



# Critical Selection of Shropshire Sheep

Third Edition

Registered Charity Number 1115599



## **Table of Contents**

Table of Contents.....	1
Introduction .....	3
Official Breed Description.....	5
Critical Selection – Head .....	6
Critical Selection – Body .....	8
Critical Selection – Legs and Feet .....	10
Critical Selection – Skin and Wool .....	12
Critical Selection – Udder and Testicles.....	14
Conformation and Locomotion .....	15
How to age a sheep by looking at the teeth .....	17
Selecting Flock Replacements.....	18
Signet Recording .....	20

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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.

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.

The Shropshire Down was originally developed and is still used as 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.

If you are unsure of any element of selection. The breed society inspectors will be happy to offer confidential advice or assistance.



## **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.

<b>Head</b>	Naturally clean, soft black face, with a covering of wool on the poll. Rams should possess a bold masculine head.
<b>Ears</b>	Soft black in colour, of medium length and well set on.
<b>Neck</b>	Muscular and not too long.
<b>Body</b>	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.
<b>Legs</b>	Medium length, of strong bone and upright joints, well set apart and soft black in colour.
<b>Skin &amp; Wool</b>	Cherry pink skin covered with dense, fine quality wool of good staple.
<b>Undesirable Traits</b>	Receding wool above the eyes. Lack of wool around the base of the ears. Excessive black wool or patches of dark skin with no wool on the head, either in front of or between the ears; Coloured wool in fleece. White patches or mottling on the face, ears and/or legs. Throatiness – being loose skin below the neck. Horn stubs. Thick, coarse, long, pricked or drooping ears. Drooping rump (dock set low). Roman nose. Coarse wool on breeches.

Sheep which vary significantly from the Breed Description should be carefully considered before registration.

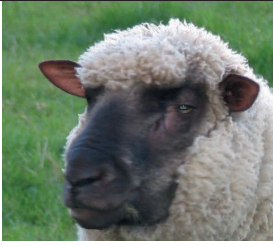
NOTE: Judges/inspectors are requested to adhere to the above type

## **Critical Selection – Head**

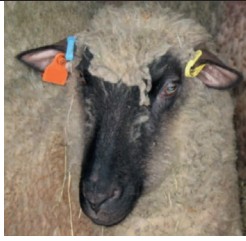
Naturally clean, soft black face, with a covering of wool on the poll. Rams should possess a bold masculine head. Ears are soft black in colour, of medium length and well set on.

<b>The Ideal</b>	<b>Undesirable Traits</b>
The head of the Shropshire is strong and butt-nosed, not long and thin and has no roman nose.	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.	Ears should not be pricked, overly long or pendulous. 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.	Lack of wool around the base of the ears is undesirable as is excessive black wool or patches of dark skin with no wool on the head, either in front of or between the ears; Occasionally a black area devoid of wool may develop between the ears of rams, this should not extend any further back than the ears and should not be present in rams under 18 months old. The female offspring of such rams could also exhibit reduced head covering and may pass this undesirable trait on. Pale, tan faced sheep occur occasionally and may become paler as they mature this is not desirable.
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.

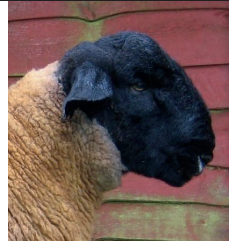




Head & Ears ✓



Long & Thin Head ✗



Roman Nose ✗  
(like in a Suffolk above)



Receding wool  
above the eyes ✗



Black Patch on Head ✗



Mottling on Face ✗



Jaw ✓



Overshot Jaw ✗



Undershot Jaw ✗



Pricked Ears ✗



Drooping Ears ✗

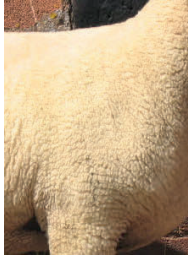


Pale Ears ✗

## **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.

<b>The Ideal</b>	<b>Undesirable Traits</b>
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 ✗



Prominent Shoulders ✗



View from above ✓




Roach back and steep to tail ✗

## **Critical Selection – Legs and Feet**


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

<b>The Ideal</b>	<b>Undesirable Traits</b>
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 adversely affect the ability of a ram.
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 hereditary.
<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: 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 ✓




Pastern ✓

**Pasterns**















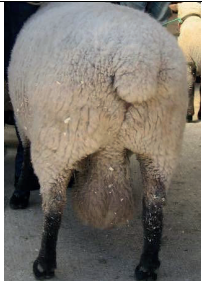


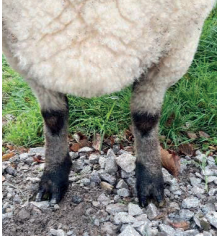
Correct	Too much angle	Too straight



Flat Pastern ✗



Mottling on legs ✗

<div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;"><b>Rear View</b></div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;">    </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 5px;"> <p>Correct</p> <p>Bow Legged</p> <p>Cow Hocked</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;"><b>Side View Rear Legs</b></div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;">    </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 5px;"> <p>Correct</p> <p>Sickle Hocked</p> <p>Post Legged</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;"><b>Front View</b></div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;">     </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 5px;"> <p>Correct</p> <p>Splay Footed</p> <p>Pigeon Toed</p> <p>Knock Kneed</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;"><b>Side View Front Legs</b></div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;">    </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 5px;"> <p>Correct</p> <p>Calf-kneed</p> <p>Buck-Kneed</p> </div>	<div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;">  <p>Sickle Hocked ✗</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;">  <p>Back Legs ✓</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;">  <p>Knock Kneed ✗</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;">  <p>Buck-Kneed ✗</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Front Legs ✓</p> </div>
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## **Critical Selection – Skin and Wool**

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

<b>The Ideal</b>	<b>Undesirable Traits</b>
The skin should be cherry pink.	<p>Skin should not be discoloured e.g. grey, mauve or blue</p> <p>A poor /dark skin colour may be indicative of the future development of coloured wool.</p>
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.	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
The wool quality should be consistent throughout the body.	<p>Wool quality should not deteriorate into hair-like, coarse wool around the rear end (britch).</p> <p>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</p>



Black Spot ✘



Black Wool ✘



Black Patch ✘



Excessive Black Wool on Head ✘



Loose Fleece ✘



Tight Fleece ✔



Black Skin ✘



Grey Skin ✘

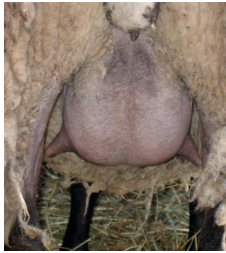


Pink Skin ✔

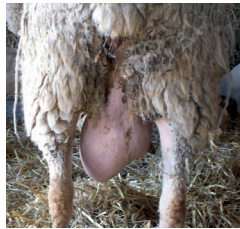
## Critical Selection – Udder and Testicles

The Ideal	Undesirable Traits
<p><u>Udder &amp; 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><b>Tone-</b> 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><b>Size-</b> 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>





Udder ✓

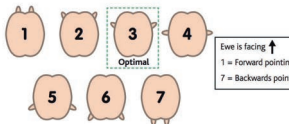


Pendulous Udder ✗

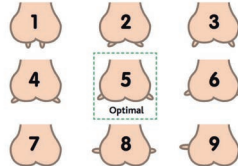


Lumpy Udder ✗

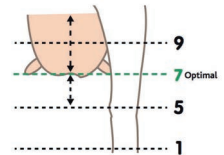
Teat position - The placement of the teats on the udder on a horizontal plane.



Teat Angle - The placement of the teats on the udder on a vertical plane.



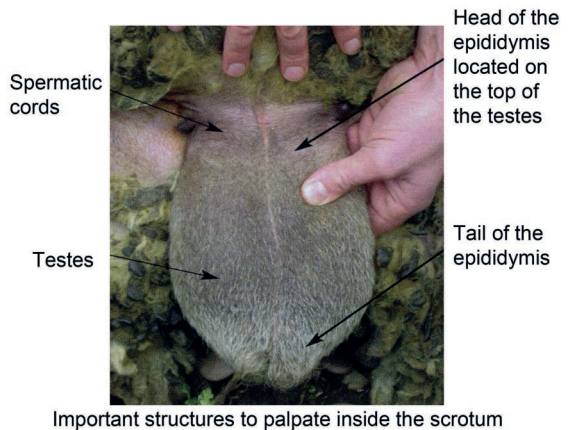
Udder Drop - The distance of the ventral abdominal wall when viewed from behind.



In most ewes udder and teat conformation is good, particularly in young ewes and conformation remains reasonable as ewes age. There are some conformations that are particularly susceptible to mastitis, these are pendulous udders, long, thick teats, teats pointing very forward and teats angled vertically.



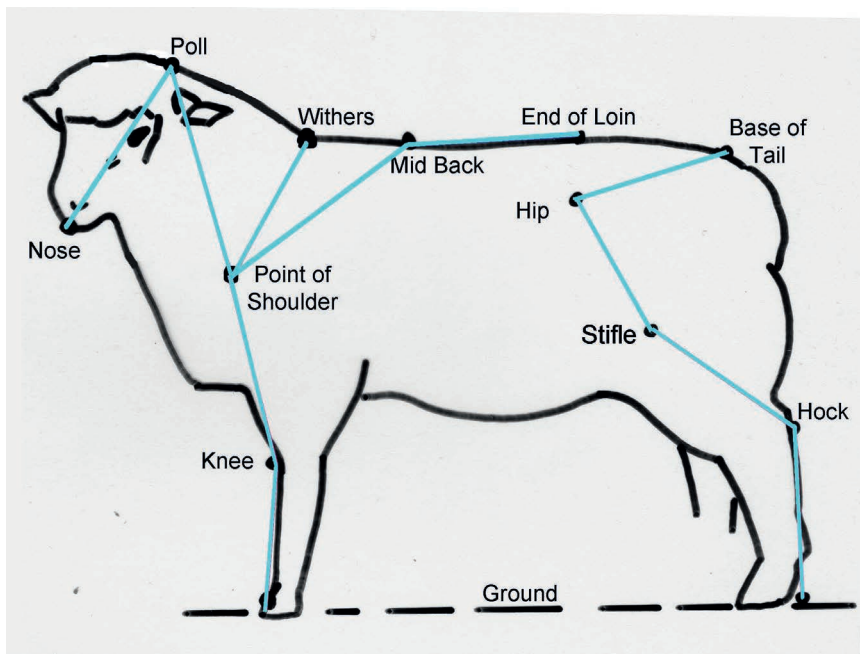
Uneven Testes ✗



## Conformation and Locomotion

In addition to the requirements detailed in the previous section, the action or the way an animal moves is an important consideration especially 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.”

## How to age a sheep by looking at the teeth

Under 1 year old	No Broad Teeth
1 – 2 years old	2 Broad Teeth
2 – 3 years old	4 Broad Teeth
3 – 4 years old	6 Broad Teeth
4 – 5 years old	8 Broad Teeth
Over 6 years old	Worn Teeth

## **Selecting Flock Replacements**

(With thanks to Harvey Clay for this article Winter 2018)

The process of selecting flock replacements should start when the lamb is born, whether you are keeping the replacement yourself or planning to sell it to another flock.

To produce an easily managed and productive flock, replacements should be born preferably unaided to fit healthy ewes with a good supply of colostrum and good mothering ability.

If these lambs suckle well in the first few hours of life, and have a plentiful supply of milk in the coming weeks they should grow well and have good resistance to disease.

Do not select replacements from lambs that were weakly at birth, or have not grown well, or pet lambs unless these have performed in line with the best of the flock.

Keep good flock records and weigh lambs regularly; at 8 weeks as an indication of the ewes' performance, and then regularly every 3-4 weeks, which will indicate the lambs' own genetic potential.

Bear in mind that single lambs are generally larger and grow faster than twins. Twins often catch up by the time they are 12 months old. Twins are, however, more likely to produce twins.

This is especially so if their dams were also twins.

Once the potential replacements are identified then the real selection process starts.

Lambs should have good conformation; a long strong broad back with no dip behind the shoulder. Good legs not turning in or out, with the hind legs not too straight, and short pasterns strong enough to support the sheep. The feet should have two evenly sized toes, which are not cracked or deformed. The tail should be set up well on the rump.

Lambs should conform to the Breed Characteristics as described in the official breed description in the flock book. These are the true flock type and must be adhered to as we are only custodians of the breed and we must not alter it.

The head should not be pointed and should have a good covering of wool with no black between the ears or on the top of the head. The ears should be short and not droopy or pricked up. There should be no white on the cheeks or jowls. The skin

should be cherry pink with a good tight fleece.

If you are buying replacements always talk to the breeder and if possible visit the farm to see the flock in its surroundings. Find out if lambs are grass reared or have been creep fed; are they singles or twins and what time of year were they born. Will they fit with your flock management? Sheep reared intensively may not thrive under harsher conditions.

Consider the health status of the sheep; are they Maedi Visna accredited or Scrapie Monitored. If not accredited, does the flock carry out any screening tests for MV, Johne's or other diseases? Have the sheep been vaccinated against clostridial diseases, abortion or foot rot? In a high risk year, vaccinations against Blue Tongue and Schmallenburg would also be important.

Is the flock Signet recorded or can the owner produce their own figures showing growth rates and performance at market. These figures can be used to compare sheep, and should only be taken into account after the more important factors of good conformation and correct breed characteristics.

We are all still trying to breed the perfect sheep, but when selecting replacements keep only the best to improve your flock. The rest will all taste very good!

If you are unsure of any element of selection. The breed society inspectors will be happy to offer confidential advice or assistance.

## **Signet Recording**

The SSBA run a performance recording scheme called The Shropshire Breed Improvement Scheme. This is based on the well-known Signet Performance Recording Scheme – a system used by many sheep and beef breeders in the UK to identify animals that are genetically superior for desirable traits.

Under the Signet system, Shropshire breeders measure and record the performance of their flocks. These breeders collect data such as the weight of lambs at birth and at 8 weeks old; the number of lambs born and raised by each ewe, and the carcass conformation of lambs. Carcass traits are measured by ultrasonic scanning in the loin area of the live lamb and occasionally full body CT Scanning.

All the performance information gathered by the breeders is sent to Signet, who use a specialised computer program to calculate the genetic potential of all lambs, ewes and rams in recorded flocks. This program is able to recognise genetic links between related animals, which improves the accuracy of the evaluations. It can also identify genetic linkage between relatives in different recorded flocks, allowing cross-flock comparisons to be made.



