

WENSLEYDALE SHEEP

Helen Babbs meets the hardy Yorkshire breed with the magnificent fleece.



Wensleydale ewe Photo: Sam Hogan; Lakeland flock

Wensleydale sheep have a short history compared to many other native British sheep breeds. They were developed in the early 1800s as a hardy hill breed which could thrive in the Yorkshire Dales conditions while producing both fine wool and good meat. Wensleydales are still a thrifty, dual-purpose breed, but with the shift to modern breeds such as Texels, they have largely gone out of favour. Fewer than 1500 pure-bred ewes are now registered in the UK, putting the breed as “At risk” in the Rare Breed Survival Trust’s ranking scheme, and their numbers continue to decrease.

One person counteracting this decline is Jayne Dryden, who keeps the Home Farm Wensleydales flock near Edge Hill. Jayne finds her pedigree Wensleydales thrive on her Cotswold farm just as well as they do in the Yorkshire Dales – her original flock of 23 has now grown to 300!



Wensleydales love to sunbathe!

Photo: Home Farm Wensleydales

Fine Fibre

When starting her flock in 2011, Jayne chose Wensleydale sheep because of their wool. “I’m a bit of a fibre freak,” she explains, “and Wensleydales have the finest fibre you can get.” Wensleydales are a long-wool breed, growing long silky ringlets of wool all over, including on the legs and belly. Staple length is typically 20-25cm, although on some shearlings the locks can

be up to 40cm long! The wool may be either black, which spans a variety of shades from pure black to light grey, or more commonly white. Added colour variation occurs when the tips of the black fleeces are bleached by exposure to sunlight. This broad natural colour spectrum makes Wensleydale fleece popular with hand-spinners.

Both black and white Wensleydales have wool-less, “dark blue” or slate grey heads, with a long fore-lock fringe hanging over their faces. Fleece weight averages 5-6kg, although Jayne warns that up to half of this weight can be grease, which is lost when the wool is washed. The other slight problem with the Wensleydales’ large fleeces is the risk of getting cast, particularly in the ridge-and-furrow fields of Jayne’s farm. “The sheep sunbathe on top of the ridges,” says Jayne, “and then simply roll off. We check twice a day from mid-May until shearing in June for cast sheep. They don’t seem bothered, but they’re quite heavy to roll back upright!”



Wensleydale ewe and lamb Photo: Sam Hogan; Lakeland flock



Wensleydales are a sturdy dual-purpose breed Photo: Sam Hogan; Lakeland flock

Friendly sheep

Once they've been sheared, Jayne finds the Wensleydales' lively nature comes into play. "They run and jump and kick, all round the fields, like they're saying 'No More Fleece!'" she laughs. Their favourite pastime, however, is sunbathing. "They graze first," says Jayne, "and then they all settle down in the sun. If I go out in the field in the evening, they'll all come and sit down around me – they're very friendly."

Although Wensleydale sheep scatter rather than flocking together when startled, they have a strong flocking instinct and prefer to graze as a group, separate from any sheep of other breeds in the same paddock. "It's very much a 'Them and Us' thing," Jayne describes. "When it rains, all the Wensleydales rush for the field shelters. If you saw my fields in the rain, you'd think I didn't have any sheep!"

Good grazers

With their hardy hill origins, adult Wensleydales thrive on year-round grazing, supplemented with hay or haylage in the winter. "About half my herd are wethers," says Jayne, "so they have nothing to do but eat grass and give perfect wool." To get the sheep to a good, sturdy size for maximum wool production and quality, Jayne feeds all the lambs on concentrate pellets as well as grazing for their first year. The in-lamb ewes also get concentrates from eight weeks before lambing until the lambs are weaned in the summer, and Jayne keeps a special paddock for any "poor do-ers" who need a top-up feed.

As their large fleeces place a heavy



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demand for minerals, all the Wensleydales have access to seaweed based tubbies blended specifically for rare breeds.

Twins and triplets

Wensleydale sheep are noted for their very high lambing percentage, officially 250% or more. Jayne finds her ewes usually have twins, "although we had 32 sets of triplets and three sets of quads this year as well!" The ewes produce plenty of milk for twins, and can even keep up with triplets with aid of morning and evening bottles for all the lambs from Jayne. Lambing is best done indoors, as

the Wensleydale lambs can get chilled if exposed to wind and rain. "It's important to have good ventilation and fresh air," Jayne points out, "so we use a large marquee with open sides!"

Wensleydales are naturally polled, so don't need de-horning, but the pedigree breed standard requires tail docking. "With the long wool, it's a bother dagging and watching for fly-strike," says Jayne, "so we dock the lambs and castrate the wethers with an elastrator at two days old." She prefers to leave the tails quite long, as this is believed to reduce risk of prolapse in ewes. ➡



Wensleydale hogg in wool and Shearing ewe Photo: WLSBA



A large, baled Wensleydale fleece

Photo: Sam Hogan; Lakeland flock



Wensleydale Lambs Photo: WLSBA

Wensleydale fleece can reach 40 cm long

Photo: WLSBA



9. Wensleydales have wool-less faces and a long fringe!

Made for mutton

Although Jayne doesn't slaughter her flock, Wensleydales were originally bred as dual-purpose, and their large size makes them good meat sheep. Ewes typically weigh 90kg, while rams reach 130kg or more. Wensleydale lambs grow a little more slowly than modern commercial breeds but stay lean, so they can readily be kept on and finished as older hogget or mutton, while still producing tender meat. Wensleydale rams pass these good meat characteristics on to cross-bred offspring as well, which has led

to recently increased interest in the use of Wensleydales as crossing or terminal sires.

Where to find them

In their full fleeces, Wensleydale sheep are a rather magnificent sight, particularly in large groups at the Breed Society show and sale in Skipton each September. The Home Farm Wensleydale flock may also be met throughout the year at various wool fairs, where the sheep accompany Jayne and her Home Farm yarn stall, and are a great favourite with visitors. Though everyone

says it about their favourite breed of sheep, once you meet Wensleydales you will begin to agree with Jayne when she says "They're the nicest sheep!" **SH**

For more information, visit the Wensleydale Longwool Sheep Breeders Association website www.wlsba.co.uk; or contact them at: Todd Fall Farm, Redworth, Darlington, Co Durham, DL2 2XG Tel: 07949 989976 The WLSBA 2017 show and sale will be held at CCM Skipton on the 1st & 2nd September 2017.