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Swaledales invade Blackface country

time will you ing?" asked Mr Burton when I ned to arrange his Swaledale . . . "I'll need to you at the road you'll never get re in your car," planned.

why I couldn't was s when Mr Burton me and his vet — was calling to inject of the cattle — the Crianlarich- rum road in Perth- to Cononish Farm. de enough only for the Land - Rover with ups- exhaust which he uses, rough pot-holed road ds up and down, through ns and over them, serving other farm until after e bucketing miles, it arri- at the lonely steading at head of the glen where Burton lives with his e Margaret, their two ildren, and their shepherd, onald Macrae.

At times, the road is washed away, which is not surprising when you consider the rainfall there. Two years ago, 155 inches fell and the average is somewhere between 90 and 100.

In January 1974, there were 94 inches in two days. And this — at the headwaters of the River Tay — is a country where Swaledale sheep are thriving and pushing up lambing percentages. Mr Burton was one of quite a number of Scotch Blackface breeders in the Highlands who switched to using tups from the Pennines on the native ewes.

REGISTERED FLOCK
Unlike some of them, however, who cross them once or, perhaps, twice, and then put the Blackface back, he uses the Swaledale all the time and has got a registered flock. Cononish Farm totals about 10,000 acres of owned and rented land which rises to a peak, on Ben Lul, of 4,708 ft. There are three other summits over 3,000 ft — and the sheep go right to the top in summer.

The point where you start climbing Ben Lul is two miles from the farm steading, so it is not difficult to imagine the work entailed in shepherding. Mr Burton has had a rough road cut out of the hillside for part of the way there, but, just now, one of the mountain torrents has gouged out a gap in that, so the journey cannot be completed — even by Land - Rover.

There is no good in-by as North of England hill farmers know it. There is enclosed ground — about 400 acres of it along the floor of the glen — but it is not improved land. "The soil in the bottom of the glens, tends to be very much more acid than the land higher up," explains Mr Burton. "It's a very peaty soil. Higher up, there are limestone veins through the land and some very good sheep grasses." This is where

By ALAN BIRTWISTLE

the sheep graze all the year round barring times of heavy snowfall when they are pushed into the bottom of the glen. Little has been done to the glen floor apart from cutting open drains, partly because the soil is so acid and partly because there is no suitable access for machinery to spread lime and slag.

CATTLE
Cononish carries about 1,800 ewes and 30 cross - Highland spring - calving suckler cows, whose calves are sold in the back - end store sales. Highland and Beef Shorthorn bulls are used alternately. The cows are outside all the time, and in the winter get hill cattle cobs — but no hay — on heather moorland lower down the glen.

Poor lambing percentage — between 50 and 60 per cent — was the main reason for Mr Burton's introducing the Swaledale ram into his Blackface flock 10 years ago. Some farmers in the area had used the Swaledale for crossing on the Blackface with good results, and he decided to try it.

He bought 14 tups that year from the Kirkby Stephen sales with the idea of using them once and then going back to Blackface. But he was so pleased with the results that he decided to continue. Now, about 1,600 of the 1,800 ewes in the Cononish flock are Swaledale-crosses, and some are almost pure Swaledale.

What Mr Burton found,

first of all, on using the Swaledale tup was that the ewes held better to it; then the lambs themselves seemed "just that little bit fitter" when they were born. But the real benefits came when the gimmer lambs became breeding ewes. "They have greater milking and mothering ability, and my lambing percentage has gone up by 30 with virtually no change in the management," says Mr Burton.

He does not think there is a lot of difference in birth-weights of Swaledale and Blackface lambs, and when put over the weighbridge at the store sales, they scale more or less the same.

Even so, he has had to grade for his lambs at Dalnally — the local store centre — most years, and one pen in 1975 made £11.05 apiece at 76 lb liveweight. Some have gone to Stirling and other places in the Lowlands and most people who have bought them have told Mr Burton they do relatively better than the Blackfaces.

"In fact," he recalls, "one man who bought some last year told me the previous year's batch were 2 lb heavier than comparable Blackfaces when finished — and were away two weeks earlier."

But the increase in numbers is the great thing, and Mr Burton is certain the Swales are harder than the majority of strains of Blackfaces.

"They really stand up to the winters we get," he says. "The type of fleece they carry is extra good for keeping out rain, cold wind and sleet. And the little extra length of leg they have makes them good foragers in severe conditions."

TUP TYPE
Each year, Mr Burton comes south to Kirkby Stephen to buy replacement tups. He looks for "something with a good bit of bone, with a fairly square backside, four good legs and a good carriage." And the tup must be correct in the mouth.

Last year, the better end of the batch he bought averaged £100 with a top of £170.

Up to now, these purchases have been the extent of his transactions at Kirkby Stephen, but this year he plans to bring down some gimmer shearlings and ewes. Normally, about 200 shearlings are sold at Stirling, bringing as much as comparable Blackfaces. Draft ewes go the same centre after four crops of lambs have been taken off them.

Mr Burton has a registered flock of 50 ewes, and



intends to continue using the Swaledale tup. "Unless results decline," he says, "I see no reason for changing back."

When the tups arrive at Cononish, they are housed and given hay and water, and are let out for a quarter of an hour each day for some concentrates and exercise until tugging time. "The main reason for housing is that I know where they are in the morning, and, if they are inside, they are not losing condition ranging around in this vast area," says Mr Burton.

After tugging, he has been sending the tups to an arable farm in Fife, but last year was able to winter them in an adjoining forestry plantation and they did well, with a little concentrate feed.

Gathered up at the end of May, they were clipped, dosed and let out to the hills, where they will remain until lamb - gathering time in September.

Cononish is split into four "hirsels," and ewes on the two nearer, larger, ones are tugged on the hill; those on the farther two are brought down for tugging, then returned to the hill.

SCHEDULE
In March, the whole flock is gathered. Lean ewes are drawn out and fed some cake on enclosed land. This is kept up until after lambing time, which starts usually the last five or six days of April or early May.

Swaledale crosses near the steading.

All the sheep are lambed on the hill mainly because of the better land there. Foxes are in evidence at this time, and Mr Burton and his shepherd on their journeys round the flock, carry 12-bore shotguns to deal with the vermin. "We had five foxes dead last year," John says. "They could be a problem, but if we keep on top of them it isn't too much bother. We are fortunate in having gamekeepers on either side of us."

Hoggs are clipped in the last week of June or first week of July, and, at the same time, the lambs are marked. Next operation is the main clipping — the "milk clipping" — at the beginning of August, and

then, in September, all the wether lambs are drawn out for sale at the store market. Draft ewes are pulled out at the same time.

Mr Burton regards himself as very fortunate in the health of his animals. Being a high - lying farm with sheep mostly on the higher land, Cononish has little fluke, but just after New Year, when the tups are taken out, all the ewes which were tugged on the enclosed land are dosed.

Braxy and blackleg would be the main problems if vaccination measures were not taken against them. "In this area," says Mr Burton, "braxy was a real killer in days gone by. We do get an occasional case, perhaps

where the vaccine didn't take."

Winter dipping takes place in October or November to assist weatherproofing of the wool and to combat lice.

It has been the practice, at marking time or "milk clipping" time to dose the lambs for worms, but one very wet year, sheep on one of the hirsels did not get clipped until the end of August, and the lambs were not dosed. "They went to market straight off their mothers," says Mr Burton, "and they were among the best pens I had ever sold."

So last year, the dosing of the lambs was cut out, and results were very good. "But, of course, I'll have to keep an open mind," he says, "although, unless there was a worm problem, I wouldn't dose them now."