

The origins of the Suffolk

NORFOLK EWE



SOUTHDOWN RAM



THE FAMOUS RAM BISMARCK V



Before going into the history of the Suffolk Sheep, perhaps the origins and domestication of sheep generally should be considered.

The exact line of descent between domestic sheep and its wild ancestors is unclear, but it is generally believed that today's domestic sheep is descended from the Asiatic Mouflon (a wild horned sheep, native to the Caspian region of Turkey)

Sheep were among the first animals to be domesticated by humans, due to their lack of aggression, manageable size and social nature and were widely used for their wool, skins and meat. Today, sheep are a totally domesticated animal, largely dependent on humans for their survival and health. The domestication of sheep is thought to have happened between about 11,000 to 8,000 BC in the region of Mesopotamia. Shepherding spread quickly worldwide and is considered to have arrived in Europe around 6000BC to parts of France. During the time of the Romans, there are records of a large wool processing factory in Winchester, England In about 500AD. By 1000AD,

England & Spain were recognised as large centres of sheep production in Europe.

Sheep are first thought to have arrived in Ireland sometime after the 16th Century where once again they were widely used for their wool, skins and meat. These 'original' sheep are now totally outbred by imported breeds which started arriving in large numbers around the turn of the 18th Century. These sheep were predominantly brought to Western counties, where sheep farming in 21st Century Ireland is now widely associated with the West of Ireland.

THE ORIGINS OF THE SUFFOLK SHEEP.

It is generally believed that in the 18th Century, a breed of sheep, originally called Southdown Norfolks or Blackfaces locally, existed in the county of Suffolk in England. It was a cross between a Southdown Ram and a Norfolk Horned Ewe. In 1774, Arthur Young, writing his "General View of



Advert in first flock book, 1887

SCALE OF POINTS.	
Head	Hornless: Face black and long, and Muzzle moderately fine—especially in Ewes. (A small quantity of clean white wool on the forehead not objected to.) Ears, a medium length, black, and fine texture. Eyes, bright and full ... 25
Neck	Moderate length and well set 5 (In Rams strongly, with a good crest).
Shoulder	Broad and oblique 5
Chest	Deep and wide 5
Back and Loin	Long, level, and well covered with meat and muscle; tail broad and well set up. The ribs long and well sprung, with a full flank 20
Legs and Feet	Straight and black, with fine and flat bone. Woolled to knees and hocks, clean below. Fore-legs set well apart. Hind-legs well filled with mutton ... 20
Belly	Well covered with wool ... 5 (Also Scrotum of Rams)
Fleece	Moderately short; close fine lustrous fibre, without tendency to mat or felt together, and well defined, i.e., not shading off into dark wool or hair ... 10
Skin	Fine, soft, and pink colour ... 5
Total 100	

Scale of Points for Suffolk Sheep taken from the Suffolk Sheep Society Flockbook Volume 1

Agriculture in the County of Suffolk”wrote,“it has been observed these (sheep) ought to be called the Suffolk Breed, the mutton for the table of the curious has no superior in texture or grain, flavour, quantity and colour of gravy”.

Frank Rynns, one time Director of the sandy heaths in Eastern England, described the Suffolks as having “a keen eye and an alert movement, the head, ears and legs were black, the wool short and fine, with the ewe clip being 2-2 ½ lbs; the mutton tasting quality was excellent”.

In 1810 the Suffolk was recognised as a distinct breed, but it was in 1859, that classes were introduced for the first time in the Suffolk Agricultural Association’s Show for these local sheep and thus, the distinctive name of ‘Suffolk Sheep’ was born.

The Suffolks Scale of Points of 1887 (see Illustration) is marked on the following features: Head, Neck, Shoulder, Chest, Back and Loin, Legs & Feet, Belly, Fleece & Skin. These breed points have never changed and remain consistent in 2021.

According to the 1892 Flock Book Vol VI “at this present time the sheep as they now exist may be briefly described as blackfaced and hornless, with clean black legs, closely resembling the Southdown in character and wool, but about 30% larger. They excel in the following:

Fecundity

Thirty lambs reared per score of ewes is a frequent average

Early Maturity

If well grazed, they are fit for the butcher at 10-12 months (demonstrating the preference for mutton at that time

Hardiness

They will get a living and thrive where other breeds of sheep would starve

Meat

The quality is super-excellent with an exceptionally large proportion of lean

Constitution

Their robust hardy characters, power of endurance and comparative freedom from attacks of foot

have, during the past 15 years caused them to displace, to a large extent, the half-bred sheep formerly habiting the chalk hills and sandy heaths of the Eastern Counties”

‘The distinctive feature of the Suffolk Sheep is the Jet blackness of its head and its legs below the knee and the hocks, which should be covered in fine glossy hair. The face should be fairly long with a fine muzzle, especially in the ewes. The ear should be thin and silky and of a fair length; the eye full and bright, indicating a vigorous disposition, stamina and fine quality’

The Suffolk Sheep Society was founded in 1886 and at that time 32 of the original 46 flocks Registered in Vol I of the Flock Book were in the County of Suffolk. The first Irish Flock is attributed to Henry Strevens of Roscommon in 1891 whose registration appears in Vol V of the Flockbook. In 1892, Branches were set up by the Society and by the 1930s Society sales were taking place in Dublin. The Flock Competition was initially geographically

restricted to the UK mainland but in 1912 (the year the Titanic sank!) the competition was opened for the first time to any registered flock in the UK & Ireland.

Today, the Suffolk has become one of the most numerous breeds of sheep globally in the 21st Century, with flocks registered throughout Europe, USA, Canada, Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

2021 sees the Suffolk Sheep Society celebrate a remarkable 135 years of promoting, improving and extolling the virtues of the Suffolk Breed. The Suffolk is still the leading domestic terminal sire in the UK & Ireland and the continued dedication of all Society Breeders will ensure that this will remain the case far into the future.

Our Club wishes the Society every success in the years ahead and we are sure that the enthusiasm for the Suffolk breed both from the Breeder and the Commercial farmer alike will continue to flourish for many generations to come.



Bismark V, entered in Volume 1 of the Suffolk Sheep Society Flock Book. Awarded first Prize at the Royal Show in 1886 & 1887, Bismark was selected to establish the Breed Scale of Points’

*Handsome and hardy, happily hornless,
Prolific in twins, rarely born less,
Face and four legs as black as the devil,
The breast, back and loins all wide and level,
Well covered in meat, of muscle no lack,
Legs of mutton well filled, tail level with back*

Quoted from an 1897 publication for interest and without comment!

DID YOU KNOW?

By 1919, the Norfolk Horned Sheep had diminished to just one flock but through careful conservation and the efforts of one man, JD Sayer, numbers have gradually been rebuilt.

Given the shortage of purebred fertile rams (the last pure bred ram died in 1973), a related breed, the Suffolk as well as unrelated breeds such as the Wiltshire Horn and Swaledale, were used to breed animals that were more than 90% Norfolk Horn. In 1986, the breed was recognised by the RBST appearing on their Priority List as Category 1, critical.

As of 2007, it was listed by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust to be ‘At Risk’

