Oxford Down Sheep Breeders' Association

ESTABLISHING & MANAGING A REGISTERED OXFORD DOWN FLOCK

BUYING OXFORD DOWN SHEEP

Oxford Down ewes and rams can be bought at the Association's official sales at Worcester and Carlisle in August and Melton Mowbray in September. Contact the Secretary for details. Alternatively, ewes and rams can be bought privately ex farm directly from registered flocks. The Secretary can provide a list of breeders and their contact details on request.

Buyers should obtain the best foundation females possible to establish a good quality flock. It is essential that this good start is maintained and improved on by selecting and purchasing top quality stock rams. Always remember that "the ram is half the flock". Each subsequent lamb crop must be culled hard so that only the best ewe lambs are retained as flock replacements and only the best ram lambs are offered for sale for pedigree or commercial use. To help in the selection of suitable breeding stock the points to look for in a good Oxford Down are given below.

SELECTING OXFORD DOWN SHEEP

The Oxford Down should be as big and strong as possible, with a bold appearance. It must display character and style and have a bright, alert eye.

It should have a bold, masculine head, well set on a strong neck and the poll should be well covered with wool. Wool blindness should be avoided. The hair on the face should be dark in colour, with a few grey speckles on the nose permissible.

The sheep must be correct in the mouth i.e. the teeth should meet the pad.

The legs should be short, straight and strong, standing square and wide apart. The sheep must stand up on its toes and must not be down on its pasterns. There should be white wool down the legs over dark hair.

The animal must have a full, level back and the ribs should be well sprung. The barrel should be deep, thick and long with a straight underline. There should be a broad breast, well forward and a full, rounded brisket.

The fleshing should be firm, lean and deep. The loin must be wide and thick; the gigot full, deep and wide; the dock thick; and the twist deep. Oxford Downs must be selected for a very high growth rate.

The tail must be docked to leave a sufficient length to cover the anus of the ram and vulva of the ewe. The skin should be a healthy, 'cherry' pink colour and the whole body should be covered with fine wool of close texture and good staple, giving a tight, high quality fleece. Black fibres in the fleece must be avoided.



Oxford Down Shearling Ram

EAR MARKING & REGISTRATION

When purchasing Oxford Down sheep it is essential to check that the sheep are individually ear marked. The buyer should also determine from the vendor prior to purchase the exact registration status of the sheep.

1. If the sheep are already registered the vendor should supply the pedigree certificates to the buyer. The buyer must submit a Transfer form to transfer the sheep into his or her flock. The transfer fee is payable by the buyer.
2. If the sheep are pending registration by the breeder (usually ewe lambs) the pedigree certificates will be available when the next volume of the Flock Book is published. The buyer must submit a Transfer form and pay the transfer fee.
3. If rams are sold as "Eligible for Registration" a completed Ram Registration Form signed by the breeder should be given to the buyer and submitted to the Association with the required registration fee.

It is also important to physcially check that the ear tags in the sheep's ears match the numbers stated on any paperwork, pedigree certifcates or sale catalogues.

MANAGEMENT OF THE REGISTERED OXFORD DOWN FLOCK

Having bought good foundation stock (both first-class ewes and a quality stock ram), there are some key management points to note if the new breeder is to progress successfully with the new flock.

FEEDING

The importance of selection and hard culling of inferior stock cannot be overemphasised. However, there is a lot of truth in the saying "half the breeding is in the bag". No matter how good the foundation animals and how judiciously the progeny are selected, success will not follow unless the feeding is correct. The correct level of nutrition allows stock to fully express their genetic potential. If feeding is inadequate, there is a danger that good stock will not realise the full growth of which they are capable. However, if a lamb is overfed it can increase the likelihood of it going wrong in the mouth as a shearling. Also, if a lamb puts too much weight on before its bone structure is able to support that weight, it can result in the lamb being down in one or more pasterns.

In practice, if you are aiming to take lambs to early shows or sales they must be creep fed on an ad-lib basis until weaning when they should be given access to good clean grazing supplemented by additional feeding right through to the event. At this stage a good Oxford Down ram lamb should weigh 70-80kg. Note also that lambs born in March or April are very unlikely to achieve the necessary size to be successful at summer shows or early breed sales. Most breeders who attend these events will try to have lambs on the ground as early in December as possible and certainly January at the latest. There is no point in bringing out late-born lambs or lambs which have not been given the necessary level of feeding.

Ram lambs intended to be sold as shearlings do not need to be pushed so hard but even so must be on a good level of feeding to let them grow well during their first year. Over the first winter the rams can be out at grass for much of the time or perhaps grazing roots. Closer to the sale the level of feeding should be raised to let the rams gain some condition.

WEIGHT RECORDING

One of the Oxford Down ram's main commercial advantages is that it will sire lambs which have the potential for extremely high growth rates. In order to maintain this trait it is beneficial for pedigree breeders to weight record their flocks. Some breeders weigh their lambs every month but the common ages for weighing are at birth, 8 weeks, 12 weeks, and 21 weeks. Weight recording helps to identify the fastest-growing individuals within each lamb crop and families within the flock. It also helps to improve the milking ability of the ewes as the growth rate to 8 weeks is a good indication of how well a ewe milks. Some breeders also join the Signet recording scheme which involves weight recording and ultrasonic scanning for backfat and muscle depth.

WEANING

Lambs should be weaned from the ewes at 12-14 weeks old, although early-lambing pedigree flocks which are creep feeding heavily may wean earlier. If ram lambs are left with their dams beyond 14 weeks there is a danger that the more precocious ram lambs will serve some of the ewes, leading to lambs born earlier than expected and whose sire is unknown. After weaning the ewes should be put on bare pasture to help dry up their milk supply or housed briefly on a straw and water only diet.

RECORD KEEPING

As with any pedigree livestock breeding, good identification and record-keeping are essential if accurate pedigrees are going to be maintained. Three basic items of information must be recorded in the record keeping system: the sire of the lamb, the dam of the lamb, and the lamb's ear mark. Other information such as birth type and date of birth are also recommended. A set of record sheets is available from the Association for this purpose or the breeder can develop their own lambing book. Ear marking must be done as soon as practicable after birth by inserting a pair of official UK ear tags in the ears, one electronic and the other visual. In practice, lambs should be tagged at a few days old after the ears have strengthened and the veins can be seen.

SHEARING

An important consideration when producing shearlings for show or sale is the date of shearing. For shows the Association has a rule that they "must have been bare shorn after 1st March in the current season". This rule applies to all show sheep other than lambs. If the shearlings are not going to any shows but are being prepared for a ram sale in September, they can be bare shorn in mid-May. If the rams have good, tight fleeces this date of shearing will result in rams with the correct growth of fleece at sale time and no additional trimming will be required. For July or August sales, a March or April shearing date respectively would be suitable.

FLEECE TYPE

The fleece characteristic is vital to producing a desirable commercial or stud ram. The aim is to have a "tight" or dense fleece i.e. when trying to grip the fleece in the hand, the fingers cannot close around the wool. If a lamb has an

excellent, very tight skin it is possible to show it untrimmed, but normally lambs must be trimmed for show or sale. With shearlings and older sheep trimming is always necessary for shows but as explained above, it can sometimes be avoided for sale-only sheep destined for autumn sales by bare shearing them at the correct time. When trimming sheep the modern practice is to leave perhaps 1" of wool over the main body of the animal. Long, loose fleeces will be heavily penalised by good judges.

CONDITION

For both shows and sales it is very important that the sheep are carrying the correct amount of condition. With Down sheep on good land or with heavy feeding of green fodder it can be very easy for them to put on excessive fat. Conversely, sheep which have been on a "commercial" feeding regime will not be carrying sufficient condition to look at their best in the show or sale ring. An experienced judge at a show or potential buyer at a sale will handle the sheep carefully along the back, down the ribs, across the loin, around the dock, and down the gigot. This is done to assess the fleshing ability of the animal, which it will transmit to its progeny. The breeder should aim to produce a sheep which is firmly fleshed all over, but not over-fat. The condition scoring technique can be used to assess this. A condition score of 3-3.5 is the aim.

FLUSHING

The management of the breeding ewe flock is critical to success. The ewes can put on a lot of condition on good land and can become too fat to conceive. To prevent this, ewes are normally grazed tightly on poorer grazing during the run up to tupping or occasionally brought inside on a straw and water diet to ensure they do not gain too much condition. However, for a short period immediately prior to tupping it is good practice to graze the flock on good grass to "flush" the ewes. This rising plane of nutrition will encourage better ovulation and hence improve conception and lambing rates.

TUPPING

Tupping is a critical period of the annual management cycle. As well as ensuring that the ewes have been managed correctly in the run-up to tupping, flock owners must also manage their rams correctly. Rams should be given some extra feeding before tupping to ensure they are in good condition (fit but not fat). They may also need feeding during tupping to maintain energy levels. Some breeders use teaser (vasectomised) rams on the ewes prior to the introduction of the rams. Teasers will induce ovulation in the ewes and will lead to a more compact lambing season. When the stud ram is put in with the ewes he should be fitted with a raddle harness with a coloured crayon that will mark the rump of each ewe he serves. The colour should be changed on a 15 day cycle so that the flock owner can observe if any ewes have returned to be served again. This system allows you to work out roughly when ewes will lamb and also helps to identify a ram that is serving the ewes but not settling them. It should be noted that in a pedigree flock only one ram must be run with the ewes at any one time, otherwise there is no way of knowing which ram is the sire of individual lambs. A mature ram can serve around 50 ewes in a season and ram lambs around 25. During tupping, keep a record of which ram ran with which ewes and the dates of each cycle. It is best practice to record the date on which each ewe is served, if possible.

The timing of tupping depends on the market which is being targeted for the lambs the following year. If it is intended to show lambs at summer shows or sell lambs at early stud sales in July or August, the tups should go out in the second week of July to ensure that at least some lambs are born throughout December. If it is intended to show or sell only shearlings, a March/April lambing period will suffice. This later lambing will also tend to be more compact and result in higher lambing percentages, as well as being cheaper in terms of the reduced amount of feeding required for both ewes and lambs compared to earlier lambing systems. The downside is that the progeny has to be kept for an extra year.

FEEDING IN-LAMB & LACTATING EWES

The feeding of the ewe on either side of lambing time is also very important. In the later stages of pregnancy, from about eight weeks prior to lambing, the in-lamb ewe should gradually be given additional concentrate feeding, known as "steaming up". If ewes are too fat during pregnancy there are often lambing difficulties, but ewes that are too thin while in-lamb can succumb to twin-lambing disease. In-lamb ewes can be scanned at 12 weeks to identify those carrying singles, twins or triplets, and those that are barren. This allows the ewes to be fed accurately according to how many lambs they are carrying. After lambing, feeding must be increased again to help the ewe produce a good supply of milk for her lambs. Roots should not be fed in significant quantity prior to lambing but post lambing they are an excellent feed to help the ewes lactate well. It is essential that new-born lambs receive sufficient colostrum to ensure good health. If the ewe cannot provide it or the lamb is not suckling, artificial colustrum should be tubed directly into the lamb's stomach. Other routine tasks to be carried out on the lambs include treating the navel with iodine to prevent infection, ear tagging, and tail docking. Ram lambs that are obviously not suitable for breeding from an early age may be castrated but many breeders choose to leave their ram lambs entire.

WORMING

A key to healthy lambs and a healthy flock in general is control of parasitic worms on the flock's grazing land. Clean grazing is vital if young lambs are to thrive. There are a number of ways this can be achieved. The best way is to give them access to land which has not been grazed by sheep in the previous season. This might be land that has been cut for hay or silage or grazed by cattle. If arable crops are rotated with leys it is much easier to provide clean grass and it may also be possible to provide some arable fodder crop grazing for specific periods of the year. Grazing cattle and sheep together or following cattle with sheep in a particular field is also a good technique because each species is unaffected by some of the other's parasites. On a grass-only farm with sheep as the only livestock and with no grass conservation, there will be a reliance on anthelmintics. In this case the different chemical groups should be strictly rotated each year to minimise the risk of resistance building up. It will also help if a form of paddock grazing is used where each field is rested for a month or so as the sheep stock is rotated around each paddock until it is grazed out.

TRIMMING FOR SHOW

The art of trimming and preparation for show or sale is a skill which new breeders need to develop. The best way to learn is to get help from an experienced breeder who has a recognised ability in turning out sheep. It may be possible to assist or observe a breeder when they are preparing some of their own sheep or alternatively they might be willing to demonstrate on some of the new breeder's sheep. A good source of information on this subject is the book "The Showman Shepherd" by David Turner (see below).

SELECTING AND SELLING YOUR SHEEP

Breeders must cull each lamb crop hard and retain only the very best lambs as potential breeding stock. This means that the majority of each lamb crop will be sold as prime lambs. If the flock is lambed early, high prices can be obtained for lambs not suitable for breeding purposes by selling them into the early lamb trade. Breeders can also obtain premiums for their pure Oxford lambs unsuitable for breeding by selling them prime to private butchers or farm shops or into the home freezer trade. The best ram lambs may be kept to sell at breed sales or ex-farm for either pedigree or crossing use, either as lambs or as shearlings. It should be emphasised that this is a specialised market and rams must be correct, well-grown and well-presented or they will either fail to sell or achieve poor prices. The best ewe lambs should be retained as flock replacements. Any surplus good quality ewe lambs may be sold as lambs or shearlings either ex-farm or at breed sales. Again, females must be correct, well-grown and properly presented if they are to sell well.

CONTACTS

Suggested ear tag suppliers:

Datamars Agri UK Ltd t/a Roxan, Pheasant Mill, Dunsdale Road, Selkirk, TD7 5DZ Tel 01750 724110
www.roxan.co.uk

Allflex UK Group Ltd, 1 Greencroft Industrial Park, Stanley, Co Durham, DH9 7YA Tel 01207 529000
www.allflex.co.uk

Shearwell Data Ltd, Putham Farm, Wheddon Cross, Minehead, Somerset, TA24 7AS Tel 01643 841611
www.shearwell.co.uk

A useful contact for the supply of show equipment and other sheep husbandry sundries is given below.

Showtime Supplies www.showtime-supplies.co.uk Tel 01759 368588

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

The four books listed below are highly recommended and are often available new or secondhand on Amazon.

The Showman Shepherd by David Turner, Farming Press, 1990, 120 pages, ISBN 0852362048

Practical Sheep Keeping by Kim Cardell, The Crowood Press Ltd, 2001, 192 pages, ISBN 1861261632

Sheep Ailments: Recognition and Treatment by Eddie Straiton, The Crowood Press Ltd, 1998, 176 pages, ISBN 186126397X

The Veterinary Book for Sheep Farmers by David C Henderson, Old Pond Publishing Ltd, 1990, 700 pages, ISBN 1903366305

For further information about the breed or to discuss setting up a new flock please contact the Secretary:

Tel 07999 156 440 e-mail secretary@oxforddownsheep.org.uk www.oxforddownsheep.org.uk