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THE BLUEFACED LEICESTER – 'A History of the Breed'

By Jeremy Hunt, Published 1986

Chapter 4 'It's Official'



*'Lucky Dip' Skelton Show 1965
Purchased by OLD PARKS for £ 120*

By the early 1930's two types of Hexham Leicester had developed, distinguishable mainly by size, some being more powerful in conformation than others. At that time the Hexham Leicester was being used mainly on Scottish Blackface ewes: owners of such ewes demanded as bare a sheep as possible, and Hexham Leicester breeders understandably produced fine skinned tups to meet the highest prices. Even today breeders can recall the very fine skinned tups of the 1930's and are baffled as to how it was developed. No other breed with such fine skin was evident at that time. Memories of sheep looking 'stark naked' are often commented upon even today; some tups would be completely bare of wool on their back-ends and down the shoulder points, with not a trace of wool on the belly.

Conformation of some of the early Hexham Leicester sheep was not good. The very blue types often appeared ewe necked and narrow in the neck causing a common weakness behind the shoulder. As the Swaledale became favored as a

Mule producing female in preference to the Scottish Blackface, so the type of Hexham changed too. Those who were breeding tups to use on Swaledales were producing stock with more wool on and with an even curly coat from shoulders to the buttocks. Only those breeders wanting tups to cross with the Blackface ewes continued to demand the bare skinned type; but as time went on, and Swaledales predominated as Mule producers, so the change in the Hexham Leicester became more prominent.

In the 1930's leading breeders included Mr. Wilkinson of Hexham whose OAKWOOD flock produced some notable sheep with fine fleeces and dark blue heads. Messrs. Ridley & Sons CHOLLERTON sheep from Hexham topped many sales including the 1935 offering at Hexham. The top price was £30 with 20 sheep realizing the best average of the day at about £13.75. The flocks of EAST FOURSTONES, BROCKS BUSHES, PARSONS BYERS MATFEN HIGH HOUSE, SUNDERLAND FARM, LOUGH GREEN, and the BEARD flock were all leading breeders in the 1930's. The bigger flocks at that time were probably showing around 25 lambs each year and keeping 40 odd breeding ewes.

Although the concentration of the best flocks began around the Hexham area, there were others establishing themselves further west. Near Penrith the Greenop family began to produce good sheep and another name now synonymous with Bluefaced Leicesters, the Raine family, OLD PARKS, also started to be noticed. An approximate 1930's guide would put Northumberland as being mainly Scottish Blackface., Durham mainly Swaledale and Cumberland gradually switching to the Swaledale. In those early days of the Mule sheep, demand was nothing like it is today.

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The early Mule sales centre was Lazonby and Tow Law where an entry of 4,000 Mule lambs by the 1930's was considered a good turn out and not all of those were being sold for further breeding. By this time the Mule was well recognized for the same characteristics it is today, but in the early 1930's that recognition was only localized. But even as the Bluefaced Leicester began to become more popular through the Mule it was capable of producing, breeders still made no moves to form themselves into any sort of society. There was great personal contact between the early breeders; respect and loyalty and a wide knowledge of each others stock virtually outlawed the need for a more official form of registration. Although the conformation and skin of the Mules was always of utmost importance in the selection of Bluefaced Leicester crossing tups, Mule colour was not as important as it is today. So although Mule breeders often bought their Bluefaced Leicester tups from the same breeders year after year, there wasn't the same intensity of breeding to a type that exists nowadays.

Mr. Ted Green of LUKER HALL, Northumberland was a man who demanded a lot of his sheep in that he was a stickler for good conformation and body shape and one who is often remembered for getting the breed a foot hold at the Kelso ram sales. With a large flock of over 120 Bluefaced Leicester ewes he became widely known for his development of the 'Kelso type' of Bluefaced Leicester. There are still breeders who would relish the idea of having some of the old type of Bluefaced Leicester tups back in the breed today; there are those who remain more subjective about the early sheep. Joe Raine of the famed OLD PARKS prefix, believes some of the tups of the 1930's and 40's were not as hardy as their offspring of 40 years on. He puts that down to a reluctance on the part of some breeders to recognize and correct faults in their own sheep. Conformation faults were often overlooked in the quest for producing an extreme looking Border Leicester with the emphasis firmly on coat colour and fine skin. In the 1930's there were probably no more than 100 serious Bluefaced Leicester breeders producing tups to sell. Consequently the need for a flock book to serve such a small band of enthusiasts seemed unnecessary.

In the 1950's the expansion of the Mule and the improved profitability of sheep prompted the idea of an association to record the growing numbers of Bluefaced Leicester sheep being bred. There had by this time been a complete changeabout in the attitude of Bluefaced Leicester breeders. The Mule was established across the whole country, demand for pure Bluefaced Leicester crossing rams was increasing. Now breeders were producing for a specialist market and were aiming to get 100 percent of their stock away for breeding.

Prime movers in the formation of the Bluefaced Leicester Sheep Breeders Association, formed in 1963, included, Tom Ridley, CHOLLERTON; Thomas Armstrong, EAST FOURSTONES; Tom Forster, LOWES FELL; Joe Yeats, BAGGARAH; Les Tweddle, STATION HOTEL; Norman Little, CASTLE VIEW; Joe Raine, OLD PARKS; Bob Shadwick, ROUGHTON HEAD; and Alfie Dent, SUNDERLAND FARM. The first meeting of the Association to select office holders was held in Kirkoswald village hall, near Penrith on 12th November 1962. The first Chairman was Joe Raine; Thomas Armstrong was Vice-Chairman, with a committee of 21. Mr. A T. Iveson, Hexham became the first President. Miss M. Fawcett undertook the secretarial duties and remained in office until June 1974 when she handed over to Miss Mary Mann who in turn was secretary for 7 ½ years until her marriage in 1981. Then Miss Pauline Allsup took over in January 1981 as Secretary. The need for an official organization to oversee the welfare of the breed was borne primarily out of the expansion in numbers, the more widespread distribution of pure-bred sheep and the need to implement a recording system. But the breed was also in need of an official 'tag'. Critics of the breed, and there have always been many, were thought by some breeders to be getting away scott-free simply because there was no official mouthpiece to defend their image of the Bluefaced Leicester. An Association of breeders would and DID change all that.

There was spontaneous response from breeders in their support for the Association which now took over organization of the official sales at Hexham, Lazonby, Tow Law and Carlisle. Formality followed in the wake of the new order improved by the Bluefaced Leicester Sheep Breeders' Association. All breeders who applied for membership had all their sheep inspected prior to gaining acceptance to the flock book. In order to get across to breeders the type of sheep that was considered suitable for registration on-farm demonstrations were held to hopefully educate breeders and ultimately to improve the quality and conformation of the breed as a whole. A standard of breed points was laid down early on by the Association Committee. Brown colouration on the legs and overshot mouths were typical faults that the breeds leaders felt must not be encouraged; but good straight toplines, pearly, fine wool and a good blue colour were points highly favoured. It is interesting to note that sheep with white ears were more readily accepted than they are today, nowadays most older breeders will admit that sheep are much bluer than they used to be, a trend that was at its height in the 1970's. But the emphasis on the blue colour has resulted in more black Bluefaced Leicester lambs being born; something many

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longstanding breeders had never previously experienced (or perhaps it was just something no one ever admitted to). By the publication of the 2nd edition of the flock book in 1965 there were 345 flocks registered, compared with around 300 in the initial publication.

Annual inspection of flocks continued for several years after the Association was formed. However, as the membership increased and was spreading into other parts of the country it was decided to drop inspection of existing members and concentrate on new members. This worked well until 1982 when it was again becoming increasing difficult to cover the wide areas involved and inspection of flocks was finally dropped unless specifically requested by a new member. However, all sheep sold through Association Sales continue to be inspected before they can be sold.

One of the breed's most notable sires was bought as a shearing the year before the Association was formed from a Hexham sale. His name was Lucky Dip; bred by Hughie Taylor and bought by Joe Raine for use in his OLD PARKS flock for the days top sale price of £120. This tup is remembered by many for his outstanding conformation, good mouth, quality legs and good body and typical head. But not only was he a good looker. He left many good sheep at OLD PARKS, probably the most influential sire there has been in the Raine's flock; his progeny worked well for fellow breeder Joe Yeats, BAGGARAH and Bob Shadwick, RAUGHTON HEAD the latter producing a notable son of Lucky Dip that carried many of his sire's qualities. Another well know tup to emerge since the Association was formed carried the AULDBY prefix and was owned by Russell Hall. Bred by Henry Mattocks of Penrith, owner of the AULDBY prefix, he has left his mark in many flocks via his progeny. The first tup to make four figures at £ 1,300 was sold by Joe Raine at Lazonby in 1970. The tup was by a THACKWOOD sire and was bought by Mike Harvey, CLAUGHTON. Another well known sire emerged from the OLD PARKS flock in the late 1970's, know as OLD PARKS 'Progress' he was sold as a lamb at Lazonby, but on sale day looked far from his best. He was bought for a knock down price – some say for barely half of what he was worth- by Teddy Helme, ORMATHWAITH FARM. He proved an outstanding sire and spread some excellent progeny into many flocks during the 1970's and early 1980's.

The breed continues to attract more supporters each year; many out to make a fast buck soon learn that breeding the Bluefaced Leicester is a life-times work. But frustration and disappointment seems only to spur on the determination to succeed in producing the tup to beat all tups.

Excerpts taken from:
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**CH Bluefaced Leicester at 1965 Royal Show
seen here at Penrith Show
Pictured with: David Raine, OLD PARKS**



**Joe Raine with winning pen of sheep at
Royal Lancashire Show, Blackpool 1965**