



Protected from winter's bite by their thick fleece, Welsh Mountain sheep happily graze on the rocky slopes of their homeland.

On the unforgiving high land of North Wales, the hardy and spirited Welsh Mountain sheep breed has survived and thrived for centuries

TOUGH GRAZERS OF THE SNOWY PEAKS

ON THE STEEP hillsides above the River Conwy in North Wales, the winter morning shines bright, but cold. The air is still and quiet, and, in the shadow of the bare hedges and rough stone walls, frost still lies thickly on the ground. In the sun, a flock of shaggy white sheep pick their way across the slope. Some look about and bleat to their neighbours, but most have their heads down as they graze keenly on the thawing grass with a steady mumbling noise.

These are Welsh Mountain sheep: a breed which has grazed the hills and mountainsides of Wales for hundreds of years and is referred to in written documents from the 13th century. With the barrier of the mountains to separate them from other breeds, these hardy white sheep have changed little from their medieval ancestors.

A perfect fit
This history defines Welsh Mountain sheep as a 'landrace' breed: one developed

in a particular area over many years, without any crossbreeding with sheep from outside the region. "The breed is a very old one, so they represent generations of breeding to suit this type of land," explains Carwyn Roberts, who runs Tyddyn Coed farm, near Llanrwst, along with his father, uncle and cousin. "We've been keeping Welsh Mountain sheep since my grandfather came to the farm in the 1950s. Our land runs from down by the River Conwy, right up to 2,500ft on the mountain, and there isn't another sheep >

The sheep have wedge-shaped heads, tapering to the nose; strong jaws; bright, dark eyes, and broken tan facial markings.

breed that could thrive up there. They fit the land perfectly.”

The grazing land at Tyddyn Coed is typical of mountain farms across Wales, with coarse, poor-quality grass, invaded by patches of heather and bilberry at higher elevations. Yet, the Welsh Mountain sheep do, indeed, thrive on it. “They’re good grazers, and, even just on grass, a ewe can raise twin lambs bigger than herself,” says Carwyn. “The sheep go up on the mountain with their lambs in May, and they’re up there until October. Then we bring them down to the middle ground, near the farmhouse, which is approximately 700ft.”

The pregnant ewes graze here until spring lambing time. “We top them up with home-grown silage and sometimes fodder beet, spread out on the ground. But, even in the snow, they’ll stay out and forage down to the grass,” says Carwyn. As their dense fleece is waterproof, these sheep do not need extra shelter from bad weather. “They’ll come down towards the edge of the field if it’s very stormy, but they’re quite content to be out in the wind and rain,” he adds.



Conwy farmer and Welsh Mountain sheep breeder Carwyn Roberts, with a prize-winning ram lamb.

Hardy breed

Close up, Welsh Mountain sheep are a medium-sized breed, with a stocky build and sturdy legs. They stand 2-2½ft (60-75cm) tall, which is comparable to other older upland breeds, such as Herdwicks, but smaller than lowland or continental breeds, such as the Suffolk or Texel. “The ewes weigh 60kg, and the rams usually 100kg, although some can be 120kg. Being a rugby player is quite helpful for handling those ones,” says Carwyn, with a chuckle.

Their dense white fleece covers the Welsh Mountain sheep’s body from neck to legs, with pink skin underneath. The fleece also extends to their long tails, which come down to the hock joint of their back legs. Their legs, ears and head, with its curving ‘Roman’ nose, are wool-free, with short, bristly, white hair instead. “Some people breed them to be pure white, but I like them to have some brown colouring on their faces, round the

muzzle and eyes,” says Carwyn. “It’s like they have big, tan-coloured freckles.” His flock also sport brown patches on their knees and a reddish ‘collar’ in the thicker fleece around their necks. Their hooves are dark and quite wide, which makes them agile and light-footed, and stops them churning wet ground into mud.

Welsh Mountain ewes are naturally polled, or hornless, but the rams have a single pair of curving, light-brown horns. “The horns start poking through at four weeks,” explains Carwyn. “Some breeds have horns like corkscrews, but these just have a neat curve back, behind their ears.” For both ewes and rams, their ears are upright, pricking forwards at anything that catches their interest, and their eyes are dark and alert. “They keep their heads up: they’re always curious,” he adds.

Spirited nature

In temperament, Welsh Mountain sheep are aloof with humans, rather than

friendly. “They’re very spirited, especially the rams,” says Carwyn. “We have two lambs at present which like to go for a wander and come home when they’re ready.” But, within the flock, they form strong family bonds. “At lambing time, there’ll often be mother and daughter pairs together, each with their lambs at foot: they do know each other.”

This independent attitude means a sheepdog is essential for moving the flock. “Some of the ewes will have their own ideas about where they want to go,” adds Carwyn. “I wouldn’t get anywhere with just the quad bike, but they have good respect for the dog.”

Like Herdwicks, Welsh Mountain sheep are ‘hefted’, which means that they know their own flock’s grazing areas on the mountain, rather than needing to be fenced in, and pass this knowledge on from ewe to lamb. “We don’t buy in any ewes,” says Carwyn, “and we keep them as long as they have good teeth for grazing.

They stay very healthy: we brought 500 ewes down off the mountain last winter, and not one of them was even lame. They still produce good lambs at eight years or older, and our oldest ewe at present is 13.”

Change of focus

Apart from a handful of replacement ewe lambs, the majority of each year’s lambs are sold for meat. “We keep a few ewe lambs to fatten up for our own freezer, but the rest go to market straight after they’re weaned, at four months old, in July,” says Carwyn. “They weigh 30-35kg by that time.” Once butchered, the lamb joints are relatively small, making the breed better suited to modern cooking tastes than the larger traditional meat sheep breeds, such as Border Leicesters. The meat is sweet, fine-grained and succulent, with a high meat-to-bone ratio. “They can put on a nice layer of fat too, which has lots of flavour, rather than grease,” adds Carwyn. “It’s very nice for a roast.” ➤



“The sheep get up and make their many tracks
And bear a load of snow upon their backs,
And gnaw the frozen turnip to the ground”

John Clare, ‘Sheep in Winter’



Rams’ horns are strong and rounded, with a backward flick, and set wide apart to give a broad forehead.



Pronged hooves are wide for stability when gripping the rocky terrain, especially in the wet or snow.

The distinctive Badger Face Welsh Mountain sheep. This is a Torddu, having a dark underbelly.



Photography: Alamy, Andrew Foggrave, Shutterstock

Welsh Mountain sheep were originally a fleece-producing breed, which could also be used for meat. But, with the advent of synthetic fabrics, the focus of the breed has shifted to meat production, with the wool of secondary value. “The fleece itself is pretty wiry, so it’s not worth much,” explains Carwyn. The degree of wiriness, caused by the presence of coarse fibres, called kemp, within the fleece, varies quite a lot within the Welsh Mountain breed. Some flocks have little kemp and produce very soft fleeces: others, as in Carwyn’s flock, are much coarser. “We shear at the start of July and get approximately 2kg from each ewe,” he says. “There’s an old sheep pound at the foot of the mountain grazing, so we only have to run the flock down to there, rather than all the way down to the farmyard.”

The most valuable product from Welsh Mountain sheep is the pedigree rams. “We breed the rams to sell,” explains Carwyn. “Our farm actually holds the breed records for sales: my dad sold one ram in the 1990s for 15,000 guineas (£15,750); then, three years ago, we bought a ram for 29,000 guineas (£30,450), which produced some excellent ewes.”

Commercial and pedigree

The pedigree status of Welsh Mountain sheep is somewhat complex, as the breed society flock book is divided into two sections: Hill Flock and Pedigree. Most commercial flocks, such as Carwyn’s, are registered with the Hill Flock section, with the basic aim in breeding being for the

The white facial stripe and matching socks of the small, shaggy brown Balwen, nibbling grass.



WELSH MOUNTAIN SHEEP BREEDS

The early medieval flocks of Welsh Mountain sheep were a mix of colours and markings: white, black, dark brown, and various patterns. The dark fleeces were valued for their non-fading colours, which enabled patterned garments and cloth to be made without dye. As the wool trade developed an emphasis on pure white fleece for commercial trading, the white Welsh Mountain sheep became the dominant strain, but in some isolated flocks and regions within Wales, the coloured sheep continued. Four distinct strains are now recognised as breeds in their own right.

Black Welsh Mountain sheep: This is very similar to the standard white breed, except for being pure jet black from head to tail. Although the two breeds are now separate, a white Welsh Mountain ewe can sometimes produce a black lamb. Their soft, black fleece contains no kemp and does not fade or go grey as the sheep age. The sheep are slightly lighter, but display the same hardy, undemanding characteristics, making them popular with small-scale flock keepers.

Badger Face Welsh Mountain sheep: This is a black and white breed, with two distinct pattern types. The Torddu, which means ‘black belly’ in Welsh, has a beige-white fleece, with a black underbelly, and wide, black eye-stripes. The Torwen, meaning ‘white belly’ in Welsh, has a dark fleece, with a white underbelly, and narrow, white eye-stripes. The fleece is quite variable in quality, with ewes producing approximately 3lb (1.5kg) per year, so most are raised for their high-quality meat. The Torddu is a more common ‘small flock’ sheep within Wales, but the Torwen type is rarer, being listed as ‘At Risk’ by the Rare Breed Survival Trust (RBST), which means there are fewer than 1,500 pedigree ewes and a risk of inbreeding, due to a limited number of pedigree rams.

Balwen: Meaning ‘white blaze’ in Welsh, the Balwen is a black-brown sheep, with a white mark on its face and white on the lower half of its legs and tail. Originating in the Tywi Valley in Mid Wales, it was almost wiped out in 1947, when an exceptionally hard winter cut off the flocks and left only one ram surviving. Numbers have built up since, but it is still listed as ‘At Risk’ by the RBST. The fleece is popular with hand spinners, as it has little kemp and changes to varied shades of brown and grey as the sheep age.

South Wales Mountain sheep: This is a white breed, sometimes called the Glamorgan Welsh, as it developed to suit the Glamorgan and Brecon Beacons area. The sheep are larger, and their heavier, dense fleeces have a high proportion of kemp. They have no fleece on their undersides, which makes shearing easier.

“Flocks of thousand sheep are fed
Upon its mountains rugged”

The Rev Evan Evans, ‘Song to Arvon’

*“Then let us not the Ewe forget
When winter bleak doth hover;
When rains descend — and we safe set —
Let us be grateful to her”*

The Rev Daniel Evans, ‘The Ewe’

sheep to be hardy and commercially productive. Many of these ewes are also crossed with rams from other breeds, such as Texel, to produce faster-growing, larger lambs, which are all sold for meat, rather than being kept on for breeding. “We cross-breed 150 of our ewes,” explains Carwyn. “They lamb at the start of March, and we sell the lambs in June for the earlier market.”

The sheep registered in the Pedigree section of the flock book match the more stringent traditional breed standard, defined when the Welsh Mountain Sheep Society was established in 1904. This placed a higher emphasis on high-quality fleece, with low kemp content, as well as meat production and no tan markings on the face. These sheep are far rarer, and the Pedigree Welsh Mountain sheep is now

listed as a ‘Priority’ breed by the Rare Breed Survival Trust, the highest degree of concern, with fewer than 500 ewes and a high degree of inbreeding.

Whether pedigree or commercial, these shaggy, white sheep are an integral part of the farming landscape of Wales. “They’re low maintenance,” says Carwyn. But in the challenging economics of modern farming, this undemanding nature means Welsh Mountain sheep are essential for sustaining the family farms that continue to tend the mountain landscape of Wales. “And it’s the heritage,” he adds. “It takes generations for them to become hefted. They keep the hills looking like they do, by grazing. And they’re pleasing to the eye. I’d never want to change them.” ■

• Words: Helen Babbs

LAMBING TIME

When they come down off the mountain in October, Carwyn’s Welsh Mountain ewes are put in with the rams for six weeks. The ewes are first bred at 18 months old, so they are two when the lambs are born. Gestation is 147 days, and the lambs arrive from late March onwards. “The lambs are quite small: they probably weigh less than a bag of sugar when they’re born,” says Carwyn, “but they have a very dense fleece, so they stay warm and waterproof. They’re up and suckling right away, even in bad weather. The ewes make very good mothers. Though we lamb outside, they like to pick a sheltered spot to give birth in.”

Young ewes tend to have a single lamb, while older ones have more twins. “We don’t want too many with twins, as we can’t put those up on the mountain,” explains Carwyn. “We keep the ewes with twins on slightly lower pasture, so she can feed both lambs well.” The ewes and lambs are moved up to the grazing land in early May, when the lambs are four weeks old. “Moving them is noisy, with lots of bleating, but they all match up again in a couple of hours.”



A ewe keeps close to her single lamb on hilly pastureland.