

Sheep in Wiltshire

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In reviewing the Victoria County History's latest Wiltshire venture, John Chandler's *Codford, wool and war in Wiltshire*, Pamela Slocombe takes a view that some of the references to sheep appear to be contradictory. I could not possibly comment on a disagreement between such local titans. But in devoting some attention in recent years to topics that involve sheep and cloth – floated water meadows and fulling mills – I have come across quite a lot of misunderstanding, and venture this modest attempt to unravel the topic. Note the title – not 'Wiltshire sheep' but 'Sheep in Wiltshire' and note also, three things about sheep in the county

there were a lot of them – half a million estimated in 1813
they did not provide much of the wool used by the local cloth industry
characteristics and utility varied a great deal over time.

Excavation of the Iron Age Hillfort at Danebury (actually in Hampshire between Stockbridge and Middle Wallop, but needs must) has demonstrated a comprehensive picture of an Iron Age society and economy. The work of Barry Cunliffe from 1968 to the 1980s [1] uncovered a farming regime including sheep and goats, jointly classified, and which provided over fifty percent of the finds.

Of the sheep flocks he tells us that they were 'maintained essentially for wool production, then meat and milk were little more than useful byproducts resulting from careful management'. However a crucial byproduct of rearing sheep was their manure – to maintain the thin chalkland soil. There was a close relationship between arable and sheep if upland areas were to produce more grain. This was a fundamental relationship that survived until the nineteenth century. A reconstruction of the Iron Age sheep in question is shown in Figure 1, not far removed from a present day breed. We have a prehistoric start point.

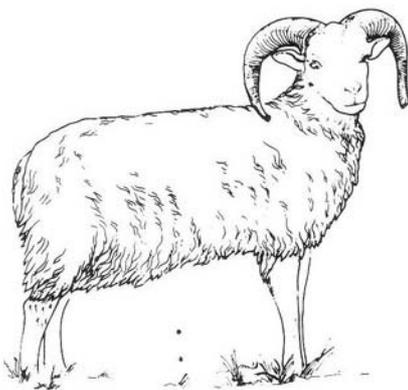


Fig 1 Reconstruction of typical Iron Age sheep based on nearest surviving modern breeds (drawn by Mike Rouillard) from Danebury Anatomy of an Iron Age Hillfort by Barry Cunliffe, reproduced with the author's permission.

The first British indigenous type was the Soay (Figure 2) surviving today as a rare breed and feral in St Kilda. There were Roman, Saxon and Norman imports, and slowly different breeds evolved to suit conditions in different areas. A genetic 'wiring diagram' [2] has a direct line from the Shetlands and

Cheviots in the north to a group of the 'south west horned' Devon Closewool, Dorset Horn, Exmoor and Wiltshire – all said to be 'closer to the Soay than others'.

Wiltshire Horn sheep have been described [3] as the 'indigenous Wiltshire breed' and as 'descendants of the South West Horned type [which] evolved sometime during the medieval period. ...' The peculiar characteristic of the breed is that it has little or no wool, the coat consisting of dense, white matted hair. The little wool that grows is shed as the sheep fattens. The modern breed society promotes it as 'the woolless meat sheep'.

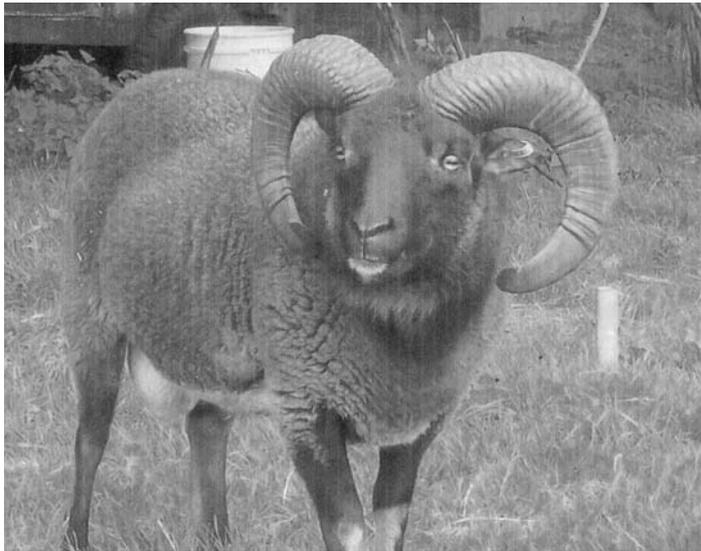


Fig 2 'Charlie', stock ram belonging to Janice Wood, secretary of the Soay Sheep Society who supplied this photograph

The function of the Wiltshire Horn for many centuries was quite clear – to provide dung and urine to fertilize the arable land. Hardy and long legged, it grazed the downs by day and was close folded on the arable areas from after harvest through to the spring sowing. If one starts from an archaeological standpoint, studying the irrigation systems introduced during the 17th century there is a danger of equating that with an innovatory sheep/corn regime. They did not, of course, arrive together – irrigating the valley floors of the chalkland simply enhanced a system that had worked well for centuries. Flooding or irrigation provided more and earlier grass to overwinter more sheep, improve enrichment of the arable and increase the profitable crop yield.

However by the end of the 18th century something had changed. Thomas Davies writing a report for the government in 1794, and again in 1813 describes

The kind of sheep which is chiefly kept in Wiltshire, is what has long been known in Smithfield market by the name of the Wiltshire horned sheep; their wool is moderately fine, and particularly useful, being the kind of which the second, or what is called the super broad cloth ... is generally made [4]

He goes on to say that many object to this kind of animal, much altered from the original, and less suited to their purpose and, to correct this, South Down sheep 'full of wool' were being introduced from Sussex. The Wiltshire Horn disappeared quite early in the 19th century. WH Hudson [5] records that in 1910 workers clearing out a well did not recognize that the mass of 'rams' skulls were in fact from a breed where both genders were horned

So, if the sheep that dominated Wiltshire for centuries produced no wool what was the connection with the Salisbury cloth industry? The answer has to be – not much. We have to draw distinctions between agriculture, manufacturing and trading. The city developed in the 13th century 'at a time when trade was expanding. It played an important part in the wool trade of southern England in the 13th century, and in the cloth industry from the 13th to the 16th centuries' [6]. Later, our new history of Codford tells us that 'For cloth production, fleeces were imported, either from elsewhere in Wiltshire, or, quite commonly, from Spain' [7] as had been the practice for Salisbury and its surrounding area for centuries.

In the context of wool and cloth Salisbury has been, in the main, an entrepot, developed in the middle ages by entrepreneurs. They built a cloth industry but it could perhaps have been something else. In the 19th century the Wool House at Codford [8] seems similarly to have been a localized business initiative. There are comparable 19th century examples – on the River Nadder, East Harnham had a whiting factory and West Harnham a parchment works. A modern example, on the River Avon, is a brewery in a former water corn mill at Haxton.