

## Keeping Devon Closewool sheep... Information for first time sheep keepers

Welcome!

So, you're either thinking about it or you've already gone ahead and done it. Congratulations if the Devon Closewool is your breed of choice – you've got good taste.

You will see from elsewhere on this website that the Closewool is an old, established breed. It started in the late 1800's with the cross of the Bampton Nott Devon Longwool sheep and the Exmoor Horn. The aim was to create a sheep with a big frame as well as quality meat and wool. The Devon Closewool Breed Society was formed in 1923 (after 'fixing' the cross), the breed was established and that is exactly what we now have - something pretty special indeed.

Whilst Devon Closewool sheep may have fallen out of favour with some commercial farmers a while ago, people are now realising how good the flavour of the meat is when compared to so many other breeds and that the wool is fantastic for spinning, felting and weaving. Who knows, quality wool may also come back into fashion for clothing and home products – the recent partnership between the Society and Devon Duvets being a prime example. There is an increasing number of smaller Closewool flocks where the sheep are being kept for home meat consumption (or small-scale meat box type sales) as well as for craft use of the wool. Sheepskins can be cured and make much appreciated presents as well as looking fantastic on the back of your own sofa!

You may have been tempted to go for Closewools because the breed description often says that they're 'docile' and an ideal sheep for first time sheep keepers. The chances are that when you first get your sheep, they won't be as quiet as you might expect – they won't know you, they'll probably be in a place that is strange to them; they've travelled in a trailer, possibly for the first time ever ... they may be on edge. Give them time, spend time with them and give them chance to get to know you. Speak to them in the field so that they get to know your voice and recognise you and other family members. In time, they'll calm down and you'll be grateful that you haven't got one of the livelier breeds who are not as well behaved. Get to know them and they'll trust you and you'll get to know them and their personalities – an old farmer once said that time spent leaning on a gate watching your sheep is never time wasted. How long after getting your sheep will you work out which is the dominant ewe – the first one out of the gate every time!

The chances are that you won't have many sheep to start with but do make sure that you have the right number for the land you have available. If you 'overstock' it's hard work in the winter feeding them to make up for the grass and pasture that you haven't got ... and bear in mind that your flock will hopefully increase in number anyway once they've lambed. Better to start with a smaller number of higher quality sheep and breed your own 'closed' flock ... in time you'll hear all about the problems of 'bought in' sheep!

The Devon Closewool Society is an active group of interested farmers, smallholders and their families who care about the breed and their own sheep. Amongst them you will find 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> generation breeders as well as those of us who are relatively new to shepherding. As with so many things, there'll be umpteen opinions and theories to confuse you but it's always worth coming to both the social and 'serious' events to meet folks and ask those questions that have been bugging you for a while. Our website shows the dates and deadlines for entry into the various Shows at which there'll be a separate class for Closewools as well as our Annual Closewool Society Flock Competition. You will also find details of the other Society 'get togethers' where you'll meet other members and get the chance to learn about the breed and how to care for them, including how to prepare them for Showing.

Once you become a member, you'll receive our Newsletters as well as the annual Flock Book. This will tell you who the other members are and how many sheep they have. This makes interesting reading, particularly just before the Annual Show and Sale at Blackmoor Gate on Exmoor early in September.

If this is your first foray into keeping sheep then good luck! The Internet is a brilliant source of information and there are several useful books to get you started... here's a list of a few things to think about at this stage (in no particular order) ...

- There are several legal aspects to keeping sheep. Have you done your research? Got a County Parish Holding (CPH) number and, when you get your sheep, a flock number and your own identifiable ear tags? Have you informed anyone who needs to know that you'll have sheep? DEFRA? Your landlord? Neighbours?
- There are several health and safety aspects to keeping sheep, including diseases and infections that can transfer from sheep to humans or even from cats to sheep. This one's worth googling especially if anyone handling sheep or visiting your land is likely to be pregnant.
- Have you got the necessary kit to handle the sheep safely without damaging them or yourself? There are many different solutions to this one and it's worth visiting a few farms or smallholdings to look at their set up before committing yourself to any significant expenditure.
- Are you prepared for the constant mess and effort involved? Worms of all varieties; Foot rot and other foot problems; Dagging or docking; Maggots; Lambing; Tagging and castration. It's not for the faint hearted and it's not practical to rely on others to do much of this for you although it's usually better to get shearing done by someone who knows what they're doing!
- Have you got someone to get advice from? Is there an experienced local farmer who can guide you and pop over in the early days if there's an emergency ... and have they already agreed to do that?! If you only have a few ewes you'll probably need to borrow a ram at the right time of year – much better to breed to a Closewool ram rather than another breed. This is essential if you want to retain your pedigree status.
- Have you registered with a local Veterinary practice and asked if they have any courses for new sheep keepers? Many offer lambing courses as well as how to administer medicines etc.
- 'If you've got livestock, you'll have deadstock' – How will you deal with any lambs or adult sheep who don't make it?
- Can you afford it? The initial capital outlay (Stock, handling equipment, Vet's bills etc) and the ongoing time needed to look after your sheep cannot be underestimated. Don't expect to cover your costs in the short term ... many would say that you'll be doing well to break even in the long term as well!
- Have you got the time? Looking after the sheep themselves is one thing and varies greatly season by season although they still need to be seen daily, whatever the weather! You'll also need to do some admin – Movement forms; Create a Holding Register (including any records of Medicine purchase and use); the Annual Inventory Return on the 1<sup>st</sup> December; the Annual Devon Closewool Registration and any Show or Sales entries or transfer information. You're also recommended to have your own records to track which particular sheep are 'performing' well and those who are costing you a small fortune and not producing much in return!

- Be warned that keeping sheep is likely to take over your life. There'll be days when you get frustrated and think it isn't worth doing and other days when things go smoothly, the lambs are skipping in the sunshine and you just know that it was worth all the hassle. You will probably bore members of your family (and the folks down the pub) as you get your head around things ... Don't say that I didn't tell you!

I mentioned useful books. Two that I've got and which are very practical are:

- Haynes Sheep Manual, Liz Shankland ISBN 978 0 85733 770 2 First published 2015, reprinted many times since, including in 2020
- The Sheep Book for Smallholders, Tim Tyne. ISBN 978 190 487 1644, First published 2009

Clearly there are many more. If you have a particular favourite, why not share it with other members on the Devon Closewool facebook page?

If you have any questions regarding any aspects of keeping Devon Closewool sheep, please contact the secretary who will be happy to point you in the right direction.

*And here's another article which we could either use now as well or hold it back until later.*

### **Are you 'sheepish' when it comes to knowing about sheep?**

Here are ten fun facts about sheep ... for experienced shepherds or those of you who are 'new to the flock'. *Useful for the sheep round at your local quiz if nothing else!*

1. Sheep have rectangular pupils which gives them a wide field of vision – between 270 and 320 degrees! They can see everything except that which is directly behind them. Useful as a prey species to be aware of their surroundings and who is approaching ... even if you've got your head down grazing.
2. Sheep have an excellent sense of smell. They communicate with others through scent – scent glands in front of their eyes and between the digits of their hooves produce smelly secretions which they use to communicate with each other.
3. There is two-way vocalisation between a ewe and her lambs. Ewes that have given birth recognise their lambs by the sound of their calls. They also 'speak' to their lambs even before they're born so that the lambs recognise their own Mother's call once they've been born.
4. Sheep can recognise you ... and probably your moods! Sheep are intelligent and can 'recognise' up to 50 other sheep faces and remember them for up to two years. They can also recognise human faces in the same way. If you upset a ewe she'll remember you for some time ... and might even get her own back at some point!
5. Talking of moods, sheep, too, are capable of experiencing a wide range of emotions, just like us! Research studies have highlighted the ability for sheep to feel afraid, angry, bored, sad and happy and they have individual personalities. They can also, apparently, be either pessimists or optimists. Anyone who has had a ewe lose her lamb(s) will know that they can 'mourn' their loss for several days if they don't successfully adopt another lamb in the meantime.
6. Sheep are very social animals. They form strong bonds within their group/ flock. They can have close 'special' friendships, a legacy from the days when they needed to know who to trust if set upon by predators, apparently. Some can also be antagonistic towards some others – and people if they're so inclined!

7. Sheep can self-medicate. They can use particular plants and other substances that hold no nutritional value to prevent or treat disease and they teach their young to do the same. There is some evidence that older breeds, like the Closewool, are better at this than some of the newer breeds.
8. There are over 1000 breeds of sheep. Some have the polycerate gene which means that both males and females can grow 2, 4 or even 6 horns! The Devon Closewool is a 'polled' breed meaning that it doesn't have horns although some develop small horn buds where the horn would have been – leftover from their Exmoor Horn genes presumably?
9. Sheep have a distinct groove which divides their upper lip. This is called a philtrum and it allows them to eat close to the ground and to select the grasses and other vegetation that they prefer.
10. Sheep's teeth tell us a lot. They don't have top front teeth. Their upper hard palate is used like a chopping board by their lower teeth. Their bottom teeth grow gradually in pairs as they grow older and can be used to determine their age – worth researching if you're going to buy sheep and don't want to be fooled into buying something that is actually older than you've been told it is!