

# HERDWICK

## Summary

A very hardy, medium sized breed from the Lake District, possibly of Scandinavian origin. The grey fleece is dense, coarse and oily, making it waterproof and valuable for insulation in extreme weather conditions. Generally placid, with a strong hefting instinct, the Herdwick is also renowned for longevity.

**Hardiness** - along with the primitive breeds, one of the hardiest of British sheep and highly suited to a free-ranging existence on low quality forage.

- *Maintains condition well* - naturally well covered, even on poor forage. Supplementary feed rarely required and often ignored or used as bedding. Switches to browse in absence of grass.
- *Resilient to extremes of weather* - typically outwintered on the wet, exposed fells and hills of Cumbria, where it grazes up to 3000ft. Its coarse, dense fleece with high kemp and lanoline content is waterproof and effective in extreme cold. Fleece may dry out quicker than breeds with white wool. Copes well in the snow.
- *Shelter* - natural forms of shelter are adequate. Patches of scrub and stonewalls can provide the necessary protection from extended rainfall.

**Physical Attributes & Husbandry** - an active, but sensible sheep, requiring some routine husbandry.

- *Handling* - a strong sheep, but not too big and fairly placid. Sensible and apart from young sheep, does not tend to struggle much during dosing and shearing. Flocks well, and can be handled with dogs or manoeuvred gently by a few people on foot, unless kept in semi-feral situations.
- *Fencing* - a lively, active sheep which will seek out gaps in fencing and handling pens. However, usually content on poor quality keep, so apart from individuals, not too inclined to escape. Variable opinion on whether it respects electric fencing or not.
- *Brambles* - thick loose fleece may make the breed prone to becoming trapped in thorny vegetation.
- *Foot care* - minimal trimming if on hard, free-draining substrate. On dune systems sand wears the feet down and salt inhibits bacteria. More foot care required on lush, wet pasture. Occasional 'corkscrew' foot growth.
- *Fly strike* - rare on exposed uplands; more likely on warm, humid lowland sites.
- *Lambing* - on poor forage on the Fells year round, productivity <100%. On rich pasture, may increase to 150%. In upland situations, lambs vulnerable to fox attack, as ewes tend to leave newborn lamb hidden and move away to graze.



Mel Stone

**Grazing Characteristics** - an effective grazer and maintenance browser of poor quality forage.

- *Grasses* - grazes whole range of grasses, including False Oat-grass, Cocksfoot and new False Brome shoots. Not keen on rank Tor-grass or old brown grass. Good impact on tussocky grasses and litter if more intensively grazed.
- *Browsing* - controls scrub regrowth and suppresses tree/scrub encroachment if grazed more intensively. Successfully controls Creeping Willow on dunes. Takes Birch, Sycamore, Pine, Bramble, Honeysuckle, Dogwood and Sea Buckthorn, but little Gorse. Readily eats Heather.
- *Sedges and rushes* - not keen, except for sedges of short swards and Soft Rush in winter. Ignores Wood Small Reed and Sea Club Rush.
- *Coarse herbs* - will take Dewberry, Rosebay Willowherb and the flowering heads of Ragwort.
- *Social behaviour* - in extensive upland situations, demonstrates a strong hefting instinct. Disperses widely, following a strong diurnal pattern. Wethers may take coarser vegetation most effectively, especially Mat Grass.

**Interaction with the Public** - suitable for public access sites where dogs are controlled or absent.

- *Public perception* - well-rounded and healthy appearance, even after shearing, advantageous. Unusual looking, pretty black lambs.
- *Dogs* - vulnerable to dog attack. Some Herdwick ewes, however, are active against dogs.

**Marketability** - some commercial potential for quality meat to specialised markets.

- *Fleece* - traditional carpet making industry using the Herdwick fleece has collapsed. Currently little value; alternative uses of the fleece, such as for horticultural mulch are being developed.
- *Meat* - high quality lean meat, but small carcass and cuts unsuitable for supermarkets. Some Cumbrian farmers have switched to direct marketing and via local butchers with some success.

## Sites where Herdwick sheep are in use & contacts

SITE NAME	HABITAT	DETAILS AVAILABLE	CONTACT
<b>Ainsdale Sandunes NNR and Cabin Hill NNR</b> Merseyside  English Nature	Extensive dune system.	Since early 1990s, 250 wethers winter grazed on Ainsdale, less on Cabin Hill. Good impact on Creeping Willow, Sea Buckthorn, Birch regrowth and Brambles. Will eat pine needles. Vegetation mosaic created with some bare sand. Hardy. Placid, easily handled and popular with the public.	Tony Meadows 01704 578774
<b>Beachy Head, Butts Brow &amp; other sites</b> Eastbourne  Eastbourne Borough Council	Rank chalk and neutral grassland, and scrub.	Year round grazing since 1992. Successfully tackled sites dominated by rank grassland. Take Tor-grass in summer. Browse Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Brambles and Wayfaring Tree. Maintain condition well, good feet, fairly easy to move with dogs. Left to their own devices may revert to 'wild' behaviour. Some dog worrying.	Chris and Mike Miles 01323 411469
<b>Elmley</b> Kent  RSPB	Grassland and saltings (ex-saltmarsh).	Up to 145 wethers, producing a fairly short, even sward for Lapwing, Widgeon etc. Hardy, placid, easy to handle, cheap to buy. Cope with little shelter on exposed coastal site. Sheep straight off the Fell may have a few foot problems but once sorted generally fine; may have to trim twice a year.	Bob Gomes 01795 665969
<b>Old Winchester Hill and Beacon Hill</b> Hampshire  English Nature	Chalk grassland and scrub.	Mixed age ewes grazed since 1998. Tackling ranker grasses; maintaining the areas of finer sward; readily browse and help to maintain the open nature of the sites. Hardy, placid and manageable. Fed hay in severe weather, but tend to lie on it; provide a rumavite block. Will dig through snow for forage. Some fly strike.	Barry Proctor 01489 8788536
<b>Pentire Head &amp; Port Quin Bay,</b> Wadebridge, Cornwall (NT).	Cliff, maritime grassland and scrub.	Herdwicks grazed with other hill breeds, but tend to remain as a flock independent of the others, hefting on areas close to the cliff edge. Hardy, resilient; good impact on coarse grasses, Bramble and Honeysuckle. Consistently escaping. Now run semi-feral on the cliffs; seem healthy but very hard to catch.	Simon Ford 01208 863046
<b>Sanscale Haws NNR</b> Cumbria  National Trust	Dunes, grassland, saltmarsh and mire.	About 200 hogs winter-graze extensively on 282ha. Maintain condition well; no supplementary feeding; good feet; some dog worrying. Not easily contained. Good site coverage with fairly catholic tastes. Keen on Heather. Numbers too low to fully suppress scrub.	Peter Burton 01229 462855
<b>Swaby Valley, Silverines Meadow and others</b> Lincolnshire  English Nature and others	Chalk grassland, marshy grassland and dunes.	150 grazed since 1995. Very hardy, with good feet. Breeding flock. Ewes over winter on site and produce good single lambs; biddable and easy to handle; few escapees. Successful restoration grazing on ungrazed chalk grassland; tackled scrub; ram lambs made inroads into coarse grasses and retained condition. Some direct marketing of conservation grazed meat.	Claire and Graham Weaver 01507 604119
<b>Various sites</b> N E Surrey, South London Downland Countryside Management Project	Chalk grasslands and scrub.	150 winter-grazed as a flying flock since 1990. Used for maintenance grazing following scrub control. Do well on rough forage; browse Dogwood and other re-growth. Could be more effective on Tor-grass if summer grazed. Feet good; few problems; some flystrike.	Alex Baxter-Brown 0208 5417282  Julia Stracy 01883 341140
<b>Other contacts:</b>		Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association - loan scheme and will provide contact with those with sheep to sell.	Geoff Brown 01946 862382
		Lake District Sheep farmer, grazes Ainsdale (see above); direct sales of meat; may have stock to sell.	Mike Naylor 01946 726306

## References

SIMPSON D & GEE M,(1997) *Setting up a grazing project* Enact (4): 23-26.

SIMPSON D (1999) *Transhumance in the UK - Herdwick sheep of the Lake District* La Canada 11: 6-7.