

NORTH RONALDSAY SHEEP OF ORKNEY FACE FRESH THREAT

OUR UK FRIEND PETER TITLEY REPORTS ON AN ANCIENT SHOW,
AN ANCIENT BREED AND A MODERN-DAY THREAT TO OUR HERITAGE



In June this year I visited one of the most magnificent agricultural shows in the world – The Royal Highland Show in Edinburgh, which was celebrating its 175th anniversary. I was there as the guest of my son, Edward, who was judging Hebridean sheep – a notable honour for an Englishman! On this side of the Atlantic, Scotland is constantly in the news headlines after the massive upsurge of support for the Scottish Nationalist Party in the UK general election last May. Some people over here think that this will damage the ancient links between England and Scotland but, as ever, my experience north of the border suggests otherwise. So far as I can see, the United Kingdom is alive and well. The warmth of the welcome and the generous hospitality underlined the fact that farmers and stockkeepers, wherever they live, share common interests which bridge political and geographic boundaries and I like to think that farming communities set standards for others to follow!

At the show there was much celebration of our farming heritage and how this shaped the world in which we live. The heavy

horses were superb alongside record breaking entries across the whole range of livestock. I visited the RBST stand and it was good to see our team dealing with a constant flow of interested visitors, supported by my Presidential successor, Richard Matson. Without any official duties to perform I had plenty of time to reflect on the origins of RBST and how its roots run deeply into Scottish, or more accurately, Orcadian soil: At its creation in the early 1970's, RBST identified the native Orkney sheep on the island of North Ronaldsay as uniquely adapted to their island habitat; to life on the shoreline of this small island and to their unusual diet of seaweed. They were the product of a unique communal farming system which had been part of life on that island for many generations. As the only surviving native Orkney Sheep, found in only one tiny location, they symbolised the threats facing native breeds more broadly and thus played a major part in galvanising support for the wider conservation of domesticated livestock.

North Ronaldsay history pre-dates the Norse settlements and sheep had been on

the island before the Vikings went ashore. However, what we see in today's native island sheep is typical of the small, hardy, double-coated short-tailed sheep brought by early settlers. Similar animals found their way to other North Atlantic islands but it seems that the sheep of North Ronaldsay are the sole survivors of that period of migration.

The importance of these sheep to the island economy and the key role which they played in the cultural development of North Ronaldsay was highlighted by a crucial period in the history of the island during the 1830's. This was an important and life-changing decade in the Northern Isles of Britain during which major social change took place; land regulations changed along with the relationship between the Laird and the tenants; the so-called "Land-squaring" was implemented and methods of managing the land opened up new opportunities to keep cattle and grow crops which were more profitable than the native sheep. Many North Islanders simply discarded their native sheep.

Not so the people of North Ronaldsay but their sheep needed to be contained in a way which protected the cultivated land. Consequently, in 1832, the sheep-dyke – a continuous dry-stone wall which encircled the entire island for a distance of some 13 miles – was built and the native sheep were thus confined to the shore where they adapted to the diet of seaweed upon which they have subsisted ever since – save for a brief period in the spring of each year around the lambing season, when they are allowed inland.

This unique structure is now listed by Historic Scotland, as a Grade A monument and acknowledged as the longest continuous drystone structure in Europe. Beyond that it is a living, working part of island life for the islanders and their sheep and for generations it has served its purpose with rugged reliability. However, during December 2012 and January 2013 the island was hit by fierce storms and rip tides – the worst in 40 years and substantial damage was done to the Sheep Dyke.

Almost a quarter of the structure lies in ruins and with only 50 people living on the island the reconstruction is beyond their physical and financial means. So, this living link with our past is endangered because, over the last decade, the deterioration of the dyke has escalated probably in proportion to the reduction of the island workforce. Despite the existence of several island-based organisations and vocal concern on and off the island about the worsening situation there remains a substantial need to kick-start some meaningful rescue operation before both sheep and dyke are consigned to history, with no living link to island life on North Ronaldsay and no lasting recognition of an ancient method of husbandry. However, this legacy still clings precariously to this northern edge of Britain and it is not too late to act.

The cultural importance of native North Ronaldsay Sheep and the dyke upon which their future depends, assumes significance far beyond the shores of their native island.

The sheep and the dyke are inter-related elements of world heritage and arguably occupy a unique place in the development of human settlements and mankind's use of livestock. Therefore, a group of committed associates has founded a campaign for action through the creation of a new Scottish incorporated charitable organisation: The Orkney Sheep Foundation (OSF). I am OSF's Honorary Secretary and the Foundation was formally launched in Kirkwall on September 8. Its website can be found at: www.theorkneysheepfoundation.org.uk. The organisation can be contacted directly at: secretary@theorkneysheepfoundation.org.uk. In the meantime I will look forward to keeping Genesis readers up to date with progress and of course, the OSF will be looking for Canadian ambassadors for its world-wide campaign. We would love to hear from anyone who wants to support our mission.

With warmest regards to all in RBC.

Peter Titley



1. Historic Scotland is an executive agency of the Scottish Government charged with safeguarding the nation's historic environment and promoting its understanding and enjoyment: <http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/>

2. The Orkney Sheep Foundation (OSF) is seeking funds to commission a survey of the Dyke in readiness for reconstruction.

A special thanks to Kate Trail Price for help with the spectacular photographs. Banner photo by Selena Kauzman.

