

The Colonial Williamsburg Animal News

FEBRUARY/MARCH 1990

PAMPHLET FILE VOLUME 2, NO. 6



WHY ENGLISH LEICESTERS

by Elaine Shirley

The return of a large flock of English Leicesters to North America is a thrilling event! We have a unique and vibrant flock from half way around the world, but what do we say to visitors who might ask "What's the big deal about these sheep . . . they don't look that special to me?"

Colonial Williamsburg strives for authenticity and education; we want to show twentieth-century people eighteenth-century life. We work with buildings, fabrics, paintings, and even plants of the eighteenth century, but until a few years ago our animals were sorely lacking in authenticity. We had animals to fill animal spaces, but no necessarily animals recognizable to an eighteenth-century person.

The English Leicesters now join the Devon cows, and our many breeds of poultry as a breed that was known to exist in Virginia and in England in the eighteenth century.

The English Leicester (also known as the Leicester Long-wool, the Bakewell Leicester, or Dishley Leicester) were the most talked about sheep in the English world in the eighteenth century. A wealthy English landowner named Robert Bakewell spent a number of years working with the old unimproved Leicester, breeding for specific characteristics and using techniques of modern breeding. The new Leicester was praised in books and articles, the rams sold for huge prices, and George Washington was keenly interested in the breed. He eventually remarked how Leicester rams had improved his large flock at Mount Vernon. The Leicester went on in the nineteenth century to improve almost every breed of English sheep, introducing into the breeds their superior wool and meat quality.

New breeds created from the Leicester crossed with other breeds forced the original animal out of the market. That is why the Leicester is so rare today; they did their job too well! In New Zealand's flock of 62 million sheep, over 70% of the sheep are the breeds created by the Leicester.

So what do we say to that visitor?

English Leicesters are a perfect example of the Age of Enlightenment, and how it fit into agriculture. This English breed helped improve flocks in Virginia, and was a driving force in the English economy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Leicesters were the beginning of the western world's modern agriculture which today allows about 2% of our population to produce all our food and fiber. The Leicesters influence was felt in most English breeds of sheep, and an animal with that genetic potential needs to be preserved for future generations. Who is to say what the Leicesters can do for agriculture in the future? Besides, they are beautiful animals!



OVATIONS FOR THE OVINES

by Allison Harcourt

Saturday morning, February 3, dawned clear despite the weatherman's predictions, and on the kitchen table the *Virginia Gazette's* banner headline announced the arrival of English Leicester sheep to Colonial Williamsburg at noon. All things come to those who wait, and wait we did.

By 11:30 a.m. people began to trickle in to the Franklin Street stables in anticipation of the celebrated sheep arrival. Richard Nicoll, well versed in the trials of sheep importation, was not going to bet the plantation on a noon sharp sheep arrival. Noon slipped by, reporters and employees stopping in to view the sheep—no sheep. Just past 1 p.m. a camera crew from channel 13 pulled in hoping to film the sheep. During their wait at the barn they did enjoy feeding and scratching the ears of Mark Anthony, the carriage horse, and teasing the barn cat, Lucy, who gave back as good as she received. The reporter rather plaintively suggested we trim the cat's claws. We suggested he quit playing with the cat. Well past their deadline they left without seeing hide nor wool of any sheep. Ken Kipps, steadfast all day, finally left to grab something to eat with the promise that we beep him at the first sign of anything remotely resembling an ovine. Daniel Fripp, one of our Colonial Livestock 4-Hers raided Elaine Shirley's locker, consumed herring in tomato sauce, and further fortified with a trip to the Cheese Shop, called his parents for permission to stay longer. Finally a much welcome call; Russ Dow was about two hours away. It took almost 10 months, either in transit or quarantine. We could wait a mere two hours more.

After all that waiting, Russ Dow's pickup with a small black trailer almost slipped in unnoticed. Are all our sheep in that little trailer? A close look revealed noses pressed to the windows of the camper shell on the pickup and when the gate was raised a line of steamy, wooly faces peered out. The ram and ewes were in the back of the truck. The lambs rode in the trailer. Diana Freedman and Madge Hall caught the moment on film. Daniel helped unload and sheep scrambled out into the stalls much to the vocal delight of Meg and Jenny Nicoll. By 6 p.m. the sheep were bedded down and Russ Dow gave a knowing chuckle when told he missed all the publicity. We sat down and had a short talk, then Russ headed back for Canada with probably a large sigh of relief.

Russ Dow started his livestock importation career bound for Italy with a boatload of cattle, and in his many years of business he has imported livestock from Europe, "Down Under," and even goats to Cuba. We're grateful for his patience and expertise to deliver our flock to Williamsburg. The one ram, eight ewes, five ram lambs, and two ewe lambs arrived in good shape. The ram and ewes are out in this Historic Area enjoying the warm Virginia winter; at least compared to Canada where they spent the last several months. The lambs will also be out in a week or so, once they have received their inoculations.

For all those who came in on their day off, or stayed long after the finish of their work day the wait was worth it. From a tragic beginning with the death of Willoughby in 1988, the future looks bright with the arrival of these much-traveled sheep.

ANIMAL UPDATE

Bill and Bruce, one of our Percheron teams, have replaced Topsy and Prince at Carter's Grove for TLO. Bill and Bruce are barefoot and enjoying the life of luxury for a few months before the summer rush.

Rod (the grey Percheron cross) and Bubba (the chestnut Suffolk Punch) are holding down the fort in York Street pasture till new partners can be found for them. Rod walked too fast and Bubba walked too slow. We will be looking for partners to match their personality and work style.

The American Creams are all attending winter classes. Mary Margaret and Jane are both in training for harness, and are doing well pulling a drag around the pasture. Moses is learning to walk and trot on the lunge line. This involves walking and trotting in a large circle attached to a rope. He is learning to increase and decrease speed in response to voice commands. Moses is in horse kindergarten. Aaron is in preschool learning to be led, stand still, and general young horse manners.

The Devons are still pregnant and doing fine. Alice is due in late February, Hannah in late April, and Nora in late April to early May. The three Dorset ewes should lamb about the same time. Spring should be an exciting time for animal babies at C.W.

Willie and Top (the oxen) are also enjoying TLO at Carter's Grove. Richard Linger is concentrating his efforts with his young team, Glen and Albert, doing a variety of chores around the Historic Area. Like Bill and Bruce, Willie and Top will be back to work in the spring.

We have a resident red-tailed hawk who likes to vary his/her diet from squirrels to an occasional chicken. The hens have become hawk-wise so our losses have been few. Keep your eyes open—the hawk is magnificent!

SPECIAL NOTE

Karen Smith has completed a year as editor of the *Animal News*. Karen is busy with many projects including the American Creams. The reins have been handed over to Allison Harcourt, who is cart driver-interpreter of Coach and Livestock Department.

OF SHEEP AND NAMES

Our English Leicester sheep have been chosen from several different flocks in Tasmania. Their backgrounds were carefully chosen to give the widest possible genetic base. Each of our ewes were bred to different rams. Our resulting lambs are not related to our ram, giving us a great range of genetic combinations. We were fortunate to be able to purchase sheep from four very fine flocks in Tasmania.

The largest group of sheep (3 ewes and the ram) came from Mr. Ian Heazlewood's farm in Whitemore Tasmania. His farm-flock name is Melton Vale, and his family have been raising English Leicesters since 1871. His sheep were very competitive in the World Sheep and Wool Congress, a premier sheep conference, show, and sale. Mrs. Asplundh in Pennsylvania, received a Melton Vale ewe, and ewe lamb. Mrs. Asplundh has been a generous and strong supporter of our project. You will recognize the Melton Vale sheep in our new flock by their metal ear tags. The Melton Vale sheep also seem to be the most outgoing of the group.

Two of our sheep came from Mr. Eric Gray of Richmond, Tasmania. His farm, called Marengo, has made quite an impact in Leicester breeding of recent years. His sheep were the first prize winners for a pen of English Leicesters at the World Sheep and Wool Congress. Our two Marengo ewes were part of that first place pen. The Marengo ewes are all large, well built ladies with bright blue eartags.

Mr. Norman Badcock's Connaughtville flock supplied two ewes. Mr. Badcock is highly respected as a judge of Leicester sheep. His brother, Mr. I. A. Badcock, sent a ewe from his Glen Dhu flock. This ewe's wool is of a slightly different texture, and wears a bright yellow ear tag.

Colonial Williamsburg has not just imported rare sheep. We have imported the best rare sheep. The leading breeders in Tasmania have enthusiastically contributed some of their best breeding. We are committed to preserving the breed, and to breed the best examples. If you stop by to see the sheep (for the month of February in front of the Powell House) say hello to the girls from Melton Vale, Connaughtville, Glen Dhu, and Marengo. Pretty soon their baaa's will all have a southern Virginia accent.



TO JAKE AND JOCK FROM THE HEART

by Kay Williams

It's fun to drive those silly mules,
They jiggle and jump and act like fools.
If it's through a puddle they must walk,
They stiffen up behind and balk.
If on the road's a greasy spot,
It's a deadly trap they'ss traverse not.
Step on a manhole they would not dare,
Which makes the driver fuss and swear.
"Oh Fudge!" she says as matter of fact,
Straining to hold her poise and tact.
For mule skinner's words will make you squirm,
And startle the young, the old, and infirm
To the point they'd tremble and fall off the wagon
When faced by a mule skinning firebreathing dragon.
So as I laugh and grip the lines,
I cuss my Long-eared Valentines.
I was hit by an arrow, shot by cupid—
That I love these mules some think me stupid.

QUESTIONS? COMMENTS? Please write to:
Animal Editor, MHW. Colonial Williamsburg
Animal News is published by Coach and Livestock
Operation, Historic Trades Department
Allison Harcourt, *Editor*