

Black and White from Wensleydale

by Helen Babbs

The valley of Wensleydale in Yorkshire gives its name not only to the famous cheese, but also to an eye-catching long-wool sheep breed. Wensleydale sheep have fine, ringlet fleeces with individual locks which on the shearlings can reach 40cm long!

Even once they mature, Wensleydale sheep are excellent wool producers. An adult ewe typically produces about 6kg of fleece a year, with a staple length of 20-25cm. This may be pure white, or in a range of colours from silver grey through dark brown to jet black, all with a good lustre to the wool. White and coloured Wensleydales are recorded in separate flock books by the Breed Society, to avoid developing a piebald breed like a long-wool Jacob sheep!

Their wool was the reason Jayne Dryden chose Wensleydale sheep to keep on her farm at the edge of the Cotswold Hills in Warwickshire. "I'm a bit of a fibre freak," she says, "and Wensleydales give perfect wool. The natural colour variation, including where it gets sun-bleached on the tips,

For more information, visit the Wensleydale Longwool Sheep Breeders Association website: www.wlsba.co.uk



Wensleydale ewe

means it's great for making natural coloured yarns, and is popular with hand-spinners too." Jayne's flock has grown from the original 23 to 300 sheep, who supply the fleece for her Home Farm Wensleydale range of yarns and knitting kits (www.homefarmwensleydales.com).

To support their mass of fleece, Wensleydale sheep are large, with the ewes weighing 90kg and the rams 130kg. The wool grows all over their body, including legs and belly. They have a long fringe, known as the topping, which flops over their wool-free, "dark blue" faces and ears. Wensleydales are naturally polled, but have their long tails docked, to reduce problems with dagging and flystrike.

With their large fleeces,



Sheared ewe and lamb

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Wensleydale sheep are obviously cold hardy, and can graze all year round, with a supplement of hay or haylage over the winter. However, they don't like rain, so require access to a field shelter at all times. "Wind and rain means they get chilled through," Jayne explains. This is especially so for the new-born lambs. "We do our lambing in a large, open-sided marquee, so the ewes and lambs stay dry but get plenty of ventilation. They go out after a month, once the lambs aren't so delicate."

Wensleydales are as prolific at lambing as they are at growing fleece. Ewes typically produce twins, but in a single year Jayne has also had 32 sets of triplets and four sets of quads! The ewes produce plenty of milk for twins, and the "extras" will manage happily with a bottle top-up, or weaning onto a milk machine. To make sure the lambs grow to a good size, Jayne feeds concentrates to the pregnant and milking ewes, and all the lambs up to a year old. After this, they thrive on grass, along with seaweed "Tubbies" to



Black Wensleydale ewe



Wensleydales will thrive on a grass-based diet



Black Wensleydale fleece



Coloured Wensleydales come in various shades

Wensleydales have wool-less faces and ears with a long fringe

supply the heavy mineral demand for fleece growth.

Although Jayne's is a slaughter-free flock, with their large size Wensleydales also make good meat sheep, and were originally bred as a dual-purpose breed. They do mat-

ure more slowly than some modern breeds, but remain lean and tender. They can be kept on to produce hogget or even mutton without losing quality, and can be finished on a purely grass-based diet. Given their hardy, thrifty nature, Wensleydales are also suitable for use as a crossing or terminal sire with hill ewes. Wensleydale rams pass on the good wool, lambing and meat characteristics, along with a high genetic resistance to scrapie.

The Wensleydale breed, unlike many other British native breeds, was developed from a single ram in the early 1800s. "Blue Cap," a Dishley Leicester ram with particularly fine, curled fleece, was crossed to a local strain of long-wool hill sheep, and the offspring selected into the distinctive Wensleydale sheep. In the late 19th century Wensleydales were extremely popular, but their numbers have declined hugely, and the breed is currently listed as "At risk" by the RBST, with fewer than 1500 registered pedigree ewes. "There shouldn't be so few, though," says Jayne. "They're lovely, friendly sheep. If I go and sit in the paddock in the evening, they all come and settle down around me!" ■

