

Devon Closewool sheep -this rare breed could be your starter flock

Helen Babbs finds out about these sturdy, weather-proof sheep



A sturdy breed with a "leg in each corner"

People often think of rare breed sheep as small, primitive types – lightweight, horned and quite flighty. But the rare Devon Closewool sheep isn't any of these. Large and sturdy, with a dense fleece and no horns, the Closewools take life calmly, making them ideal sheep for a starter flock. "We got our first Devon Closewool as a single pet lamb for our younger daughter in 2014," says Lyn Rennie, from Highampton in Devon. "But 'Fluffy' the ewe had so much character while still being really easy to handle, we rapidly fell in love with the breed, and exchanged our previous Blueface Leicesters for twenty Closewools a couple of years later." Twelve years on, their Hunscoot flock has grown to 200 breeding ewes and ewe lambs, plus six rams, and led the family to take on a full-scale farm tenancy in 2021.

CALM & CHUNKY

As a breed, Devon Closewools are a chunky, medium-size sheep with a short, thick neck and sturdy body. "They've definitely got a 'leg in each corner'," Lyn notes, "and at about 80kg for the ewes, it does hurt when they step on your foot!" Both ewes and rams are naturally polled. Their face, ears and legs are wool-free, with thick white hair, while their creamy-white fleece covers the entire body. "It's a very dense fleece, as the name implies, so it keeps them nicely warm and dry even

“The Closewools take life calmly, making them ideal sheep for a starter flock

in winter rain and snow." Fleece weight is usually around 3kg from each ewe. "At present, ours just goes to the Marketing Board," says Lyn, "but other flocks have theirs spun into speciality rare-breed yarns."

In character, the Closewools are calm and friendly. "They're so gentle and quiet, but with plenty of individual character," says Lyn. "We don't have a



Devon Closewool lamb

sheepdog now, so I just move our ewes by calling them from the gate – they put up their heads, bleat a greeting and come over. Given their own time, they'll go where you want, but they prefer to plod, not hurry." This placid nature means the Closewools are great at staying in their fields to graze, rather than exploring the boundaries. "When we moved to our farm, the fences were quite poor, often just a couple of strands of wire," Lyn recalls. "This was a worry with our Jacob sheep, but the Closewools couldn't have been less bothered – we didn't have a single escapee."



Fluffy and her twin lambs



The breed produces excellent rare-breed lamb from a pasture diet



Lyn Rennie's prize-winning Devon Closewool ram



Devon Closewools are quiet and easy to handle



Prizewinning trio of Hunscoot Devon Closewools

“They've definitely got a 'leg in each corner

WEST COUNTRY NATIVES

The Devon Closewool Sheep Breeders Society was founded in 1923, but the sheep had been popular in the Devon and Exmoor area since the 1800s. "The breed was developed by crossing Exmoor Horn sheep with the local longwools," Lyn explains. In 1950, there were over 200,000 registered Closewools within Devon, but like many native breeds, the introduction of continental sheep such as Texels caused a decline. Devon Closewools are now listed as 'At risk' by the RBST, partly due to their limited distribution, with most flocks still in the south-west region.

"They are very suited to our conditions here in west Devon," says Lyn. "We're at

about 400ft, so quite wet and windy, but there are also flocks up on Exmoor that thrive out all year too. They can stay out all winter, including in the snow. As well as the rain, the Closewools have feet that cope really well with all our mud – they have good feet with no problems."

LAMBING TIME

The Devon Closewool's easy-care nature continues into the lambing season. "We bring our flock into the barn for lambing, just to make it easier for us," says Lyn. "We lamb a few in January, to give some early lambs for the summer shows, and then most of the flock lambs in April. The lambs are born with big long legs and a thick woolly fleece already, so they cope well with our wet springs. After a couple of days indoors to bond with their mum, we're able to turn them out again."

The ewes vary between one or two lambs each year. "The lambing percentage is about 160%," Lyn figures, "so we get some twins but not the majority. 'Fluffy' was unusual in being a triplet lamb!" However, the Closewools make up for this lower lambing rate by going on breeding longer. "They first go to the tup as shearlings, at 18 months old, then they carry on lambing well up to eight or nine years old or more, so we get more lambs overall."

FROM GRASS TO CHOPS

After weaning at five months, the lambs move onto a purely grass diet. "The breed was developed for 'grass-only' farming, and they thrive on it," observes Lyn. "The ewes have haylage when they come in for lambing, and other than that they live on grass all year round. It's much more

PICTURE CREDIT: NORTH DEVON SHOW



PICTURE CREDIT: KIM DART

A sturdy line-up of Devon Closewool rams

“They definitely prefer grazing to browsing

cost effective, and makes them an ideal breed for organic or regenerative farming systems, like ours. We do feed the show sheep a little bit of concentrates at the start of the season,” she admits, “but that’s just to get them looking brilliant for the shows!”

Unlike some other moorland breeds, the Closewools definitely prefer grazing to browsing. “They will nibble a little willow, but they’re not really interested in eating the hedges,” Lyn notes. Because

their farm soil is mineral deficient, she gives all the flock a standard mineral bolus annually. “Our wet clay land lacks a lot of minerals, so giving a bolus just keeps them covered.”

Closewool lambs can be ready for slaughter by 16 weeks from a pasture diet, or up to 24 weeks for the moorland flocks. “They grade as well as commercial breed lambs,” says Lyn, “but produce the most wonderful dark meat – sweet and with a subtle flavour. We have our spare ram lambs wethered, and sell the meat direct as lamb boxes.” All their ewe lambs are kept on, either to build up the flock or be

“Devon Closewools do enjoy a day out!

sold as breeding stock. “There’s quite an interest in the pure breeds at present, so we always have a market for them.”

A GRAND DAY OUT

When it comes to the summer, Devon Closewools do enjoy a day out! “The sheep really seem to enjoy it,” Lyn chuckles. “Because they’re so friendly, they like all the brushing and pampering to get them ready before hand, and then they love being fussed and petted by the public on the day. Some breeds can be a bit nervous in the pens, but the Closewools are always up at the hurdles, looking out for a pat.” This friendly but steady nature also makes the breed good for Young Handlers classes.

Being based in Devon, Lyn has a good range of shows with dedicated breed classes throughout the summer. “Last year was a good year,” she enthuses. “One of our ewes won breed champion at three shows, and a home-bred ram was Champion at the North Devon show.” If there isn’t a specific Devon Closewool class, the breed can go in “Any other native” classes. “They do well in those too, although judges are often surprised how big they are!”

*For more information, visit the Breed Society at: www.devonclosewool.com
Hunscott flock: <https://www.instagram.com/hunscottdevonclosewoolflock/>*



PICTURE CREDIT: KIM DART

Devon Closewools are quite large in build



PICTURE CREDIT: KIM DART

A good dual-purpose breed for meat and fleece