



Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity

Romney Salt Marsh Lamb

Romney Marsh Sheep are big sheep with a heavy long woollen fleece. Wool has always been a big part of the interest in the breed although it is historically a dual purpose breed. It matures early and is a wide headed sheep with no horns and a black nose. They are efficient grazers and give a good return on meat and wool. Many traditional marsh farms make use of Romneys extensively and are happy with one lamb at a time, but under more intensive systems lambing percentages can rise up to 180-185%. Romney lambs are generally slower to finish than those of other commercial sheep, although this will depend partly on the system. It is possible to finish a big single lamb in ten to twelve weeks if it is kept on good grazing. Almost every detailed description of the Romney cites relative resistance to foot rot, an attribute rarely mentioned in descriptions of other breeds. The breed is slaughtered at around 36 kilos in weight.



The Salt Marsh Lamb offers a unique flavour due to the sheep grazing over the natural grasses and samphire of the salt marshes in Romney Marsh in Kent. These marshes are free from any fertilizers and provide an environment where the sheep can roam freely. This hardy existence causes them to put on extra fat which marbles their meat, making it moist and tasty. The meat has a richer and altogether sweeter flavour. Romney meat is known for its delicate taste even in older lambs. 90% of the UK's salt marsh lamb is exported to France where it is highly prized by their top chefs.

The Romney is a breed that has its origins in the low lying lands of Kent and Sussex, specifically Romney Marsh. The Romney Marsh is an area of wetland between Kent and Sussex whose economy and landscape was dominated in the 19th century by sheep. Improved methods of pasture management and husbandry meant the marsh could sustain a stock density greater than anywhere else in the world. The Romney Marsh sheep became one of the most successful and important breeds of sheep.

In the 1800s there were as many as a quarter of a million sheep across the Marsh and to look after them, farmers and landlords employed the services of self-employed shepherds to tend their flock and move them around the Marshes. Tough and resilient, these shepherds – known as 'lookers' – would live for long periods away from their family. They knew the Marshes like the back of their hand which allowed them to move flocks around safely and speedily avoiding swamps; waterways and other hazards and knew the few sheltered spots in which to harbour their wards during times of particularly adverse weather. Their knowledge of the Marshes, and remote shelters, also made lookers the ally of many smugglers and it is undoubtedly the case that the relationship was two-way with lookers providing services to smugglers and earning often not inconsiderable rewards in return.

With modern farming methods the need for lookers has now disappeared, although several residents of Lydd and other towns were still employed as 'lookers' until the 1950s. Prior census returns from the 1800s showed a great many Marsh residents classifying themselves as such. Today the only remaining evidence of these strange solitary folk are their weather shelters. The remains of these shelters – known as 'looker's huts' – can still be found dotted around the Marsh. They were typically brick sheds with a chimney and fire to keep the 'looker' and occasionally young or injured sheep warm. At their peak, there would have been hundreds (one figure puts the number at 356) of these huts across Romney Marsh, sadly most are now in dire condition and their number diminishing every year mainly through thoughtless, mindless, vandalism. A few are maintained, notably near Camber, New Romney, Old Romney, St Mary's Bay and Dymchurch and a local community project (the looker's heritage project) has been formed to protect the traditions, memories and these last few buildings. Tragically in the late years of the twentieth century they fell from favour, pushed aside by more intensive farming methods and breeds.

Prior to this, the Romney sheep provided the foundation for the English woollen industry which was the most important export commodity in the middle ages. Their long but dense fleece was highly prized, leading to widespread wool smuggling. Their meat was also highly sought after. Exported to other continents, the Romney is the world's second most economically important sheep breed. With the current change in the agricultural system they have once again established their place in the twenty first century farming. Due to the similar land topography and weather conditions, the Romney breed made an easy transition to New Zealand and the Falkland Islands, where it became quickly established and still remains the predominant breed.

The salt marsh lamb is still produced entirely in the local area, although the breed has spread over the south east. There are currently only four farms, as well as six butchers on the Marsh, united in the Romney Sheep Breeder's Association, greatly decreased from historical numbers.