

The Orkney Sheep Foundation

By Kate Traill-Price

The Orkney Sheep Foundation was founded at the start of 2015 with a clear objective: that of “conserving an island heritage.”

The island in question is North Ronaldsay - a tiny piece of land dotted at the very top of the archipelago known as the Orkney Islands, in northernmost Scotland in the United Kingdom.

On this small, unassuming island which counts less than 50 residents, lives a breed of sheep unlike any other in the world, and this is the heritage that the OSF is seeking to conserve: the ancient breed of North Ronaldsay seaweed-eating sheep.

The flock’s bloodline goes back thousands of years, with recent studies by the French Natural History Museum showing that Orkney sheep were supplementing their diet with seaweed as far back as 4000 BC.

What makes the North Ronaldsay sheep so specifically unique is their habitat. There are no fields or pens for these animals. Instead this small, hardy, goat-like breed live in one giant flock of nearly 3,000 on the 270 acres of rock and sand that makes up the foreshore.

Even more notably, they are kept there by a 20-kilometer, nearly 200 year old man-made stonewall known as a ‘sheepdyke’ that runs the entire perimeter of the island.

The sheepdyke was originally built in the early 1830s in response to the collapse of Orkney’s kelp industry - until then the island’s most profitable source of income. A drastic change was needed and between the residents and the island’s Laird, John Traill, it was decided that North Ronaldsay’s fertile land would be best used for cattle farming and crops.

It was a bold move that saw the wall erected at the tide’s highest level, and the sheep banished onto the beach in the process.

While other flocks in similar circumstances suffered at the changes and harsh conditions, the wily sheep of North Ronaldsay not only adapted to their new habitat, but thrived upon it. With the wild North Sea throwing an abundance of seaweed onto the shore, the sheep’s diet became an oceanic feast of nutrient-rich kelp. Unlike most other animals, the North Ronaldsay sheep are actually at their optimum weight in the deepest depths of winter, when the sea’s fierce rip tides produce an even greater bounty.



Each island crofter was entitled to keep a select number of sheep on the shore, and in exchange would help to rebuild and repair any section of sheepdyke that ran alongside their farming land.

So it worked for hundreds of years but with the island’s population now ageing and diminished, a new strategy is needed. The sheepdyke has been devastatingly damaged by recent storms, and funds are needed to help its repair.

If they are able to venture inland, this special and unique flock risk disease and polluting their pure bloodline by mating with other breeds kept on the island, and - with a diet no longer used to eating grass - copper poisoning.

You can help the OSF in its mission to rebuild the sheepdyke, and by doing so secure the safety of this remarkable piece of living history. To

make a donation or learn more about the OSF please visit www.theorkneysheepfoundation.org.uk

Photo above of the iconic lighthouse on the northern point of the island, which is the tallest land, based light in Britain.

Photo www.visitscotland.com



*North Ronaldsay Sheep,
eating kelp on the shore, and on the Dyke*

