

ROMNEY MARSH

Summary

Developed on the bleak, low-lying grasslands of Kent and East Sussex, the Romney Marsh is common throughout the world. Adaptable to changing environments and production systems, it is able to thrive on very short grass swards and is suitable for maintenance grazing of lowland grasslands, particularly where a tight sward is desirable. A docile, easy to handle breed which has an established commercial market for its meat.

Hardiness – a fairly hardy lowland breed.

- *Maintains condition well* – and recovers quickly when given better keep. If kept on low quality forage, may require supplements in winter and at and lambing time.
- *Tolerant of an exposed environment* – a breed adapted to the bleak climate of some of southern England's most exposed grazing; its good, thick, heavy fleece provides protection from the elements.

Physical Attributes & Husbandry – a docile, easy to keep breed, which is respectful of enclosure.

- *Handling* – a docile sheep which is easily worked by dogs, and easy to handle.
- *Fencing* – respectful of enclosure and content when confined; standard stock fencing without barbed wire is reputedly sufficient to keep the Romney in. Responds well to electric fencing. Not very athletic and tends not to stray.
- *Breeding* – the Romney is as prolific as the system. Many traditional marsh farms on poor keep, farm Romneys extensively and are happy with one lamb at a time. Under more intensive systems, lambing percentages rise to 180-185%. Plenty of pelvic room allows easy lambing and good lamb survival. Good mothering ability. May be more resistant to mastitis than other sheep breeds.
- *Size and appearance* – a heavily built longwool breed, once important for its wool. Ewes weigh about 70-75kg and the rams can reach 100kg. Both sexes are hornless.
- *Hooves* – sound feet and legs; believed to be more resistant to foot-rot than other breeds.
- *Scrapie* – the breed may have a genetic-based resistance to scrapie.



The Romney Sheep Breeders Group

Grazing Characteristics – a breed well suited to maintenance grazing on lowland grasslands.

- *Grazing* – strongly grass based, favouring grasses of short swards. Good at exploiting very short grasslands.
- *Rushes and sedges* – unlikely to eat unless very short of grass forage. Grazes ditch margins and some emergent vegetation, such as Common Reed.
- *Ranging behaviour* – strong tendency to spread evenly over the grazing area to make best use of the available forage.

Interaction with the Public – a large docile sheep suited to grazing conservation sites with public access.

- *Reaction to people* – a fairly calm sheep, not particularly disturbed by the presence of people.
- *Public appeal* – large and docile, the Romney Marsh is a well-covered breed with a dense fleece, giving it a healthy, plump appearance.
- *Reaction to dogs* – vulnerable to dog attack, although its large size may act as a partial deterrent.

Marketability – a commercial breed with an established market for the lamb.

- *Meat* – the Romney Marsh produces a large carcass which attracts a higher value than some other commercial breeds.
- *Finishing* – lambs generally slower to finish than those of other commercial sheep, although this will depend partly on the system. Possible to finish a big single lamb if kept on good grazing at 10-12 weeks.
- *Breeding* – not as prolific as other commercial breeds.
- *Wool* – high quality.
- *Milk* – very rich and suitable for cheese making.

Sites where Romney Marsh sheep are in use & contacts

| SITE NAME | HABITAT | DETAILS AVAILABLE | CONTACT |
|---|----------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Isle of Sheppey Kent Private estate / English Nature / RSPB) | Grazing marsh. | The estate grazes the Romney (and has done for some 150 years); successfully maintenance grazing to promote conditions for breeding, passage and wintering waders, flora and invertebrates | Phillip Merricks 01424 814203 |
| Pevensey Levels | | Breed thrive on water logged grazing throughout the winter; a tribute to the hardiness of the breed. | Martin Hole |
| Walland Marsh East Sussex/Kent | Grazing Marsh | 1200 Romney ewes grazed on a traditional grazing marsh system. Area includes an SSSI important for its old pastures and ditch species. Farmed on an easy care system, to give lambing at 120-150%. Maintains condition well in summer drought conditions. Good resistance to a number of diseases, particularly foot rot and mastitis. An excellent, easy care sheep for organic or conservation grazing systems. It survives and thrives where others fail. | Simon Wright 01797 224181 |
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| Other contacts: | | Romney Sheep Breeders Society | Alan West 01732 845637 |

References