

Beginners Q&A

These notes are based on an article "wot I wrote" for the Southdown Newsletter published in December 2019 and have been expanded since

The Q and A splits into five sections

[Why should I keep Sheep and why Southdowns?](#)

[Showing](#)

[About Rams](#)

[Records and Performance Recording](#)

[Odds and Sods](#)

Why should I keep Sheep and why Southdowns?

The first reason to ask yourself is "Why keep sheep in the first place?". The usual reasons are:

- I am a commercial farmer and hope to make money from my sheep enterprise
- I have some grass that I need to manage
- I want to have my own home grown lamb
- I want to show sheep
- I want to grow my own wool for spinning
- I like looking at sheep
- I want my family to experience the joys of sheep-keeping
- I enjoy "pedigree" breeding
- I want to sell rams to commercial farmers

Often, it's a mixture of all of these, but it's probably a good idea to have some clarity or purpose. The one area above that I would question is the "wool for spinning". Southdown wool is high quality BUT has a short staple (length) which makes it very tricky to spin and often it has to be blended with another breed to make it possible to spin.

For all the other reasons the Southdown could be a great choice. It is a very docile, easy to handle native lowland breed that can be tightly stocked. It is a good converter of grass to forage, fattens readily off grass, the meat is exceedingly tasty and there are plenty of showing classes around the country.

For the commercial farmer the Southdown is an excellent option - as it is a bit smaller than other terminal sire breeds - for lambing ewe lambs, first time lambers and old girls who perhaps do not have enough milk for large lambs. Due to its lighter weight and easy finishing, the breed is also a good option if you want to get some lambs away early and/or you are worried about grazing running out.

What is your sheep experience like?

Other than having a registered holding number there is no legal requirement preventing anyone from keeping sheep. If you have never kept sheep before, the first rule of livestock keeping is "Where there is livestock, there is deadstock". So be prepared for casualties and on this basis, I

would suggest starting out with three ewes just in case one expires. A lonely sheep is not a happy sheep, after all they are flock animals.

The next thing to appreciate is that, at a small scale, and as a novice and with small numbers you are unlikely to make any money in fact the setting up costs maybe quite expensive and that excludes the purchase of the sheep. You will need a trailer, good fencing, some sheep hurdles, access to water, a vet, a shearer and somewhere to get rid of casualties. There are various medicines and dosing guns, a tagging kit that you will need to buy to keep your sheep alive legal and healthy. Feeding equipment, bottles for orphan lambs, a small barn, more sheep hurdles, some hard feed and winter forage – hay/haylage. You probably don't need these all at once but over the year you will find you need to accumulate most of these... have I put you off?

The next consideration is what breed you are going to keep. Every breed has the same blurb "easy to lamb, finishes on grass" etc. Don't believe it. Whatever they say terminal sire breeds are not as easy to lamb as a commercial crossbred ewe. Even crossbreds can give headaches. In theory the Primitives things like Soays and Hebrideans and hill sheep like the Scottish Blackface may be easier to lamb but I suspect nobody worries about helping them lamb as you can't catch them in the first place.

Also, as a first timer and a pedigree breeder every lamb and ewe is far more precious to you than a commercial farmer with five hundred other ewes, so it is inevitable that you will want to chaperone each lamb out whether it needs help or not.

BUT IT CAN ALL BE IMMENSELY REWARDING IF NOT IN THE FINANCIAL SENSE

If you have kept sheep before you will know all this, all I will reiterate is that a pure breed is not as easy to manage as a cross breed.

How expensive are they? What and how should I buy?

If you have never kept sheep before, do your best to buy some older ewes. The advantage is that the ewe knows what she is doing and if things go wrong, you won't have lost as much money. Older ewes maybe as expensive as shearlings. If a breeder has kept them, it is probably because they are their better or favourite sheep. The breeder will also know that the older ewe is much less hassle than a shearling.

Wherever possible buy locally from a breeder who you feel you can trust, they will be keen for you to do well and will do their best to support you and signpost you to rams etc. You will also get a feel for their type of sheep, the way they are reared and their overall system. You can learn a lot from them as most sheep and breed lore is passed on by word of mouth. A local sale will also minimise stress for the sheep and avoids the adrenaline rush and ego-fest of an auction.

Before visiting do ask for a price list or a guide to prices. I provide my customers with a price list in advance so they can choose what they like, and I warn them about the more expensive ones or remove them as an option.

Unless the breeder is miles away it may be a good idea to leave the trailer behind and let the breeder know that is the situation – bringing a trailer creates a pressure between you both about a "sale". Take the pressure off, if you like and want the sheep agree to buy and offer a deposit say 20-50% of the agreed price.

From July to September a fair number of Southdowns are sold through Society Sales and also at two Unofficial Sales at Thrapston and at Hailsham.

The Society sales can attract some of the very best stock, some beautifully prepared and fat sheep and some extremely high prices... for some sheep. Though many sheep are also not sold. Society sales have "upset prices" minimum prices below which the animal may not be sold. These are published on the Society website and in the sale catalogues and so are useful benchmark of what to expect. However, some breeders will sell for less on farm or at unofficial sales, others will expect a lot more and put a higher reserve on. If you go to an auction and the sheep, you like do not reach or stall at the upset price. Either bid at upset price if you can afford it OR approach the breeder afterwards. Some may sell especially if your offer is only a little less than the upset price. However, there will be breeders who will already have placed a high reserve. You can usually tell they have from where the auctioneer starts the bidding or from the fact that other sheep from the same breeder have gone at well above upset price. These breeders take a Rolls Royce approach they may be very good sheep, but the breeder knows that keeping their prices high limits demand and ensures a premium.

Do check in advance what commercial sheep are selling for especially lambs and cull ewes. Shearlings are harder to check for as the commercial breeding ewe sales are often later in the season.

If you have a good and trusted friend who really knows sheep and is the sort of person who would show you how to trim feet or help with advice on a difficult lambing (their advice might be ring the vet), then do take them with you to help choose the sheep.

If you are going to a sale do your best not to be taken in by the hyperbole in the catalogue or the presentation of the sheep. All the extra weight and beautiful wool will be gone in three months' time. Think of the "presentation" as Christmas wrapping paper and the hyperbole as an estate agents bullshit. What really matters is a sound animal that can breed, a toy that works or there is not a prison next to your new house.

What type of sheep keeper am I really?

After a year or two of sheep keeping you should have a better feel for what you really enjoy about your sheep. This will give you a focus for future development. However, be aware there are some years which may be a disaster but there will better years to come or least not as bad, sheep farmers are rarely optimistic.

Showing

As a pre-cursor to this section, I should warn you that I am not a fan of showing. Although I show my sheep occasionally, I do not enjoy the experience/ embarrassment of showing my sheep. I also lack the skills and patience to correctly prepare and train sheep, also at 6' 3", I do not enjoy bending over or kneeling down to keep sheep (that have not been halter trained) in the correct posture. Finally, I am concerned that to be successful in the showing too many sheep are being overfed. I like to keep my sheep "commercially", so they are tightly stocked in a working condition and clothes.

Having said that some people love showing and enjoy the camaraderie, provided that the rivalries and the pursuit of a red rosette or a championship does not become too intense.

I am interested in showing, but because I work full time, I am not sure I would have enough time?

Showing is time consuming. There is the preparation and feeding as well as the attendance at shows (mainly May-Sept). There are also fat stock shows in November and December.

How do I start showing?

A good starting point is to visit some shows and/or actually show at a small local event (there is nothing like learning by doing). Get the dates, especially entry dates in the diary and work back from that.

What's involved in pre-show preparation?

There is an article by Jonathan Long in the 2018 Southdown Autumn Newsletter (page 19) which describes the comprehensive approach he takes to prepare for showing. Whilst some other breeders take such a thorough approach, it is not always necessary. As I show mainly at local and society shows/sales, I tend to take a minimalist approach thus: I plan roughly what sheep I want to show (and/or sell) and check the dates of the event especially entry dates. Some of the events have quite early closing dates. Others allow entries quite close to the show date e.g. 3 weeks. As I usually only "show" at society sales my own process is based around these two sales in August and September.

(This is what I know I should do, but I don't always. In fact, I have taken late shorn stock to my local show with no prep and come away with seconds and thirds in large mixed classes including many well prepped sheep). I get those showing/sale sheep shorn early e.g. March. I know it seems mad as an outstanding sheep/Southdown should stand out, but appearance matters more than it should. More wool makes the sheep look bigger and, when trimming, gives more to work with. About 2-3 months before the planned event, I separate the "show team" out, and re-check the basics: feet, teeth, udder/testicles and general "style" and condition. I will probably lightly trim feet if they need it. The sheep are then preferentially fed. This usually means the best quality grazing available and some hard grub c. 200-300 g/day (depending on animal size (i.e. less for lambs). About 14 days before the show, I will re-check their feet and then a week or so before they are due to be trimmed, they are washed.

The sheep are then trimmed – professionally – I have the kit and can do a bit of light trimming but I have not yet acquired sufficient topiary skills. Trimming costs between £20-35/head and there may be a mileage/call out charge if the trimmer has to come a long way or has to do only a few sheep. Trimming needs to be done about a week or less before the event. The expert topiarists will be doing this on the day before and some more on the day... some of which I suspect is nerves or perhaps they would rather talk to their sheep than their rivals! If you want to keep the sheep clean post trimming it may be good to get coats/covers and change the diet to hay to minimise the risk of soiling the wool.

Does showing affect prices?

It would I think be fair to say that at the Society's two major sales Worcester in August and Melton Mowbray, in September, that animals with rosettes especially first prize and show

champions attract a premium price. I would also suggest that animals in show condition i.e. prepared and groomed will sell and/or sell better than sheep fresh from the field.

Do you have to wash and trim to show Southdowns?

No, it is not compulsory but nearly everyone does. It is an advert for the breed and their flock. However, it is not always necessary to conduct a Rolls Royce job. It is less likely that a judge will select a poorly prepared sheep as the first prize winner, unless the class is very small and/or the primed sheep has some very obvious and fundamental flaws. Do watch out though, a few shows specify "untrimmed" sheep.

How can I be successful in the showing?

Put succinctly to me by one respected judge and former breeder, success in the show ring depends on three things: good sheep, good preparation and good showmanship. And another senior judge would add a big "good sheep" will often win over a smaller "good sheep". Another observation is that a judge that has their own flock will be looking - assuming the sheep is "sound" - for sheep that matches their own style and preference. So, when choosing sheep for each show think about the type of sheep the judge is likely to prefer. A final observation is that halter training will make life easier for you, other exhibitors and the judge. So, think carefully about whether you want to take your very best but stropky ram who will pull you around the ring and knock the judge over or a gentle obedient chap who will only knock the judge over if he doesn't give you a rosette!

What is involved in showmanship?

Being crap at this I am not sure, but I think it involves making sure your sheep shows itself off to its best advantage, gently nudging feet, moving the head for it to stand well, walking it evenly. Keep the animal under control and keep an eye on the judge to ensure that if they are looking at your direction the sheep is showing itself off to best advantage. Stay alert to what is going on in the ring – don't daydream, stare blankly into space, wave at friends start using your phone (it should be on silent). Be presentable yourself, wear a tie and white coat and your sheep's allocated number, arrive at the ring promptly hopefully with a clean correctly fitted halter attached to a sheep. Speak when you are spoken to. Some judges are polite and friendly tho' many say nothing and appear rude. That may have been how they have been taught to behave (old school judging was like that), they could be shy and/or not know you. Some judges can make up their mind quickly almost as you walk in the ring others can take ages. Congratulate the winner and if practical other rosette winners. You don't need to shake hands just a "well done" will do. When leaving the showing let the champion first prize winner go first. After the judging has finished do seek out the judge and get some feedback. Do not question their judgement. The judge like the referee or the umpire is always right. Do ask them if they picked up any faults in your sheep, what could be done to improve your sheep and what was special about the winner. If they have time they MAY even be able to go through your sheep with you, however please recognise the judge may be knackered will have looked at lots of sheep in other classes and just want to escape to a nice cup of tea or a stiff gin!

About Rams

For pedigree breeders ram choice and care is really really important and a high priority for flock development as after all the flock will be retaining that ram's progeny, with his good (and maybe bad points?) into future generations. For a commercial farmer they will choose a particular terminal sire breed to suit their market and then for most of the year ignore, neglect or forget about the rams until a week or so before tupping as their focus will be on finishing lambs. I may be being a bit harsh, but ram care and maintenance is nothing like that of a pedigree breeder. For a commercial farmer after (and possibly before) terminal sire breed ram fertility is the next most important factor. The problem is that ram fertility is volatile (See next question about infertility)

How often are rams infertile?

A quick Google suggests that as many as 20% of rams may be infertile or sub-fertile. On this basis it is a good idea to have some cover and/or rotate rams. Ram fertility can fluctuate over time. I have had a ram that was sub-fertile when tested and then on the third cycle have an 80% conception rate. On another occasion I had a ram that was fertile as a shearling but in the second year completely infertile. It is a very fluid matter and difficult to predict. Having watched ram fertility tests it's something I will only organise if there is a clear doubt and that it's a ram I would like to retain. While it is possible to do a fertility test at the beginning of the season or before sale it is not very reliable as it only proves that on the date of the test the ram was fertile. The thing is ram's health is a bit more sensitive than their nature suggests and their sperm is especially sensitive to infections and raised body temperature.

Would a Southdown ram be happy with 10 ewes?

The glib answer is that a Southdown ram would be happy to be bought and have his head scratched. Yes, though of course he would be happier with larger numbers. Some of my ewes are sponged to synchronise oestrous, so I mate them in groups of up to 10 (usually 5-8). But later in the season they are grouped in 10s-30s depending on my breeding plan. The rams are then rotated for the second cycle to cover for any fertility issues. Very occasionally a ram may jump a fence to reach a ewe in season, but usually they want to stay with their own breeding group... and/or stand at the edge of the field watching the adjacent ram who is busy watching him.

Can I use a ram lamb ?

Yes but...

- a) Don't give him too many ewes perhaps twenty if not sponged and only 4-5 if sponged.
- b) He will run around like a lunatic when he is first put in (first time shearlings will also go crazy and get breathless). They do not realise that it is much easier to wait until the ewes come into season at which point they will all cluster around him, and he will have a sleepless night or too and his testicles will ache (so I am told).
- c) It will stunt his growth a bit so when he has done the work do give him some extra TLC and grub.

Do people rent out rams?

Yes, a number of breeders rent out rams or provide board and lodging to visiting ewes. This is helpful in allowing smaller flocks to get access to - hopefully - better genetics than they can afford. It also makes life simpler for the smaller flocks as they don't need a separate "ram field".

A typical hire cost is £50-60 for the first five ewes and £5-7/ewe thereafter (NB VAT has to be added). This is usually for 4-6 weeks hire and done on the basis that the hirer collects and returns the ram. Thus, the hire cost for a 10 ewe flock would be £75-£130.

If you are thinking of buying ewes in the autumn/winter do, consider asking the breeder to supply them tupped.

Records and Performance Recording

Why record?

Several reasons:

- There is a legal obligation to record some essential information,
- If you are a pedigree breeder you will need to know parentage, birth details, sex and identity
- As a farming enterprise you should know how you are doing in terms of output
- As a business you will need financial records to see how much money you are losing and to claim back VAT. (Farmers are mostly VAT beneficiaries)

What legal records do I need to keep?

- Movement records of sheep on and off including a movement book as well as individual movement forms
- Details of tagging and replacement tags
- Medicine records for both veterinary and farm administered treatment – dates of treatment which animals treated reasons for treatment, batch no's
- December return: sheepkeepers have to complete an annual return of the number of head on each of their holdings

Basic Performance Recording

Any business should know how it is doing although the ultimate indicator of performance is usually the balance sheet. For sheep farmers Key Performance Indicators (KPIs): lambing percentage, stocking rate, ewe replacement rate, lamb sales, weights and grades and age of lamb at sale. There are many other indicators complete with definitions on the AHDB website [here](#). My own background and training dealing with dairy farmers as well as beef/sheep farmers highlighted the importance of **stocking rate**. This is something that is not easy to calculate (which is probably why AHDB no longer suggest it for sheep farmers!) I rarely meet a sheep farmer who knows this figure, while pedigree breeders are not interested in this figure at all as all they want is for their sheep to grow well and look good!

What is Signet Performance Recording?

Signet Performance recording is a breeding and assessment tool that uses genetic information and measurements of weight, muscle and fat to identify superior breeding stock. The service is provided by Signet Breeding Services who are part of the AHDB (once upon known as EBLEX and before the MLC).

Who does the Signet recording measurements, is a vet involved?

Almost all the measurements are done by the breeder, however the “scanning visit” is conducted by an AHDB technician... a lot cheaper than a vet and more competent/experienced in this type of scanning (measuring the fat and eye muscle content over the rib). The technician also has the specialist equipment needed. Not all flocks that record are scanned every year – most do but some take a year off for logistical reasons. Also, some sheep may be off the farm or hiding in a hedge and thus miss their scanning. Signet records for each animal will show if the animal has been scanned. If you are buying from a Signet recorded flock, they will have access to these records and can provide them if you ask.

Does it cost more to buy a Signet recorded animal ?

Yes and No. For example, my best performing ewes e.g. in the top 10% of the breed are worth more to me than my “average” ewes so I will expect a premium for them. Likewise, if I want to buy a top performing animal I will be prepared to pay more for that animal. Other breeders price their animals differently and their prices may take account of their flock’s reputation and history, the rarity value of their genetics etc.

What is involved with Signet recording?

Currently c. 6 flocks record through Signet. Breeder’s aims in recording are usually two-fold:

1. to identify superior performing sheep within their own (and other) flocks i.e. grow faster have better muscle: fat ratio, maternal ability etc... For example, answering the age-old questions such as “is it better to keep a big single or a smaller twin?” and/or “which twin should I keep?”.
2. to be able to promote the Southdown as a Terminal Sires to commercial flocks who should (in theory at least) want a high performing ram to get better faster growing lambs out of them. And “in theory” again farmers and breeders should be willing to pay more for a ram with good performance figures. Speaking personally, I have bought and not bought rams from certain breeders because of their performance figures or lack of performance data.

Which flocks choose to record?

It is mainly larger flocks > 20 ewes that record. This is principally due to the economics i.e. the cost of recording. In 2025 the annual fee is £75 per breeder plus £2/ewe for the first 50 ewes, £1.75/ewe (51-150 ewes), £0.75/ewe (151-300 ewes), £0.25/ewe (301+ ewes). There is an additional charge for ultrasound scanning and independent weight verification at 16-21 weeks. This is the minimum visit fee (which covers the first 100 lambs in the flock) of £275/visit plus VAT. Thereafter the headage rate for every lamb over 100 lambs is £2.50/head (plus VAT). Some larger flocks do not record because as well as the costs there is additional paperwork and recording e.g. eight-week weights etc

Odds and Sods

How do I get better quality sheep*?

That's a can of worms! What does one mean by a "better quality sheep"? Is it about lamb/meat production over a lifetime or is it about a good specimen? For the purpose of this question, I will focus on the "showing" elements.

First of all, make sure the sheep are physically good sheep. Though written primarily to support Southdown Sheep Society Sales, the Minimum Standards and Recommendations on the Society website are a good starting point. Additional guidance is in preparation but still not yet available. This will be more about the physical attributes/structure of the animal and applies to all sheep whatever the breed. When selecting my lambs for retention I will be looking at mouth/teeth, feet, testicles or teats and general condition. (I also take account of its life experience, pedigree and performance data).

Then, having established that the animal is a "good sheep" have a look at how well the animal meets the "breed description and characteristics". There is also a third factor that will become apparent as you show. This is the "charisma" or star quality: the look, "cat-walk style" and arrogance of the animal. Inevitably many aspects of the breed are down to personal choice – there are many shades of mouse brown - so ultimately you need to decide what type of Southdown you like. I am not sure there is that much satisfaction – unless winning is all that matters - in showing sheep and winning rosettes if you think the animal looks like a llama, bat or an elephant. Remember that the sheep that wins its class is the one that one judge thinks is the best on that day in that group of sheep. Different judges will choose different sheep and on a different day the same judge may prefer another sheep.

*Probably the best way of getting better quality sheep is to keep asking questions and learn the basics of sheep keeping from other shepherds and sheep keepers and thus build your own experience and judgement. Possession of show rosettes is probably a good indication that the sheep are "better than"... but that is not an indication that a sheep is "good quality". Besides many breeders have very good sheep but rarely if ever show.

What do most breeders do with their ram lambs?

Most ram lambs go to the butcher. In my flock I castrate any small lambs (<3kg at birth) that I think will take too long to finish i.e. more than 8 months. This is usually about 10-15 out of 50-60 ram lambs. I make selections of ram lambs to register based on their performance, looks and genetics. Out of my ram lambs this means I keep 7-10 each year. I expect/ hope to sell 50-75% of these, some I may retain. Surplus unsold shearling rams are sent to slaughter. Most breeders keep too many rams. Less than 50% of ram lambs that are registered ever go on to do any work.

How do breeders sell their surplus stock?

Breeders will do a mixture of society auctions and sales off the farm. Except possibly in Sussex and Kent, it is unlikely that Southdowns will do well in general auctions for breeding stock. Some breeders organise an occasional auction for themselves. Some breeders only ever sell off the

farm. Historically some breeders have taken stock to NSA ram sales, but I have not seen any going for some time.

How long does it take to reach a kill weight?

Southdown “finished” lamb liveweights – depending on the breed “type” - vary from 32-44kg. Based on a 50% killing out percentage (animals on grass and smaller animals will have a lower KO% e.g. 40-42%), this gives a carcass weight of 16-22kg. How long it takes a lamb to reach a finished weight depends on both nutrition and the breed “type”. The smaller traditional ones, ready at 32-36kg, will finish faster than the larger leaner types. Both will finish more quickly with better grub. My first lambs usually weighing c. 34-36kg usually go at 140-150 days. However, my larger lambs tend to go at c.180 days while in a bad year the less thrifty lambs may need 250 days or more. An average for most of my lambs in a reasonable year would be 180 days.