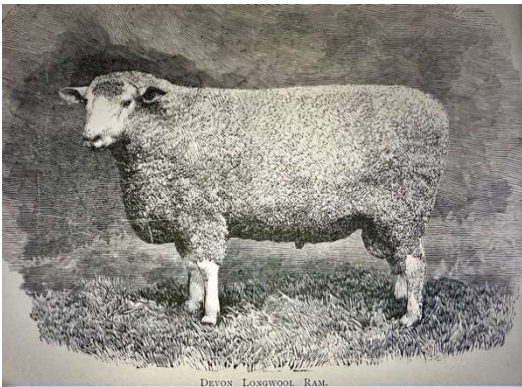


Devon Closewools – When, Where and Why it all started!

How many of us who now keep the Devon Closewool breed know when, where and why it all began? What was life really like for those early ‘crossers’ who were looking around for something different on the sheep front?

According to our Flock Book 1 from 1923, there were 96 registered breeders at the time. In order for the breed Society to be recognised at that point they had to be breeding ‘true’ (without going back to the original genetic cross) for 30 years - that means at least before 1893. Flock Book 1 tells us that only two flocks were started before then, at Castle Hill in 1883 and by SA Cook (Sidney Albert, my Grandfather) at West Heddon, Filleigh in 1889. His Father, Nicholas Cook, was a Castle Hill tenant so, presumably, over-the-gate deliberations between Tenant and Landlord (or his Shepherd) about how to breed better sheep was probably where and why the original crossing happened. *How fitting that our Society’s AGM is still held in Filleigh Village Hall, within spitting distance of where it all began?* Nicholas Cook moved to Heddon in 1848 and he, with his brothers Fred and William and sons Charles, Nicholas and Sidney supplied Closewools to a significant number of the 96 flocks listed by 1923. *I don’t know why Nicholas isn’t listed as a flock owner in 1923 but he was ill and bedbound in his later years.*



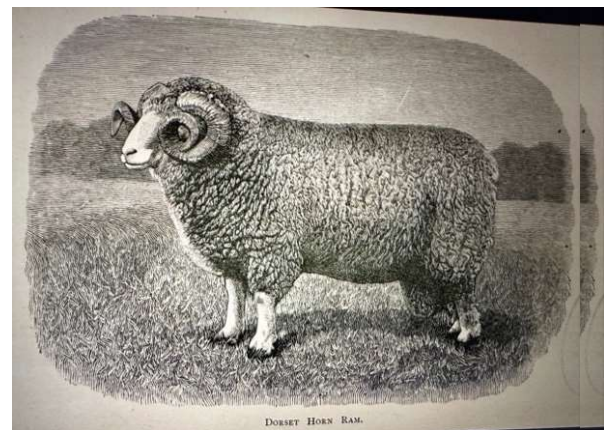
So, what was the ‘cross’? They took a Bampton Nott ram (for it’s wool) and bred him with Exmoor Horn ewes (for their hardiness). The meat of both breeds was excellent even then. The Bampton Nott was a type of Devon Longwool, now extinct. It was heavy-framed, larger than the Exmoor Horn and with fine wool of a long staple. Apparently, it was related to sheep from ‘up North’ (between the Tees to the Severn) and it is believed that this area also produced the then ‘new’ Leicester sheep. No wonder that Closewool/ Blue faced Leicester crosses work so well now!

Picture left: Devon Longwool Ram, Bampton Nott type

Picture right: Dorset Horn Ram, very similar to the Exmoor Horn (no picture available from the time)

Pictures taken from ‘Live Stock Handbook No 1 Sheep Breeds and Management’ 1905)

It’s fascinating to find out what else was happening at the time. In the late 1800’s Parson Jack Russell was just down the road from Filleigh at Tordown House, Swimbridge crossing his terriers to breed the ultimate small hunting dog. *How many of us now keep both Closewools and Jack Russells?* Anyway, talk of the day in the Swimbridge and Filleigh areas was clearly about breeding to improve bloodlines for a specific purpose.



In fact, the whole of the 1800’s appears to have been about ‘improvement’. At the start of the Century, the Industrial Revolution (1760 to 1840) mechanised a lot of things that were previously done by hand and in the home. It moved production into larger workplaces, sometimes ‘factories’. In 1816, Heathcote moved from Loughborough to Tiverton. He provided homes for the 100 workers who came with him. He also started to educate them in his own school and to employ local labour as well. Word soon spread across the County about a different way of employment and life generally. John Heathcoat, his grandson, subsequently built Knightshayes Court (now National Trust) in 1869 as the family home.

In 1818, John Knight bought Exmoor from the Crown. He wanted to extract copper and iron in the same way as he had in the Midlands but he didn't find as much as he hoped. He'd paid a very high price for what he got, estimated to be around £20m in today's money. At the time, Bampfylde was having much more success in his North Molton mines which must have upset Knight greatly!

Knight and his son, Frederic, instead 'broke the land', built farms and roads and appointed tenants whilst they continued their prospecting. They built a dry-stone wall around the first land they owned – some of which can still be seen today in places. The first farms they built were: Emmetts Grange(1884), Horsen, Wintershead, Warren and Crooked Post, now Littons. *If you're interested, I can recommend 'The Wild Red Dawn', Part 1 of a trilogy by Paddy King-Fretts who knew both the history and Exmoor so well.*

In 1833 the Factories' Act made schooling the responsibility of employers so farmers were meant to educate their workers. There were many things that farmworkers weren't very happy about and in 1834 the Tolpuddle Martyrs in Dorset formed a secret society to voice their concerns and were arrested and transported to Australia for 7 years' hard labour. Interestingly, within a few years many farm workers from Devon and elsewhere actually chose to go to Australia for a better way of life – around 100 days at sea.

In 1840, The Duke of Bedford was developing his mines near Tavistock and also building homes for his workers. He used his knowledge of controlling water in mines to harness water-power to drive farm machinery and he set up model farms to demonstrate this. One such farm was Dinnaton Barton, Swimbridge (1853), another local example of people trying to make things better which the Fortescues and Cooks would certainly have known about (*Not to be confused with nearby Dennington House which is where Jack Russell's wife was born*).

In 1858 the West Buckland Farm and County School was set up by the local rector and son of the then Earl of Fortescue, another Castle Hill connection. Aimed at the sons of the 'middle class' (farmers, local tradesmen etc) it recognised the need for improvement in education. Filleigh School opened in 1862 and South Molton in 1877. Schooling to age 11 wasn't compulsory until 1893.

Times were tough in farming when the Closewools began. It was hard to get farm labour as there were now better work alternatives around. Landowners were putting up rent to get agriculture to pay as much as their other newer investments in towns and industry. Everything had to get better and to pay more. Gone were the days of subsistence farming and merely looking after your own needs.

In the late 1800s there was a real downturn in agriculture. Rents were going up even further or, worse, landlords were selling land to invest elsewhere - if you had a farm and wanted to stay put you had to try and buy it. We are told that a lot of sheep breeds changed at this time, not just the Closewool, as productivity needed to increase significantly to pay the bills. Knowledge of how to use manure to improve soil fertility and the supplementary feeding of cattle and sheep became widespread – the foundations of farming as we know it today.

When the Closewools first began to roam the fields around Filleigh, there were no cars, just horse and cart or to they had to be driven along tracks and roads. Not until 1900 were there even a few cars in North Devon. Train transport had started in South Devon in the 1840's and Barnstaple Junction opened in 1854 but rarely were sheep moved by train. The Torridge Vale Butter Factory started in 1874 right next to the tracks there which had opened in 1865. The first tractors weren't around in Devon until 1920 at the earliest. Many farms didn't get one until decades later. Actual horse-power and traction engines were the only way to get the bigger jobs done, including harvest. In terms of moving sheep, things must have improved greatly between then and 1923 as the Flock Book 1 lists sheep sales at Bratton Fleming, South Molton, Barnstaple and Blackmoor Gate ... or did they just walk them there? It's no surprise that most market towns are a day's walking distance apart. South Molton Pannier market opened in 1860 to replace the Old Market House and the smaller shops which stood around the Market Square. Barnstaple Pannier Market was completed in 1855 and replaced the former Butchers' Market (1812) which had a Corn Exchange above it.

So, some facts from Flock Book 1, 1923

- 96 registered breeders/ flocks, of which 7 didn't complete their flock returns (*Sorry, Kim, some folks didn't get their flock returns in promptly then either!*)
- Of the 89 who did give their numbers, there were 6,346 ewes, 3,921 Yearling ewes and 358 rams. 10,625 total
- There were 9 flocks who started Closewools before 1900, all very localised and on the western skirts of Exmoor: Filleigh, East Down, East Buckland, Arlington, Berrynarbor and Kentisbury
- The Castle Hill Flock comprised 117 ewes, 68 Yearling ewes and 2 rams
- Sidney Albert Cook's flock was 25 ewes, 22 Yearling ewes and 11 rams. Clearly, he saw ram sales as a good little earner! *Photo: SA Cook judging Closewools in full fleece*
- The largest flock listed in 1923 was Flock No. 9 TW Smith, East Down with 250 ewes, 200 Yearling ewes and 9 rams. Interestingly, this is the only flock with the same flock number today.



Photo: Albert Cook with Closewool Champion and Reserve Champion, Okehampton Show 2018

By keeping Devon Closewools, you, too, are contributing to the maintenance and continuation of the breed. The meat is superb. The wool and sheepskins they produce are equal to that of the best breeds and better than many. There is a lot to commend the Closewool. It is our responsibility to keep the best and breed only from the best. As owners and breeders be proud of what you do ... and thank you for (justifiably) having faith in them!

Veronica Matthews, 2024

- *Great Granddaughter of Nicholas Cook and Granddaughter of Sidney Albert Cook of West Heddon, Filleigh*
- *Niece of Albert Cook who sold me 6 in-lamb ewes in 2009 when he gave up his flock at the age of 85 whilst still living at Heddon*
- *Current owner of the only Cook bloodline flock that can be traced back to 1889*
- *Frankland Farm – Recent Overall Champion Flock*

It would be good if the history of a number of other flocks could be written up and put on the Devon Closewool website. Do you know when your flock started and which family members were responsible for it?

Even if your flock is fairly recent this would be a good time to update the 'Owners and breeders' section of the website. Just a paragraph saying something about your flock and a couple of recent photographs would be helpful to other members. Please send them to info@devonclosewoolssheep.co.uk. Thank you.