

Good with Labradors

by Helen Babbs

In temperament, Portland sheep are both friendly and independent.

I first came across Portland sheep when reading through a list of rare breed sheep for sale. At the foot of the list were two Portland ewes, “Good with Labradors.” This adaptable attitude is apparently not uncommon: Portlands will graze as a mixed flock with both other sheep breeds and other livestock, while one breeder finds that her Portland lambs play happily with her golden Cocker spaniels!

This last combination may be due to association of colour, as Portland lambs are born russet brown. Like other primitive sheep breeds, the lambs' fleece gradually fades and bleaches to the cream-coloured adult wool, although they retain tan-coloured legs and faces, with paler rings around the eyes and nose. Portland sheep

also have many other characteristics typical of “primitive type” breeds. They are small, weighing between 35kg for a ewe and 50kg for a ram, with a stocky build. Both sexes have a single pair of tan-coloured horns, often with black stripes on them.

However, one unusual feature of Portland sheep compared to other primitive breeds is their long tail, which is normally left undocked. It is generally thought this indicates a Mediterranean origin for the breed, possibly being introduced to Britain by the Romans. Portland sheep were certainly long established on the Isle of Portland by the early Mediaeval period, when over 900 sheep are recorded on the island. Grazing on the salt marshes and scrubby common land, they became famous for producing fine-flavoured if slow-maturing hogget and mutton.

Sadly, with intensified farming and increased pressure for land from the Portland island stone quarries, Portland sheep populations declined. Today, only one registered pedigree herd exists on the island. However, although Portlands are listed as “At





Risk” by the RBST, there are a good many small flocks throughout the rest of the UK. They are often promoted as an ideal breed for smallholders, being easily handled due to their small size, and also very hardy. Portlands will graze year round, even on poor grassland, needing only supplementary hay in the winter. Most breeders also give a small ration of concentrates to their in-lamb ewes, to keep them in top condition. Ewes typically are good mothers, usually having just one lamb per year. Their fleece production is similarly small, about 2 to 3kg, but it is a high quality Downs type wool which is popular with hand-spinners and knitters.

In temperament, Portland sheep are both friendly and independent. If startled, they scatter rather than flock together, but will readily form a group to come and see what you are doing! Shaun and Anne of Harcourt Rare Breeds in Yorkshire discovered a particularly strong example of this typical Portland temperament in their bottle-fed lamb Una.

“Her mum was ill shortly after birth and did not produce milk, so we shared parental duties,” Shaun explains. “Not only did she think the house was her domain, if we left

the door open she would bring in her mates! We could find five lambs wondering around the house. She's nearly 12 months old now, an independent young lady with her personal requirements. The house lawn is her personal paddock and feed area; if access is denied she sulks. Fortunately, Una now prefers outside to in, but if you are late she will come in to find you!” ■



All photographs courtesy of Harcourt Rare Breeds (www.harcourtrarebreeds.co.uk)