

# Oxford Down Sheep



**Oxford Down Ram**

## About the breed

The Oxford Down is the largest and heaviest of the Down breeds. It is a large-framed, hardy, early-maturing terminal sire with strong bone and typical blocky Down breed conformation. Flocks are found throughout the UK as well as in Eire, the USA, Canada, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway and the Czech Republic.

## Description

The Oxford Down ram has a bold, masculine head, well set on a strong neck; the poll is well covered with wool, and adorned by a 'top-knot'. The face a uniform dark colour, the ears of good length, the shoulder broad, with a broad breast well forward. A full, level back, the ribs well sprung, the barrel deep, thick, and long with straight underline. The legs are short and dark coloured, standing square and well apart. The mutton is firm, lean, and of excellent quality. The whole body is covered with wool of close texture, good length, and fine quality.

## History

The Oxford Down originated in the 1830s with the crossing of Cotswold rams onto Hampshire Down and, to a lesser extent, Southdown ewes. The breed became stabilised over the next 50 years. As many of the first flocks were located around Witney in Oxfordshire, the name Oxford Down was adopted.

The breed achieved widespread success, producing outstanding sheep for both mutton and wool. Oxford flocks were established throughout Britain and Ireland and large numbers were exported to the USA, Canada, Germany, Denmark, Russia, and Argentina. In 1889, the Oxford Down Sheep Breeders' Association was established and the first Flock Book was published.

The reputation of the Oxford Down grew, and for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was one of the most popular crossing sires for lamb and mutton production. Upwards of 1000 rams were penned annually at the Kelso Ram Sales. From the late 1950s the breed lost favour as smaller carcasses were wanted and by the mid 1970s there were fewer than 1000 Oxford ewes remaining. The 1980s saw a major revival of the Oxford Down in response to demand for large, lean lambs. Today the breed continues to be used as a specialist terminal sire.

## Commercial Role

Used as a terminal sire on any commercial ewe breed or cross, the Oxford ram will produce high quality, hardy, fast-growing lambs that are easily finished off grass alone. Typically lambs will produce 18-22kg carcasses at 12-16 weeks.

The Oxford ram will transmit high growth rate, fleshing, frame, strength, type and hardiness to its progeny. Oxford cross lambs have an outstanding capacity for early maturity or can be kept on to heavier weights (22-25kg) without excess fat, producing high quality large, lean lambs or heavy hogs. This gives great flexibility to the producer.

The lambs are vigorous and active at birth and display considerable hardiness due to their good wool cover from birth and high birthweight.

## The pure-bred Oxford

Oxfords will naturally breed early in the season for early lamb production. The Oxford ewe is generally a good lamber with a strong maternal instinct. The breed is hardy and healthy, with scrapie virtually unknown, and the top-knot on the poll gives protection against head fly. Oxfords are noted for their good, hard feet. The breed clips a heavy, dense fleece of fine, light-shrinking wool and produces the heaviest fleece and longest staple of all the Down breeds.

Oxford ewes are increasingly used to supply quality Oxford lamb to premium markets such as farm shops, farmers' markets, the freezer trade, and quality butchers. Oxford lamb has excellent flavour and eating quality and the large, lean carcasses produce bigger joints with more meat.

## Facts

Average weight of mature ewes at tugging 92kg. Mature rams can weigh over 150kg. Average 8 week weight of pure Oxford lambs – Singles: 26.3kg (M), 24.5kg (F); Twins 20.0kg (M), 18.6kg (F). Wool – Fineness (Bradford Count) 54-56, average length of staple 10-13cm, average fleece weight 3.5-4.5kg. Average number of lambs born per ewe lambled: 1.76

## OXFORD DOWN SHEEP BREEDERS' ASSOCIATION

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