

= Herdwick =

The Herdwick is a breed of domestic sheep native to the Lake District of Cumbria in North West England . The name " Herdwick " is derived from the Old Norse herdvyck , meaning sheep pasture . Though low in lambing capacity and perceived wool quality when compared to more common commercial breeds such as Merino sheep , Herdwicks are prized for their robust health , their ability to live solely on forage , and their tendency to be territorial and not to stray over the difficult upland terrain of the Lake District . It is considered that up to 99 % of all Herdwick sheep are commercially farmed in the central and western Lake District .

The wool quality of a Herdwick has unique qualities relating to durability . Thick bristle type fibres will often protrude from garments forming a protective barrier layer in blizzards ? most likely the same qualities that protect the sheep in similar conditions . They have been known to survive under a blanket of snow for three days while eating their own wool .

Severely threatened by the 2001 outbreak of foot @-@ and @-@ mouth disease in England and Wales , the breed has survived due to the intent to preserve this unique animal as a crucial part of traditional Lakeland agriculture . Still far less in number than most commercial breeds , Herdwicks survive largely due to farming subsidies and the aid of the British National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty .

= = History = =

= = = Early history = = =

The root word of the breed 's name , herdvyck , " sheep pasture " , is recorded in documents dating back to the 12th century . The origin of the breed itself is unknown , but the most common theory is that the ancestors of Herdwick sheep were introduced by early Norse settlers . According to this , it was brought to the region somewhere between the 10th and 11th centuries during the Viking invasions of western England . Alternatively , a piece of local folklore once suggested that it came from a wrecked Spanish Armada ship . In any case , the Herdwick was an important breed in the Lake District by the end of the 12th century .

For centuries , the husbandry of Herdwick sheep has been a large factor in shaping the culture and terrain of the Lake District . Topographically , grazing by sheep continues to keep the hillsides of fells largely treeless , and the ubiquitous dry stone walls of the valleys were built to protect grazing land and to confine livestock . Linguistically , many words of Lakeland speech relate to sheep husbandry . The ancient Yan Tan Tethera counting system for sheep is a survival of Brittonic counting systems .

= = = = Beatrix Potter = = = =

In the latter half of her life , the children 's author Beatrix Potter was involved with keeping and breeding Herdwicks , even acting as president of the breed association for a time . Between 1930 and 1938 she won a number of prizes for Herdwick ewes at shows across Cumbria . Upon her death in 1943 , she bequeathed fifteen farms ? approximately a total sum of 4 @,@ 000 acres ( 16 km <sup>2</sup> ) - to the National Trust , and per her instructions all continue to graze Herdwick flocks .

= = = Modern history = = =

In the modern era , the main industry of the Lake District has shifted from agriculture to tourism . The subsequent influx of tourists to the District has at times conflicted with traditional life , including the raising of Herdwicks . One Lake District farmer summed the problem up as , " We get 100 @,@ 000 visitors across our land every year ... If just one in a thousand forgets to shut a gate or can 't be bothered , that 's a hundred times we have to go out and round up our sheep . "

In the late 20th century , the keeping of Herdwicks became economically inviable without outside support ; open market prices for Herdwick fleeces sometimes drop as low as a penny a kilogram ( which is about the weight of wool from a single sheep ) . Without direct monetary guarantees for wool prices from the National Trust , it actually costs farmers a considerably larger amount of money to shear their Herdwicks than they would receive in compensation ; the majority of farmers once burned their fleeces as waste products . The Trust now acts as a wool merchant itself , thus being able to bargain for better prices directly with the British Wool Marketing Board and operate a Herdwick wool trademark . Most farmers survive through the sale of lambs , as well as both National Trust and European Union farm subsidies . Lake District farmers in particular receive subsidies for operating in a designated Less Favored Area from the England Rural Development Programme . Those who agree to maintain their land in accordance with sustainable farming practices also receive additional subsidies .

95 % of all 50 @, @ 000 or so Herdwicks live within 14 miles of Coniston , Cumbria , and this makes them particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of disease . The outbreak of foot @-@ and @-@ mouth disease in 2001 led to the destruction of many flocks , and to fears for the survival both of the breed and of the typical Lakeland sheep farming industry . Of the estimated 100 @, @ 000 Herdwick sheep present before the outbreak , a full 25 % were lost . They were not easily replaceable because long @-@ standing herds are hefted so the introduction of new stock to the fells would have required extensive fencing . The call for vaccination rather than culling to preserve what is considered a part of the traditional identity of the fells and moors was led by parties ? such as the Duke of Westminster , Earl Peel , Lord Barnard and Lord Lonsdale ? who wished to save the hill sheep on their lands . Many Lake District residents saw the breed as an indispensable icon of the region . Longtime resident and writer for The Guardian A. Harry Griffin expressed this feeling :

There are other mountain sheep on the Lakeland fells , notably Swaledales and Rough @-@ Fells , but the hardy Herdwick is the sheep most likely to be seen in and around the Duddon valley , the Coniston fells , the Buttermere fells and , through Borrowdale or Wasdale , up to the highest land in England , the Scafells . More than the old drystone walls that quarter the fells , the packhorse bridges or the whitewashed farmsteads , the little grey Herdwick sheep typify the Lakeland .

If they and their shepherds go , that is the end of the Lakeland where I have climbed , walked , skied and skated for nearly 80 years ; of the Lakeland I have written about nearly all my life .

The destruction of entire flocks meant that the shepherds were forced to undergo the process of again heafing ( the local term for hefting ) their new sheep to the hills . Normally , ewes teach this behaviour to their lambs , but with no more ewes left acquainted with a particular heaf the behavior had to be taught all over again to new ewes , inevitably involving much rounding up of flocks that had strayed over the often inaccessible fells . Unheafed sheep might also cause overgrazing by wandering if they replaced the original Herdwicks . The Cumbria Hill Sheep Initiative was set up to " reassess the position and circumstances " in the aftermath of the disease ; tough government restrictions in order to prevent another outbreak are still in place .

In 2008 , an Oregon sheep farmer began importing semen from Herdwick rams in to the United States to begin a breeding program using artificial insemination and designed to bring the breed to the country for the first time . In 2013 , Lakeland Herdwick meat received a Protected Designation of Origin from the European Union .

= = Characteristics = =

Herdwicks are a dual @-@ purpose breed , producing strongly flavoured lamb and mutton and a coarse , grey wool . This slowly maturing breed is one of the most hardy of all the British hill sheep breeds , withstanding the cold and relentless rain of the Lake District at heights upwards of 3 @, @ 000 feet ( about 1 @, @ 000 metres ) . Most Herdwicks spend winter on the fells , from approximately December to April . They are normally left to graze freely on the hillsides ( without any additional feed ) , but each ewe tends to stay in her heaf ( the local term for heft ) , the same small area of fell . Due to the rough conditions on fells , lambing losses can be as high as 25 % . This ability to thrive unassisted is part of the reason fell farmers so highly value Herdwicks over much

higher @-@ producing lowland breeds .

A Herdwick 's grey fleece is not easily dyed , and is coarse , and so is best suited to use as carpet wool . The wool is also an excellent natural insulator ; it is possible to buy sheets of fireproofed wool to fit as loft insulation . Herdwick lamb and mutton has a very distinct taste , and was even eaten at Queen Elizabeth II 's 1953 coronation banquet . Herdwick ewes also commonly produce desirable market lambs and mules by cross @-@ breeding with Suffolk , Cheviot , Charollais and Texel sheep .

Herdwick lambs are born black , and after a year they lighten to a dark brown colour ( the sheep are called hoggs or hoggets at this stage ) . After the first shearing , their fleece lightens further to grey . Rams are horned , and ewes polled . For shows and auctions , Herdwicks traditionally have their wool ruddied up ( the local term for raddled ) with dye . Rams are also ruddied when put out with the ewes to show which have been mated , and the dye is also one method ( called a smit ) of marking sheep for ownership . Before chemical dyes became available , this dye was made from either iron ore or graphite mixed with grease . For many years the legal method of identifying a particular shepherd 's sheep were notches cut out of a sheep 's ear , called lug marks ? now replaced by ear tags .