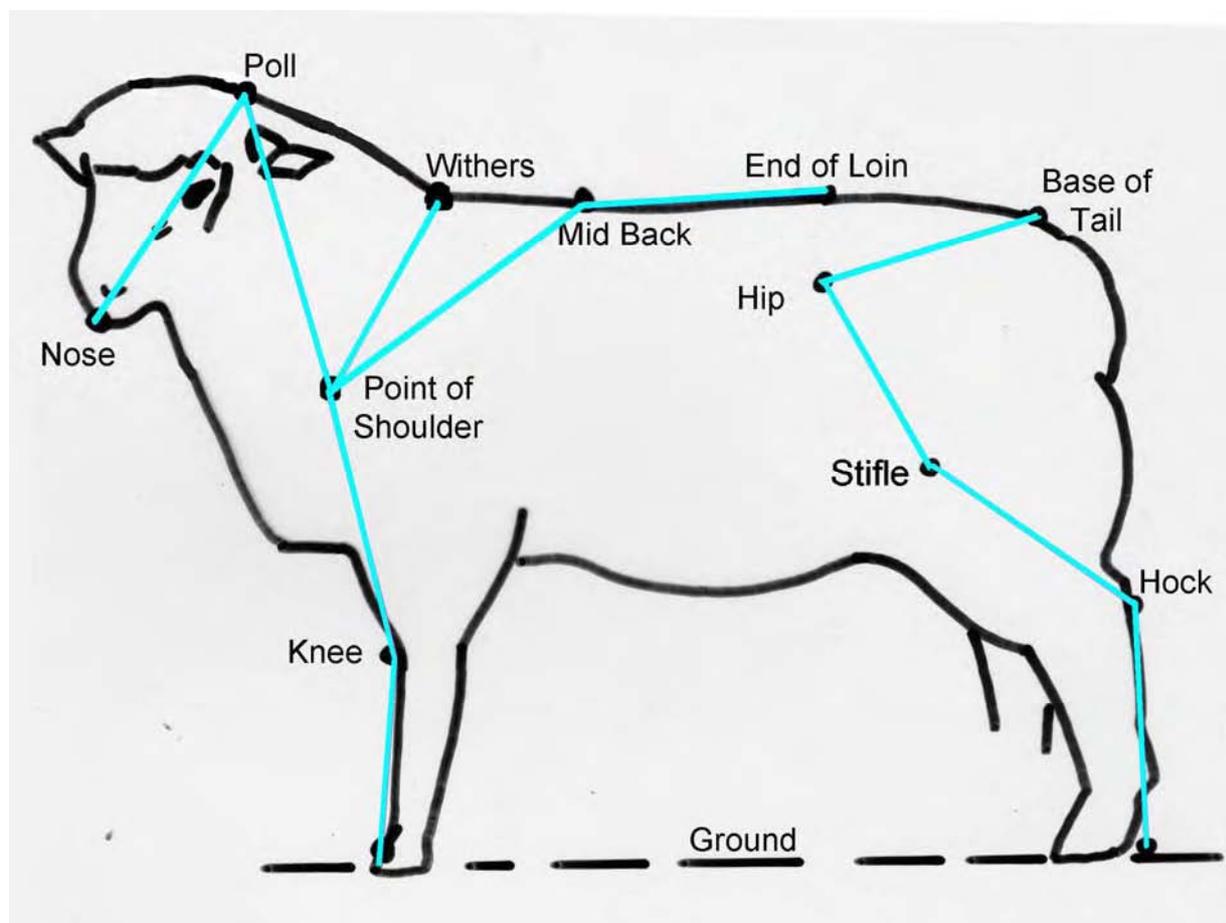
Important structures to palpate inside the scrotum

Selection of Breeding Stock and Preparation for Exhibition

(With thanks to Pauline and John Bowles for extracts from their articles in the Spring issues of Shrop Talk 2000 & 2004)

In addition to the requirements detailed in the previous section, the action or the way an animal moves is an important consideration for exhibition and can make the difference between first and second place.

Pauline Bowles, a renowned judge and exhibitor of Shropshire sheep wrote“Usually your preferred animals virtually choose themselves: they catch your eye by their alertness and stance. A good sheep has a leg at each corner and when it moves its back foot should follow behind the front, in a straight line from the knee and hock downwards. Back feet should be seen to be lifted. Sheep which fail to lift their hind legs and are seen to ‘shuffle’ suggest a narrow pelvis. A lifted walk is desirable and indicates a wide pelvis, which in turn should make for easier lambing.



For perfect conformation in a sheep, cow, dog or cat, the symmetry should be right. This is how it was described by a top Friesian breeder. Measure your animal, the following inter-point distance should be of equal length:-

- Tip of nose to the top of the poll
- Poll to point of shoulder
- Point of shoulder to middle of back
- Middle of back to the front end of the loin
- Base of tail to hip joint
- Hip joint to stifle joint
- Stifle joint to the point of the hock
- Point of the hock to the ground
- Point of withers to the point of the shoulder
- Point of shoulder to middle of knee joint
- Middle of knee joint to the ground

The measure should be the same through all of the points. When handling the top of the sheep, it should be level all the way, no dipping in on the sides just past the shoulder. An animal made correctly should walk really well and catch the eye.”

Preparation of Show Animals

Adult sheep selected for the forthcoming show season should ideally be shorn at a time to allow 3 – 4 months of new wool growth for carding and trimming. Animals shorn early in the year will need to be housed indoors until there is sufficient fleece growth to provide adequate protection against bad weather although pressure on the availability of housing at this time of year may mean delaying your shearing. This should not be detrimental in the show ring.

Carding and trimming enhances the blockiness of well fleshed individuals. It can't improve the look of a sheep without the correct conformation to start with.

Feeding is an important part of show preparation which is a stressful time for sheep. Hard feed (concentrates) given to adult sheep helps to maintain body condition, reduces stress induced weight loss, particularly in lambs, and adds a show bloom (good condition) early in the season. Avoid feeding excessive amounts or making dietary changes close to a show.

Check the feet well in advance of a show, trim as required and address any foot problems immediately. Have your worming up to date.

Halter Training and Acclimatisation to Handling

Most sheep are either extremely stubborn or very nervous at the start of this process therefore it is essential to be patient and to conduct the training in short frequent sessions. The odd tit bit can make all the difference but don't overdo it. A sheep always looking for treats in a show coat pocket will never stand quietly.

The handler traditionally stands on the sheep's left side and the lead of a correctly fitted halter comes down the right cheek from the poll to pass under the chin from right to left. During the initial training stages you may wish to tie your sheep on a halter for 10 minutes or so for two or three days, not any longer as it might sour it. Do not leave it tied up on its own. At the end of each session give your sheep a short walk, then all the walking training can be done each time you wash and trim. Don't forget to teach your sheep to stand still, have their feet placed if necessary to improve their standing position, and become used to being handled as if by a judge.

Washing

Do not be tempted to cut out wool dags prior to washing as this will spoil the look of the trimming. The aim of washing is to remove dirt and grease without making the fleece soft and fluffy, and should be done at least two weeks before a show and preferably on a good drying day. Cleaning agents range from soap powders, washing soda or plain water to proprietary show shampoos. An over-use of soap can be difficult to rinse out and result in a very bright white fleeced sheep, although show dips or colour products applied by hand sprayer can be used to even out and calm down the whiteness. These may also harden and tighten up the fleece a little which makes for a pleasing finish to trimming.

Pre-wet your sheep and apply your main wash using a firm bristled brush. Tease out any tangled wool or dags, especially around the tail area where a small plastic dog carder or slicker can be used effectively. Don't forget the belly and the scrotum for an overall clean look. While the fleece is soaking, sponge clean the face, ears, legs and areas of skin inside the legs.

Rinse your sheep thoroughly and turn it out to dry on clean ground.

If animals are relatively clean and shampoos or soap are not required then a hose with jet/shower attachment can be used to good effect without over whitening the fleece. Some people use a power washer but use with care; always spray from front to back, not directly into the fleece.

Don't worry if your sheep gets a little dirty again after washing. It is probably only superficial and easily wiped off, and dust or soiling on the tips of the wool will be removed during carding and trimming

Carding and Trimming

Carders and trimming shears come in different designs and weights therefore it is advisable to handle them before purchase. Heavy carders and shears only become heavier with use and cramp in the hand makes for a very slow arduous process.

The carding process lifts each fibre of wool to create a 'nap' which is trimmed to leave a firm base of wool enhancing (or improving) the natural contours of your sheep. With skill the trimming process can 'hide' slight faults such as an uneven back, or can make a 'guppy' sheep look quite trim. Be prepared to spend lots of time on the carding process. It is necessary to card and trim a sheep more than once, and preferable to leave it for a day or two to enable it to shake out its wool before the second trim.

Carding

Carding requires extreme patience with a sheep about to undergo the experience for the first time. The teeth of a carder, particularly when new, are very sharp and should be used with care particularly in areas with little wool covering. It is essential that your animal is well restrained for example in a headstall designed for this purpose.

Use your carder with a slapping and peeling action to lift the fibres. Until the sheep settles a mild or small carder may be useful to use, especially around the backend, tops of the legs and around the head and cheeks. Card all areas of wool with the

exception of the scrotum where the wool can be brushed or untangled by hand.

Trimming

There are many designs and weight of hand shears for both left and right handed people. Trial and error will help you to determine the best for you. Talk to other exhibitors and look at the shears they are using. The following extract is taken from an article on hand shearing, published in *The Sheep Farmer* May 1993, by Peter Jackson Chairman of Burgon and Ball.



“For trimming and showing, a bent shear is recommended either single or double bow, which enables the shearer's hand to stand off the fleece so that he can easily see the results of this work. The 5.5 inch bow is normally adequate – but larger if trimming over a long period.”

Some people prefer to trim dry wool and others will be seen using a hand sprayer as they trim. The contents may be a 'family secret' but again, as with shampoos, liquids can be commercially purchased for this purpose.

When you are satisfied that you have carded as much as you can then trimming can commence. Like many things the following process is easier said than done and practice makes perfect. Try it on a none show animal.

Look at your sheep's back and imagine the top line you wish to create by identifying the areas requiring the most or least wool removal. Depending on your preference either starting at the tail head and working towards the shoulders, or shoulders to tail head, hold the open shears so that the bottom blade is on the wool and the top blade at a slight angle off the wool with the raised nap of wool fibres between the blades. The wool is cut as the leading or top blade is closed with your four fingers onto the base blade which does not move in the cutting action. By cutting quickly and simultaneously pushing the shears very slowly away from you a smooth cut surface without ridges and 'scissor marks' should be left. To accommodate the width of the back you will

need to repeat this process by first trimming a centre line and then either side keeping these cuts level with the first. At intervals remove the cut wool with a soft brush, stand back and admire your handiwork!

Trim the sides, neck and brisket, belly (be careful with the boys!), tail and back legs to obtain the shape you require. The fullness of leg is emphasised by careful trimming so it is important that the dags have not been cut off prior to or during washing.

Standing at the side of your sheep's back legs and facing the rear, trim the back end from the tail head, round and down to each stifle. The width and depth of gigot can be emphasised by trimming the tail as narrow and short as possible. Match up the trimming from the tail head to the trimmed edge on the back. Facing the rear of your sheep, trim the wool between the hock and the stifle following the natural contour of the leg and cut a horizontal 'nick' in the wool at the stifle to emphasise the fullness of leg (gigot). Having done both back legs in this manner, trim to emphasise the lateral fullness of leg matching up to the trimming on the flanks.

All that remains is to trim the head to make a ram look more masculine and quite lightly for a more feminine look for a ewe.

Un-trimmed Classes

(The following tips have been taken from John Bowles article in ShropTalk Spring 2005)

- Select lambs as normally for breed correctness and those that have tight coats – wool that is firm to the touch and dense.
- Select lambs that are naturally stylish: as you are not fully trimming them, you have no chance to brighten them up.
- Select lambs that are reasonably clean in the head (ie not very woolly headed) and not carrying too much belly – as you can't trim that!
- Preferably do not wash your lambs because this softens the wool and in un-trimmed classes you cannot card and trim the wool to firm it up again. If you have to wash your lambs do this well in advance of the show to allow the wool to tighten up.
- Squaring off of the tails is permitted.

Ring Craft - a Few Tips

During the summer, the showground is perhaps the main venue for meeting up with old friends and acquaintances. Time seems to run away. It is always so easy to continue a conversation in the show ring but one should always remember that showing stock is a serious tradition. Total concentration is required in order for your animal to demonstrate its full potential. A lot of time and effort has been invested in the production of your show animal which now stands in the ring smart, alert and obedient. You are a team. Don't let the team down.

- Find your steward and let him/her know that you are new to exhibiting. He/she will tell you what to do, which ring to go to, and generally keep a special eye out for you.
- Remember what time you are due to be judged and keep your eye on the time.
- Remember your exhibitors number - wear this or put it in your pocket.
- Wear a fastened clean white coat - a flapping white coat can unsettle your sheep, particularly on a first outing. (Not many of us wear white coats when training our sheep.)
- Be calm
- Utilise all of the space in the show ring, try not to be crowded or jostled.
- Use any natural undulations of the ground to your advantage.
- Keep an eye on the judge at all times - he/she will be keeping an eye on you!
- Keep your sheep standing well at all times.
- Allow your sheep plenty of room to walk in a good straight line if asked to do so.
- Do not conduct a conversation in the show ring.

If you go home with a rosette the bug will bite and you will be hooked for life. If not, don't give up; find out what the judge did not like.

Show Box Contents - and Other Requirements

- White coats for the handler (with a clean spare for the photographs!)
- Show coats for the sheep (optional but these will keep your sheep cleaner during long journeys or at overnight events. They also help to stop any overnight dew from being absorbed into the wool)
- Headstall (optional)
- Halters
- Carders (sizes to suit)
- Trimming shears
- Two soft brushes (one for brushing off the trimmed wool and the other for the finishing touches with the oil)
- Oilstone and oil (for sharpening your shears)
- Oil (baby or vegetable oil to shine those black points and feet)
- A cloth and towel (to clean any dirty spots, cleaning noses etc)
- Footspray (useful for minor scald when there is time for the irritation to settle prior to show or sale)
- Antiseptic cream, petroleum jelly or similar (for minor cuts or short term relief of lameness brought on as a result of cracked skin)
- Safety pins (for exhibitors numbers)
- Pen/paper

Do not forget.....

- Directions to the showground , plan your route and allow sufficient time for travel, penning and any last minute preparation of the sheep
- Entry tickets and schedule
- Exhibitor/pen numbers if provided before the show
- MV Accreditation/Scrapie certificates (if applicable)
- Movement licenses
- Transport certificate / Certificate of competence
- Corn and water buckets
- Hay, straw and corn (as required)

And remember that shows are your shop window so perhaps a little advertising.....

- Show board
- Business cards

And just in case.....

- Flask and sandwiches
- Headache tablets
- Brandy