

Shepherds and their sheep

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It seems that sheep have been domesticated since at least 5,000 BC. Originally, they were wild animals, well able to look after themselves. Humans were mainly hunter-gatherers, rather than farmers. At around this time, the first villages were found – presumably for mutual self-protection, company and convenience. When the Romans invaded Britain in AD 53, they wanted money. They got this through the sale of sheep.

Sheep are quite remarkable. They produce lambs regularly and rich milk that can be made into yoghurt and cheese. Their flesh can be cooked and eaten. The layer of tissue just beneath the skin can be made into parchment, which we have replaced with writing paper. The skin can be worn, the horn can be carved and used as buttons and toggles, spoons or the head of a walking stick. Above all, sheep provide wool. This is an unusual substance. It can act as an insulator even when it is wet, unlike manmade fibres, and if it is tightly woven and full of its natural oil it can be quite waterproof.

Until the industrial revolution, about nine out of ten people in the UK worked on the land in all weathers. In the past, as now, the muscles of the body generate heat. They are the furnaces of the body. The layer of fat immediately beneath the skin is the insulator of the body, and helps us to retain warmth.

There have been many periods of shortage of food or actual famine, when our normal fatty layer becomes very thin. Wool was vital to help us keep warm.

The flocks of sheep relied on shepherds to care for them. The shepherds were jacks-of-all-trades. In dealing with sheep the shepherds used their judgement. We measure so much: the time taken to do a job, the cost, the project, the date. Shepherds use judgement, a wisdom that they may glean over many years. In an

upland area today, they use judgement to decide when to take the flock to the higher pastures, when to bring them down.

At a sale, a shepherd may see a ram (tup) that he liked. Will it improve the flock? Suppose the ram is mated with eighty ewes, their lambs would have half their genes from their mother and half from their father. An outstanding flock represents many judgements, made in the course of decades: judgements made by father and son, both shepherds.

Before sheep are due to have their lambs, the shepherd would examine them to see which ones had more than one lamb in the womb. The shepherd would know which sheep were having their first lamb. He/she would segregate both groups and keep a close eye on them. If a sheep was having difficulty in delivering her lamb, the shepherd would be able to help.



We know that sheep were kept near Jerusalem around the time that Jesus was

born. The shepherds who were nearby were not there by chance. After all, shepherds were known as a careful, thoughtful group of people. If a shepherd can help a sheep to deliver, presumably he could act as a midwife to a woman in labour. The shepherds were there to help, if needed.

Fiona believes (and John agrees) that some people have a mistaken idea of a shepherd's role in ancient times. Yes, it could be a dirty, messy, lonely job, but arguably no more than looking after tiny children. Sheep were an index of wealth, and the shepherd would look after the sheep of many families, so can be compared to a bank manager. A shepherd's job, in looking after the wealth of

a family, was extremely responsible. And if a sheep was lost, and then was found, there would have been great joy and relief in finding it. We don't know, but maybe that one sheep was the sole possession of a widow. Though priceless it might have been for her a bolster against starvation during the winter, or her daughter's dowry, possibly providing a way out of penury.

Nowadays a shepherd might own a complete flock of sheep.



In the thirteenth century there were about 50 million sheep grazing in England. Much of this was on land

owned by Cistercian monasteries. Some is in the land mass in the north of England, but also in Wales, East Anglia and the west country. Some of the monks acted as shepherds and tended the flocks with great care. The sheep may have been the forerunners of our modern Swaledale sheep, the sheep of the Pennines. These are tough mountain sheep with a fleece that protects them from the chilling wind. We know now that if Swaledale is crossed with a Blue-faced Leicester, they may produce a hybrid daughter called a North Country Mule. These sheep provide the breeding flock for much of the south.

Women in the early Middle Ages were often married by the time they were fourteen. They might not receive much education (as we understand it) but were responsible for many practical household skills. They often did the brewing, and may have worked in groups to shear the sheep.



Winter was and is the toughest time in the year for shepherds.

The only sheep that can stay late on the fells are Herdwicks. The others all have to be gathered in and brought down. This needed sheepdogs

that could work on their own, where they could neither see nor hear the shepherd. The dogs were needed to get the sheep to go where the shepherds needed them to go, and NOT to go wherever the sheep fancied. This involved the local shepherds working as a team. Their day would probably start in half light.

Always remember that snow and wind are killers. The sheep may be invisible beneath a snowdrift. The grass they would eat is hidden by the snow. A shepherd may wake before first light and know that until he has seen and fed every one of his sheep with hay, his day's work is not finished. One lot may have taken shelter beneath some pine trees. One of the older ewes will have led them there, to eat the tussocks of grass.

If some of the flock seem to be missing, how long can the shepherd spend looking for them? If he is there too long, there will be some he cannot see and feed. Decisions. Judgement. If he is lucky, the sheep will reappear out of a blizzard. The danger is that some will take shelter behind a wall where there is grass. The snow near the wall may get so deep that the sheep cannot get out. They will eat all the grass. There is no water. Hunger. Starvation. Dehydration. There is only one possible outcome. This is the last and only chance the shepherd has to preserve some of that part of his flock.

As you can see, it is a tough life. Yet a shepherd may feel that there is not another life that he/she would prefer.

We referred to the following books:

The Shepherd's Life by James Rebanks, helped by his wife, Helen. It is about his life as a shepherd in the Lake District where his family has farmed for 600 years. A great read and a best seller. Published April 2015, ISBN 978-1-846-14854-6

Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries by Denys Hely. ISBN 0-582-49199-7.

Domesday by Michael Ward. Published 1986.

Chronicles of the Age of Chivalry, Edited by Elizabeth Hatton.

The Atlas of Early Man by Jacquetta Hawkes gave the earliest reference to sheep and the early villages. Published 1976.

There are no ISBNs for the last three.