

Report to Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, Bart. Chairman of the Society for the improvement of British wool, of the state of sheep farming along the eastern coast of Scotland, and the interior parts of the Highlands, by Andrew Kerr 1790-1791

Appendix

Abstract of an Account of Shetland Sheep, drawn up by John Tulloch, a Native of Shetland

This paper contains a variety of inquisitions, which prove that the writer has been at very great pains to acquire proper information on this important subject. For them the paper itself must be consulted. The following seem to be the most important facts concerning the Shetland sheep, not yet so well known to the public, that he has been able to ascertain.

It is impossible, he says, to learn whence the original breed came, or how long they have been in these islands, but that original breed is a small neat sheep, with a short tail, and carries wool of uncommon softness and fineness. The breed is now however greatly mixed, having been debased by several importations of sheep, first from Scotland, and then from England, which have greatly injured the wool, rendering it much harder and coarser than it originally was. This evil is increased by the little care that is taken of the sheep, and by neglecting to keep rams of the finest kind, so that at present they look to the ewes only for the keeping up the fine woolled sort.

In consequence of this species of mismanagement, the number of fine woolled sheep, or, as they call them *kindly* sheep, much decreased so that it is supposed there are not at present in the whole islands of Shetland, above one thousand sheep of that breed, and even of the those that are called kindly, a very small proportion are of the very finest sort.

Of the sheep that carry fine wool, there are two distinct sorts observable, one sort that yields short close wool, best for being carded; another sort that affords longer wool, that would be more proper for being combed. The pile of the short woolled sort is close¹, and very much curled, or rather waved in the locks, like flax that has been cressed² between the hands, the hairs being all parallel to each other, though much bent, waving thus⁴. This wool has a clean glistening appearance in the fleece, as if it had been varnished. The long wool is often as soft as the other, though is seldom is quite so fine. It does not pack naturally so close, but is more open in the locks and is straighter in the pile. By the intermixture of breeds, you get all the varieties between these two sorts.

The colors are various – white, fawn-color, dun⁴, grey, black, and spotted. The colors most esteemed are the white and the silver grey⁵, which last is often very beautiful, and of a great variety of shades, sometimes being nearly all black hairs, and sometimes almost entirely white. Even those sheep which may be reckoned white, from the promiscuousness of the breed, have very often a few black hairs through the fleeces. It is observed that a grey sheep, like a grey horse, becomes more and more white as it advances in age. The greyness proceeds from a mixture of black hairs with those of another color. When the other mixture is a pure white, there is a beautiful silver grey, exceeding pleasing to look at, when the mixture is a dun with the black⁶, it is very ugly, though some of this kind of wool is very fine and soft.

It is observed in all these isles, that the kindly sheep are the most hardy, the most sagacious, and the best for breeding, and that though the intermixture of breeds has debased the Shetland wool, it is still more improved than that which has been imported. In a few generations, however, the distinctive quality of the foreign breeds, seems to be softened down in some measure to that of the native, though the wool is never so fine as the pure breed. The effect of these importations might have been in some measure soft, had not ewes been introduced along with the rams, and the biggest and coarsest woolled lambs been preferred for rams to breed from. The lambs of the purest fine woolled breed have always a sort of reddish tinge at the bottom of their fleece⁷. This breed is also gentle in its manners, and discovers in great sagacity in picking out proper food for itself. Its skin is likewise found to be closer and softer than that of the other sheep, and is therefore universally made choice or

in preference to all others, for aprons to malons⁸ and other artifacts*. It feeds well, and its mutton is tender, juicy, and uncommonly sweet to eat.

In this country ewes are sometimes kept to a very great age, and it is in general believed that the wool continues to increase in length and strength as the sheep advances in age, until it becomes five or six years old, when it usually loses mark of mouth, after which time the wool grows rather thinner. But these are only vague opinions that have not been ascertained by experiment.

The places where the greatest number of fine woolled sheep are present are to be found are the parishes of South Delange , Aithsting⁹, Lunnasting, Nesting, and lower Weisdale.

In the management of sheep, the inhabitants of Shetland are thankfully efficient. They are turned out to the hill, and left to shift for themselves, in the best way they can, come one end of the year to the other; and, unless it be three or four times in the year that they are taken into pens, called there *punds*¹⁰, to be examined and marked, they are never looked after by any person. They are never shorn, but the wool is plucked off as it loosens from the skin, or, rather, it is picked up from the heath, in detached locks, after it has separated of itself. Hence, it is impossible to obtain a single fleece of one kind of wool, or to sort it properly, as, in a bundle of a pound weight, you may have locks from perhaps a hundred different sheep. No use of this wool can of course be made in extensive and fine manufactures, as a few coarse hairs from foreign admixture is to be generally found among the very finest of it.

Some of the sheep, chiefly among the long woolled sort have a stiff kind of hair¹¹ that grows among the roots of the wool. This does not loosen from the skin at the same time with the wool, but continues till a later season of the year. To get free of this kind of hair is one reason for their avoiding to shear their sheep. The purest breed, however, especially of the short woolled sort, have seldom any of this hair on the skin. It be in general supposed, in Shetland, that that kind of stiff hair is only later in loosening from the skin than wool, but is later in beginning to grow also, as it seldom is observed among the wool till toward the month of February. Should this fact prove true, economical uses might be made of it.

Much occurs in this Essay¹² respecting diseases of sheep, and many hints respecting management, but, which, being only conjectural, and formed on the observations of a set of men who seem to have bestowed little attention to this very valuable animal, are not to be reckoned of great authority. They deserve to be attended to by the members of the Society, they discover that the writer has been at uncommon pains to acquire every kind of information that was accessible to him.

The following inferences seem to be fairly deducible from these facts:

1. That a peculiar breed of sheep, possessing qualities of the most valuable sort, actually subsists in the Shetland isles at present.
2. That that breed is of a hardy nature, and easily reared, and never would have been in danger of being lost, even from neglect alone, had not artificial means been employed to debase it.
3. That the inhabitants are at this day active in trying to debase it, by selecting for rams only the very worst of the breed they have, and although, in consequence of the hardiness of the original breed, they have not been able to effect an entire extirpation of it, they have already succeeded in greatly debasing it, and reducing the number – The natives are so fond of the fine wool, that they are very loath to lose any of it and, as they find that rams are apt to stray from the flock during the rutting season, so as to be often entirely lost, they take care to cut every ram lamb that carries a fine fleece, for, as wedders¹³ never wander, they are sure of thus keeping the fleece. In this manner, they debase the quality of their wool in general, for the sake of preserving a particular fleece, and realize the fable of the goose with the golden egg – This fact the writer of this Abstract had from the best authority.

*Skin is of more importance than at first sight than could be imagined; for it is probable that the skins of Shetland sheep can make Morocco leather, which will make them extremely valuable.


4. That, therefore, nothing more seems to be wanting to recover the fine breed, but to select the best ewes and the best rams that remain, and keep them apart, for breeding from.
5. That, before any proper or extensive use can be made of the wool in manufactures, which alone can make it a profitable article to the rearer, the practice of shearing the sheep must be introduced among them.
6. That a premium be given to the person who shall present a certain number of shorn fleeces at a certain time, neatly done up, as is usual in wool countries. And,

Lastly, Since Mr. Tulloch has been at such uncommonly pains to obtain information respecting this important article that he receive some acknowledgement for his trouble and attention.

FFSSA Footnotes for Clarification

1. Close – possibly dense.
2. Cressed – this word may be ‘dressed’. No meaning for the word cressed can be found that would fit here. Dressing the flax is the phrase given to removing the straw from the fibers. Dressing consists of three steps: breaking, scutching, and heckling. The breaking breaks up the straw, then some of the straw is scraped from the fibers in the scutching process, then the fiber is pulled through heckles to remove the last bits of straw. The process of breaking breaks up the straw into short segments. To do it, take the bundles of flax and untie them. Next, in small handfuls, put it between the beater of the breaking machine (a set of wooden blades that mesh together when the upper jaw is lowered. The beaters of the brake machine act much like a crimper for hair. Also – OED: creased. Flax creases/wrinkles very easily and holds that crease.

3. Dun – probably moorit or brown.

waved in the locks, like flax that has been creased between the hands, the hairs being all parallel to each other, though much bent, waving thus . This wool has a clear glistering appearance in the fleece, as if it had been varnished.

4. This is a picture of the actual document to show what the author was talking about. The drawing of squiggles measures about 1-2 ‘crimps’/mm or 10-20/cm or 25-50/inch! It is 3 mm in length.
5. Silver grey – possibly the katmoget pattern since he goes on to describe it by saying, “a great variety of shades, sometimes being nearly all black hairs, and sometimes almost entirely white”. Grey/black katmogets display this great range of silver grey shades. Katmoget and mirkface white are also reputed to be the oldest of the Shetland ‘colors’.
6. Dun with black – possibly describing a heavily sunbleached black.
7. Reddish tinge at the bottom of the fleece – possibly mixed with peat? Or pheomelanin colored wool/hair.
8. Malon – unknown definition.
9. Aithsting – this is the town that best fits the blurred text. All named towns are in the middle of Shetland.
10. Punds - Pund(n) pound; enclosure for animals. (Shetland Old County Act: That every scattald have sufficient pund, under the pain of ten pounds Scots); Punds, Da Punds- common place name associated

with local pound; (v) to impound stray animal(s). (O.E. pund: enclosure. 'Shetland Words' a dictionary of the Shetland dialect.

11. Stiff kind of hair –also known as kemp, as it fits the description. Stickel hair is kemp.
12. The author is referring to the whole book, not the Appendix which is dedicated specifically to Shetland sheep.
13. Wedders – wethers

Note: The book that this is from is a digitized reproduction. Much effort went into the correct interpretation of some of the blurredness, including contacting a state university and reading from the text of an original copy.