

SHROPTALK



The Newsletter of the Shropshire Sheep Breeders' Association

Spring 2013

IT'S OFFICIAL - THE SHROPSHIRE IS NO LONGER A RARE BREED!

SHROPSHIRE sheep are no longer classified as a rare or minority breed in the UK, and they have been officially removed from the Rare Breeds Survival Trust's Watchlist. This was announced recently at a briefing in London attended by HRH The Prince of Wales and other supporters of native farm animals.

The renewed popularity of our breed was a highlight of the RBST's 40th Anniversary celebrations at the prestigious headquarters of The Royal Society, close to Trafalgar Square. The event marked the Trust's success in rescuing native breeds of farm livestock from extinction. Many of the nation's old breeds were lost forever in the first half of the 20th Century, but since the RBST was formed in 1973, all existing types of British farm animals have been preserved.

Valuable Genetic Resource

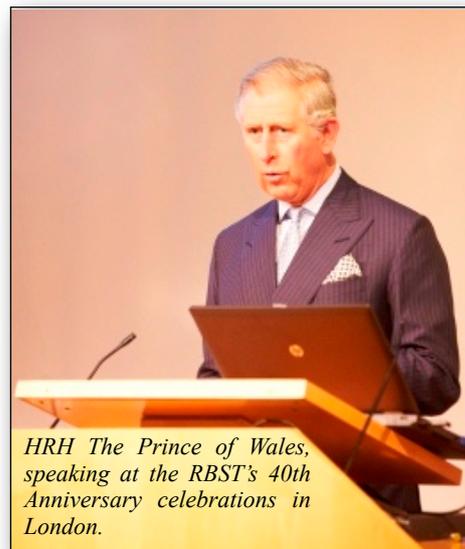
Shropshire sheep are, however, one of only a very few previously endangered breeds that have managed to regain mainstream livestock status. The breeding population of registered Shropshire ewes in the UK has increased from fewer than 500 in the early 1970s to over 3,000 in 2012, with further increases expected when flock returns have been fully processed.

Speaking at the RBST event, HRH The Prince of Wales praised the dedication of members of the RBST and traditional breed enthusiasts who have kept our important livestock heritage alive. He emphasised that native breeds are not just an attractive reminder of a bygone age, but a valuable genetic resource that could hold the key to more sustainable agricultural production.

The Prince was particularly interested to learn that Shropshire sheep have the unique ability to graze within plantations and orchards without damaging the trees, and he said he may establish a flock of his own in due course.

Commenting on the success of Shropshire sheep, the SSBA's President Liz Bowles said: "The Shropshire has often been described as a breed that didn't deserve to become rare. Shropshires are hardy and prolific and produce excellent butchers' lambs from low inputs - traits that are important to today's commercial sheep producers.

"Over the past two decades our breed society has worked hard to promote the Shropshire and ensure that it continues to perform well as a terminal sire, producing the type of lamb carcase required by retailers. Many Council members and officers of the SSBA have also made significant contri-



HRH The Prince of Wales, speaking at the RBST's 40th Anniversary celebrations in London.

butions. We must, in particular, thank our Registrar Alison Schofield, who has played a very important role over more than 20 years by introducing pedigree recording for Shropshire females in 1991, and maintaining our pedigree database ever since."

Liz singled out three additional factors that
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Ewes and lambs from Marion and Aubrey Webb's Ushers flock enjoying the early spring grass in Leicestershire.



STEPS TO THE SHROPSHIRE REGAINING "TRADITIONAL BREED" STATUS

1973

Formation of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust

1974

The Shropshire ewe population recorded within the RBST's "Critical" category with between 200 - 500 females

1984

Shropshires moved from "Endangered" to the "Vulnerable" category on the Watchlist

1991

Shropshires moved to "At Risk" category on the Watchlist

2005

Shropshires moved from "At Risk" to "Minority Breed" on the Watchlist

2013

Shropshires removed from the Watchlist and are now categorised as a "Traditional Breed"

THE SHROPSHIRE IS NO LONGER A RARE BREED

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have helped bring about a reversal in the fortunes of Shropshire sheep: Firstly, the unique ability of the breed to graze safely in tree plantations has led to the breed becoming very popular with Christmas tree growers across northern Europe. Fruit producers are also beginning to use Shropshires in their orchards, although this is still an emerging market for the sheep in the UK. With increasing fuel prices affecting the cost of mowing, and greater restrictions on the use of agrochemicals, tree growers are becoming ever more interested in alternative, environmentally friendly methods of weed and herbage control.

Secondly, the energy and commitment of our breed society has enabled better links to be formed with Shropshire sheep breeders across the globe, resulting in increased interest in UK-bred animals. High value exports of breeding stock and Shropshire ram semen have been made recently to Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and the USA.

Thirdly, the increased interest in all types of rare and native livestock breeds in the UK. Based on enquiries received by the SSBA it appears that a considerable number of new entrants into farming over the past decade are particularly interested in the old breeds, as well as other established farmers looking for livestock breeds that do well in lower input, sustainable farming systems.

“The RBST has played a significant role in assisting the Shropshire breed to move forward from its very first steps back from the brink in the 1970s, to the current research project which is underway to establish the breed’s DNA profile as a means of protecting its role within agroforestry,” added Liz.

“The RBST is supporting this project with funding and the SSBA is very grateful for all the assistance the Trust has provided over the years, which has undoubtedly contributed to the Shropshire’s rehabilitation.”

FULL STEAM AHEAD FOR OUR TWO NATIONAL SHOWS AND SALES

PLANS are well underway for our two National Shows and Sales of Shropshires, taking place in July and September. Both are excellent opportunities to buy and sell good quality stock, and are well attended by Shropshire breeders from around the UK.

The Western Show and Sale will take place at Shrewsbury livestock market on 27th July. The event is nearly a month later than in previous years in order to encourage more breeders to sell their stock at the venue. The organisers, Halls, have expanded the event to include an auction of vintage farm machinery and smallholders’ equipment, plus a Farmers’ Market. There will also be a hog roast at the market the night before the sale, which proved very popular last year.

“In 2012 we had a record number of Shropshire sheep entered. Our sale was the largest for the breed anywhere in the country,” says Matt Williams of Halls. “We hope to repeat this success, while building entries of other breeds of native and rare sheep, cattle and pigs.”

All Shropshires entered in the sale will be inspected by an independent sheep inspector, recommended by Halls and endorsed by the SSBA’s Council. Schedules for the Show and Sale will be available from Halls (01743 462620) by the end of March. **Members are reminded to check the schedules carefully to ensure their entries comply with the special regulations set for Shropshire sheep.**

The Eastern Show and Sale will take place on 14th and 15th September at Melton Mowbray livestock market. Now in its 11th year, this event attracts a large number of different breeds, and the SSBA is just one of a number of sheep societies holding showing classes. These take place on Friday 13th September (2pm for Shropshires). The sheep sale starts at 12 noon the following day.



UPSET PRICES

THE SSBA’s Council has agreed the following (minimum) upset prices for sheep sold through both the society’s National Shows and Sales in 2013:

Shearling Rams: 200gns

Older Rams: At the vendor’s discretion

Ram Lambs: 140gns

Shearling Ewes: 150gns

Older Breeding Ewes: At the vendor’s discretion

Ewe Lambs: 100gns

Vendors may set higher reserve prices for their animals if they wish. Halls reserve the right to charge the full commission on the reserve price for any animals not sold. This is to ensure that realistic reserve prices are set.

SHOW & SALE DATES 2013

National Show and Sale (West) at Shrewsbury Market

Show & Sale: Saturday 27th July starting 9am

Closing date for entries: 27th June

National Show and Sale (East) at Melton Mowbray Market

Show: Friday 13th September

Sale: Saturday 14th September

Closing date for entries: Paper 26th July, On-Line 2nd August

BREED STANDARDS: THE BODY

The neck should be muscular and not too long and the body should be well fleshed, long, deep and symmetrical. The back should be broad and straight with well-sprung ribs. The rump should be long and wide, with dock well set on and gigots full and deep.

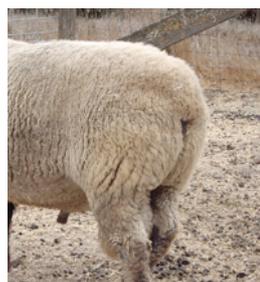
For more information, see the Critical Selection of Shropshire Sheep Booklet



X Prominent Shoulders



X Lacking Back End



✓ Gigot



Some of the competitors at last year’s Show and Sale (West) at Shrewsbury Market.

BRIAN HIGGINS 1938 - 2013

IT is with great sadness that the SSBA has to report the death of Brian Higgins, who passed away in January after a long illness.

Brian and his wife Beryl from Penryffordd in Flintshire formed the Watsdyke Flock of Shropshires around 25 years ago. Brian was well known to many SSBA members, and he and Beryl were regulars on the showing circuit. They achieved numerous successes with their sheep, including Breed Championships at County shows and the Royal Welsh Show. Brian was particularly proud of winning the latter, as he was a very patriotic Welshman. He and Beryl looked forward to their annual trip to Builth Wells in their camper van, with the sheep usually transported in the trailer behind.

Brian was also an approved judge of Shropshires and a member of the SSBA's Council, holding the post of Vice President in 2001 & 2002. He devised the SSBA's slogan: "From The Past, For The Future", which we still use to promote the breed.

Originally from Wrexham, Brian moved to Penryffordd to take over his grandfather's dairy farm in the 1950s. He held down two other jobs at the same time: He was the local milkman, bottling and delivering milk from his dairy herd for residents in the village - and he also lectured in animal and crop husbandry at the local Agricultural College.

Famous for his humour and sense of fun, Brian bravely battled with ill health for the past few years without complaint. He continued to show sheep until the end of last summer and was determined to carry on as normal for as long as possible. He will be greatly missed and the breed society sends its sincere condolences to Beryl and the family.



Brian pictured in 2004 at the Shropshire and West Midlands show, with a Watsdyke shearling ewe that was the Reserve Champion Shropshire. The Shropshire classes were kindly sponsored by Tanners Wines that year as the breed had moved out of the "At Risk" RBST category. Brian was delighted to win a bottle of Tanners whiskey as well as the usual show trophy and prize-money.

SHEEP HEALTH AND WELFARE GROUP CONFERENCE

SSBA member Clive Davies attended the SHAWG Conference last November as the breed society's representative. Here's part of his report. The full version is available on the Livestock News page of the SSBA's website.

A wide range of sheep topics were discussed with presentations given by top-flight speakers from the UK and Europe. The Schmallenberg virus received an airing but, as this was prior to the lambing season, it was impossible to predict the impact of this disease in 2013. Only when a suitable vaccine is available will there be something constructive to make the difference.

The Conference learnt that more can be achieved with attention to detail in other areas of sheep work. Phil Stocker, Chief Executive of NSA, outlined the importance of controlling common-place conditions like footrot, internal parasites and abortion, which cost the industry many millions of pounds.

Professor Neil Sargison of Royal (Dick) Veterinary School suggested that sheep production should be considered much more as an important source of food. He said the diverse UK industry, with its numerous breeds, was a great asset. He conceded however that too much range in production was an issue in the market place but highlighted the great importance of the industry for the well being of

the uplands. He stressed that flock-owners should take greater care when introducing new stock, emphasising the importance of 21 day quarantine procedures to reduce risk.

Independent sheep veterinary consultant, Chris Lewis backed-up these views and developed the ideas of 'flock security', 'farm security' and 'border security'. All doing their bit to 'keep things out!' Disease knows no boundaries. He stressed the importance of sheep keepers taking-on the responsibility of protecting their own flocks.

Adviser Lesley Stubbings outlined the importance of the SCOPS principles to the use of wormers. Professor Julie Fitzpatrick, Director of Moredun informed delegates of the history and work of the Institute. Their development of vaccines to combat problems such as Clostridial diseases had revolutionised the sheep industry.

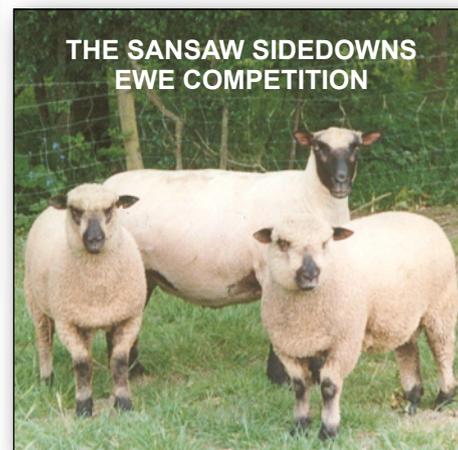
This conference gave the sheep industry a great insight into past and current research and emphasised the importance of continued work in the future. Whatever issues are solved there always new challenges around the corner. But there is no doubt that the diversity of the British sheep industry is among its strengths. The Shropshire breed can certainly play its part, especially if health, management and market-place issues are kept high on the agenda.

BREED PROFILING UPDATE

OUR breed profiling project (see *ShropTalk* Autumn 2012) is well underway and 15 rams with diverse bloodlines have had DNA samples taken.

Unfortunately, the laboratory that is carrying out the DNA analysis was unable to extract sufficient DNA material from some of the samples. This may be because nasal swabs were used, rather than blood samples being collected. Although nasal swabs work well for cattle, it appears that it is more difficult to obtain a sample from sheep using this method.

Luckily two sample swabs were taken from each ram. The lab has been able to obtain meaningful DNA samples from the second set of swabs using a different extraction technique. This will not affect the results of the project, but will delay the start of the interpretation of the samples by a few weeks.



THE breed society is delighted to announce a new annual competition that will reward outstanding prolificacy in pedigree Shropshire ewes. The contest will be open to all members of the SSBA who submitted flock returns by 31st January.

The Sansaw Sidedowns Ewe Award will be presented each year to the owner of the ewe that has produced the most *registered* progeny (male and female) in her lifetime to date.

To be eligible, the ewe must have produced registered progeny the previous year and must have been entered as "put to the ram" on the most recent flock return. The Registrar will assess the entries, based on all members' registrations up to and including the most recent flock return. There will be no limit to the number of times an individual ewe can win the contest, provided all the above criteria are met.

The winning owner will receive the beautiful Hardwicke Perpetual Trophy, originally presented to the SSBA by the great grandmother of James Thompson (Sansaw Flock) in the 1930s for the Shropshire class at the Royal Show (sadly no longer running). There will also be a cash prize of £25/year donated by John and Pauline Bowles (Sidedowns Flock). The SSBA would like to thank the sponsors for their generosity.

SHROPTALK

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SHOWING SHROPSHIRE

CLASSES for Shropshire sheep will be held at the following shows in 2013: Shropshire County, Staffordshire County, Three Counties, Cheshire County, East of England, Royal Welsh, Burwarton, Tenbury, Oswestry, Denbigh and Flint, Minsterley and Poynton. Full contact details are to be found on the SSBA's website: www.shropshire-sheep.co.uk on the Shows & Galleries page.

The breed society offers a subsidy to breeders exhibiting their Shropshires at shows that run for two or more days. The subsidy rate is £5/head for two-day shows and £10/head for longer shows. Subsidy forms can be downloaded from the SSBA's website and must be completed and returned to the SSBA's Treasurer by 31st August 2013.

SELLING YOUR STOCK

YOU can advertise your stock free of charge via the Society's website on the new and improved "Stock for Sale" page, which now includes a regional location map.

If you wish to make use of this service, you should download and complete a Sales Register Form from the website and return this either by email or post to the Sales Officer, Claire Jakeman. Please remember to update your entry through the season if you sell stock or have additional animals available.

Whilst the Stock for Sale section of the society's website continues to be a useful place to advertise, it should not be relied upon as your sole outlet. Purchasers can be very selective in their requirements, particularly with regard to travelling distance and location of prospective purchases. As reported by Claire, this is the most limiting factor for potential customers.

Be realistic about the sales potential in your own area. Plan your sales, maximise your advertising opportunities, investigate various sales venues and speak to livestock auctioneers for their advice.

CONTINUED GENETIC IMPROVEMENT AT SANSAW

The Shropshire sheep winner of the EBLEX Improved Flock Awards for 2013 is the Sansaw Flock, owned by James Thompson of Sansaw Farms, Hadnall in Shropshire.

The award is presented to the English performance recorded flock that has shown the greatest improvement in genetic merit over a 12-month period. This is the second time the Sansaw Flock has taken top spot, also winning in 2011. The runners-up this year are Sue and Mark Shimwell (Brereton Flock).

Sansaw Farms reintroduced a flock of Shropshires in 2007. There is a long family tradition of keeping the native breed stretching back over 120 years, and James believes that Shropshire-sired lambs can meet butchers' requirements just as well as those sired by continental terminal sires. Native breeds can also finish off grass without the need for expensive supplementary feeds.

In addition to the sheep flock, the 1000-acre estate runs a number of organic arable and livestock enterprises including two recently introduced pedigree Holstein dairy herds, producing over three million litres of milk per year.

Lambing from February onwards, the estate's sheep flock has been kept small and is run with the dairy herds. Last year flock numbers were reduced, with only the best 25 ewes kept

to simplify the management of the dairy and sheep enterprises.

The ewes are tugged in September to lamb indoors in February. They are turned out as soon as the weather allows and the lambs given a little creep feed. They grow quickly with lambs not retained for breeding ready for marketing at around ten to 12 weeks of age. From now on, only ewe lambs ranked in the top 25% for overall performance index will be kept for breeding.

Carefully Chosen

Selective breeding based on Estimate Breeding Values (EBVs), is producing high quality females with proven maternal ability. As well as having a high breeding index, retained ewes also have to have correct breed type attributes.

Replacement rams are bought-in, carefully chosen to avoid line breeding. Selection is based 60% on the animal's performance figures, and 40% on looks and breed type.

"Shropshire breeders do seem to be embracing performance recording more now," says James. "As a result, there is more choice for new stock and bloodlines. It also seems that high index animals coming through the sales are achieving a premium, which encourages a positive move towards recording."

SIGNET PERFORMANCE CLASSES AT THE CHESHIRE COUNTY SHOW

Classes for Signet-recorded rams and ram lambs will continue to run at the Cheshire Show this year (18th and 19th June). They will, however, have a new format: Entry is restricted to animals that had a score of 104 or above for the Terminal Sire Index in 2012, ensuring that they are above the breed average. The classes will then be judged solely on conformation, not a combination of index and appearance as in previous years. The winner of each class will receive a £25 voucher from EBLEX, which can be used by the winner when they purchase a high indexing Shropshire male. Please support these classes if you are a member of the Shropshire Breed Improvement Scheme.

JUNIOR MEMBERS' NEWS



Efa Jones (above left) was the winner of the Junior Members' show points trophy for 2012, with a score of 270 points. Although she was unable to attend the Annual General Meeting where the award was announced, her parents collected the trophy a few weeks later. Looks like Efa and her family have quite a collection of silverware at home! Ellie Butcher is pictured above right with her ram Piddington Lawrel, which she was given as a lamb and showed with great success, winning the ram lamb class, best male and the breed championship at the Shropshire County Show, as well as winning the ram lamb class at the Three Counties Show later that year. In 2012, Ellie was unable to show Lawrel because he was on a 60-day standstill before being exported to Switzerland. Ellie says she's very proud that he was able to represent British Shropshires overseas.