



THE DISTRIBUTION OF SHEEP IN SUSSEX IN THE EARLY FOURTEENTH CENTURY.

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WE learn from contemporary customs accounts that the Sussex wool clip in Edward I.'s reign was shipped mainly from Shoreham and Seaford, ports which served as outlets for the eastern half of the South Downs.¹ The question that naturally arises, and that this article will try to answer, is whether this region had any special advantages in regard either to the production or shipment of wool during the half century that preceded the Black Death. It is true that in the Middle Ages these two ports stood at the mouths of rivers whose lower courses were navigable; further west, Arundel and Chichester were less favourably situated, goods for shipment from the latter, for example, having to be taken to Dell Quay, nearly three miles away. But the relative importance of Shoreham and Seaford cannot be entirely explained along these lines. The prosperity of a port is largely determined by the character of its hinterland, and it is this that we must consider in some detail.

Our main source of information is the *Inquisitiones Nonarum* of 1340-41.² These give one ninth of the value of corn, fleeces and lambs in 270 Sussex parishes, sometimes, unfortunately, as a lump sum, while in many cases a combined value is given for fleeces and lambs. For about 180 parishes, however, we have the estimated values of fleeces given separately, and from these can be calculated approximately the numbers of sheep per parish. In other cases the totals arrived at can only be very rough. Although I have previously

¹ S.A.C., LXXIV., pp. 131-9.

² *Inquisitiones Nonarum*, 1807 (Record Commission).

pointed out that values included in the returns for some parishes are probably unreliable,³ the general distribution of sheep shown on the accompanying map is no doubt reasonably correct. At all events it accords with information culled from other sources.

The total number of mature sheep (lambs have been omitted from the calculations) in Sussex in 1341 was roughly 110,000, made up as follows:—

(a) Parishes in which fleeces were assessed separately	85,000
(b) Parishes in which combined values were given for fleeces and lambs	20,000 ⁴
(c) Parishes in which combined values were given for corn, fleeces, and lambs	5,000 ⁵
Total	110,000

It is interesting to compare this total with the export figures of the period: the average annual amount of wool shipped abroad from Sussex during the first half of the century was about 300 sacks and 9000 wool-fells,⁶ representing, on the basis of 300 fleeces to the sack, the produce of nearly 100,000 sheep. This suggests very strongly that Sussex sheep were reared primarily for their wool and not for food. Miss A. M. Melville, in a valuable unpublished thesis entitled: "The Pastoral Custom and Local Wool Trade of Medieval Sussex, 1085-1485"⁷ points out that there was no large-scale autumn killing as is generally supposed,⁸ the animals being kept in sheep cotes or folded on fallow land during the winter.⁹

For purposes of mapping, only group (a) of the above parishes can be utilised. These may be classified according to the sizes of their flocks, the largest being (1) Alciston (with Lullington),¹⁰ (2) Piddinghoe, and (3) Laughton. In the first named there were just over 3000 sheep, most of which belonged to Battle

³ *S.A.C.*, LXXII., p. 164.

⁴ Allowing £20 for fleeces out of a total of about £38.

⁵ Allowing £5 for fleeces out of a total of about £150.

⁶ *S.A.C.*, LXX., p. 100.

⁷ University of London Library.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 52, 53, 76, 77.

¹⁰ Numbers preceding names of parishes refer to numbers on map.

Abbey, while the other two parishes had about 2200 each. Since the bailiff's accounts for Alciston give totals of about 2000 sheep at this period,¹¹ however, the symbol for that parish on the map has been made to represent this lower total. In other cases where two parishes have been assessed together they have both been omitted from the map.

Between 1000 and 2000 sheep were pastured in the following parishes:—

(4) Alfriston	(10) Edburton	(17) Plumpton
(5) Bexhill	(11) Falmer	(18) Piecomb
(6) Bishopstone	(12) Friston	(19) Rogate
(7) Blachington/ Shoreham	(13) Manxey	(20) Sompting
(8) Brighton	(14) Pagham	(12) Stoughton
(9) Broadwater	(15) Patcham	(22) Washington
	(16) Patching	

Most of these parishes contain a strip of chalk downland and are situated to the east of the Adur. Broadwater, Pagham, and Sompting, however, lie on the fertile coastal plain west of Shoreham where corn growing was the principal occupation; the ninth of corn in Pagham, for example, was valued at £47, the highest in the county, in spite of the fact that 2700 acres had been inundated by the sea.¹²

Much of the Weald was clearly unsuited to sheep grazing, although quite a number of sheep were apparently pastured on clay soils in the western part of the county. Apart from the Rother valley, which is carved in the Wadhurst Clay, the Hastings Beds are mainly covered with sandy soils that have a dry surface, but their pasture is poorer than that on the chalk downs. Robertsbridge Abbey, in spite of its Cistercian foundation, does not seem to have possessed any large flocks in this region.

No sheep were recorded in the following parishes:—

Balcombe	Iden
Barcombe	Seaford
Burwash	Shermanbury
Chichester (St. Pancras)	Shoreham (New)
Cuckfield	Whatlington

¹¹ Miss Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹² *Inquisitiones Nonarum*, p. 360.

The absence of sheep at Seaford was due to French raids, from which the town had recently suffered.¹³ A few neighbouring parishes attributed their poverty to the same cause.¹⁴

The sandy soils of West Sussex derived from the Folkestone Beds within the Lower Greensand formation supported a considerable number of sheep, but generally speaking the adjoining chalk zone was rather poorly stocked. This brings us to the most important part of our analysis—the distinction between the eastern and western downs, for it is clear from a glance at the map that there was a marked concentration of sheep between the Adur and Beachy Head. In the first place we must not be misled by the apparent uniformity of soil throughout the chalk country, for although no deposits of sufficient importance to warrant their inclusion on a “drift” map have as yet been identified over much of the western downs, there is a substantial loam covering that is capable of supporting woodland. This is particularly marked in the area west of the Arun; and if, as is quite possible, such woodland existed in the fourteenth century, it will help to account for the smaller flocks there. But there is another important factor to take into consideration. Gilbert White, writing in 1773, drew attention to a difference in breed between sheep grazing on the two sides of the Adur, and his observations are worth quoting:—

One thing is very remarkable as to the sheep: from the westward till you get to the river Adur all the flocks have horns, and smooth white faces, and white legs; and a hornless sheep is rarely to be seen; but as soon as you pass that river eastward, and mount Beeding-hill, all the flocks at once become hornless, or, as they call them, poll-sheep; and moreover black faces with a white tuft of wool on their foreheads, and speckled and spotted legs: so that you would think that the flocks of Laban were pasturing on one side of the stream, and the variegated breed of his son-in-law Jacob were cantoned along on the other. And this diversity holds good respectively on each side from the valley of Bramber and Beeding to the eastward and westward all the whole length of the downs. If you talk with the shepherds on this subject, they tell you that the case has been

¹³ *Inquisitiones Nonarum*, p. 355.

¹⁴ e.g. Friston and East Dean.

so from time immemorial: and smile at your simplicity if you ask them whether the situation of these two different breeds might not be reversed? However, an intelligent friend of mine near Chichester is determined to try the experiment, and has this autumn, at the hazard of being laughed at, introduced a parcel of black-faced hornless rams among his horned western ewes. The black-faced poll-sheep have the shortest legs and the finest wool.¹⁵

In a discussion on the origin of Sussex sheep Hall and Russell, after quoting the above passage, add:—

The black-faced poll-sheep no doubt represent the original stock of the Southdowns, while the white-faced horned sheep probably correspond to something like the old Wiltshire breed which we learn from other sources extended at that time into Hampshire.¹⁶

If Gilbert White's remarks can be assumed to apply to a period as remote as the fourteenth century it seems reasonable to suppose that the superior quality of the wool in eastern districts¹⁷ (though even this was poor compared with the wool of other counties) would have been an incentive to local sheep farmers to increase their flocks as much as possible, for the wool was in great demand on the continent and could readily be exported from Shoreham and Seaford. Chichester, on the other hand, although officially constituted the staple for Sussex wool when the Home Staples were set up in 1353 could not possibly have been a good centre for shipment. It is not surprising, therefore, that the East Sussex merchants petitioned for a staple within their own area. This was granted, and Lewes for a time became the centre of activities in the east.¹⁸ By the beginning of the following century, however, the burgesses of Lewes were petitioning Parliament for a renewal of their privileges, which had been withdrawn, on the ground that most of the wool produced in Sussex was grown within 10 leagues (about 15 miles) of the town.¹⁹

Concerning differences in the quality of wool from

¹⁵ Gilbert White, "Natural History of Selborne," Letter XVII.

¹⁶ Hall and Russell, *Agriculture and Soils of Kent, Surrey and Sussex*, p. 43.

¹⁷ Wool from Alceston was sometimes half a mark above price for county (Miss Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 100).

¹⁸ *S.A.C.*, LXXI., p. 178.

¹⁹ *Rot. Parl* iii., 497, 4 Henry IV.

East and West Sussex we might note that in the corn-growing parishes along the coastal plain the proportion of lambs to fleeces was uniformly high according to the *Inquisitiones Nonarum*. This no doubt means that the sheep in those parishes were mainly ewes kept for their milk as well as for their wool,²⁰ whereas on the downs the flocks consisted principally of wethers.²¹ According to certain Battle Abbey accounts fleeces from Appledram, which falls within the former category, were smaller and of poorer quality than those from Alciston, where the proportion of wethers was much greater.²² Since there was a good deal of interchange of stock between these two parishes, owing to the common ownership of farms in each, however, we may assume that some poll sheep were to be found at Appledram as well as Alciston.²³ Elsewhere, it would seem, the excess of ewes on the coastal plain tended to accentuate the poorness of quality of the wool produced by horned sheep west of the Adur, to which Gilbert White has referred.

The relatively large numbers of sheep in the corn-growing parishes draw attention to another interesting point, viz. that large stretches of open downland were not essential for sheep farming in the Middle Ages. It is clear from evidence in the custumals of the Bishop of Chichester's manors²⁴ that a not inconsiderable number of animals in Sussex belonged neither to wealthy religious houses nor to local overlords but to villeins and cottars who were accustomed to fold their flocks on fallow strips in the open fields which must have been particularly extensive on the Brick Earth soils.

Thus we see that at the earliest period for which detailed information is available there was a rather special development of the wool-growing industry in

²⁰ Miss Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁴ "Thirteen Sussex Custumals," ed. W. D. Peckham (*Sussex Record Society*, XXXI.).

the chalk country east of Shoreham. This was not fortuitous, but was conditioned by certain geographical factors that are still strongly felt; and in fact one might add that although the improved Southdown has become more widely spread than its medieval prototype, the present quantitative distribution of sheep in Sussex bears a striking resemblance to that of 1341.