

# Oxford Downs make the grade on family farm

Young farmer Vickie Jones describes how the Oxford Down fits into the sheep enterprise on her family's Leicestershire farm.

Nine years ago my father was looking for a ram to put on some Texel cross ewe lambs and decided to purchase an Oxford Down from the Native Breeds sale at Melton Mowbray market. I took this opportunity to also purchase three pedigree Oxford ewes and a ewe lamb at the sale. These were from the Ingall and Twinwood flocks and got me off to a good start. That is where my Billesdon's flock of Oxford Downs began. Having now taken over the commercial flock of 250 sheep from my father, I continue to use the Oxford Down ram commercially on Texel cross ewes and also run my pedigree Oxford flock alongside. Based in Leicestershire, I fit in looking after the sheep around my job at NFU Mutual with help from my parents too. It's very much a family effort.

The pedigree flock currently consists of 20 ewes and this has been built up gradually over the years from purchasing select ewes at the breed sales at Worcester and Melton Mowbray, predominantly from the noted Barley Park flock, and in the past few years by retaining my own females. My main aim is to improve the stock that I have, to maintain numbers roughly where they are now and to promote the breed as a terminal sire through selling crossbred lambs. Only the best pure bred lambs are retained and the others are sold through the local live-

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stock market. Although currently classified as a minority breed, the Oxford Down still has a good commercial value with even the pure bred lambs selling well in the spring as a commercial lamb. A number of pedigree breeders also sell their unwanted lambs through lamb box schemes and direct to the public for the freezer.

The Oxford Down ram produces good quality, hardy lambs that are active at birth and are also easily lambed. They are generally born smaller with a good covering of wool and have good growth rates. This means they are suited to all systems, including outdoor lambing. We begin lambing at the end of March. The majority of the lambs that we produce are finished off grass and are sold through the local livestock market from the end of July until Christmas. I aim for weights of 45kg+, as these currently seem to gain the higher prices when selling through a livestock market, and this is easily achievable for the Oxford cross lambs. I always like to have a few Oxford cross lambs for the Christmas fatstock shows to try to help with breed promotion, and they always stand their own in a native class.

I find the Oxford ram crosses particularly well with a Texel cross ewe, and as we breed our own replacements by crossing Suffolk x Mule ewes with a Texel ram, using the Oxford Down ram suits our system. Oxford rams are much more affordable than a lot of the other terminal sire breeds and in my experience they can produce lambs that sell as well as any other. A good Oxford Down ram can normally be purchased for between £200 and £400.

The breed society's main sale is held at Worcester market each year in August with a



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breed sale also held at Melton Mowbray market as part of their Native Breeds sale in September. There is always a good selection of males and females on offer, providing a good opportunity for both pedigree breeders and commercial farmers to purchase Oxford Down sheep.

Following lots of encouragement from the Oxford Down Sheep Breeders' Association, in

the past couple of years I have started showing my pedigree sheep. Due to the breed's docile nature, once halter trained they are easy to handle. My stock ram Horsley Uncle Bob even appeared in my wedding photos! Having been on a couple of trimming and judging days put on by the breed society, I am starting to learn the art of presenting my sheep for showing. This year I won my first breed championship at Rutland County Show with a homebred shearing ram. Being the largest of the Down breeds and with its famous top knot, the Oxford really stands out at the shows and gets lots of attention. They always stand their own in mixed breed classes too. I also won reserve champion Any Other Native Breed at last year's Ashby Show with a shearing ewe. It was really good to represent the breed and to stand above other popular breeds such as Suffolks and Southdowns.

I always get comments from the older generation saying how popular the Oxford Down used to be and how their fathers and grandfathers used to keep Oxfords. I wish more people would take a chance on them now and see how good the breed can be as a terminal sire. ■

