

The Different Types of Southdown – A Beginners Guide

This is an article originally titled “Our Quadrophenic, Diverse and Happy Breed” written by Southdown breeder Patrick Goldsworthy for the Southdown Newsletter November 2017. It was updated in Dec 2020 and June 2022 with some tweaks.

In any “pure breed”, when you get your eye in, there is quite a lot of diversity and variation from the breed description in the variety of phenotypes (“looks”). Much of this variation will be down to personal choice and interpretation but it will also be a reflection of historic and recent breeding decisions. For the Southdown this is no different and recent pedigree analysis and debate amongst breeders has highlighted this variation.

Breed History

So first off, a reminder of Southdown history. During the late 19th and 20th century probably until the 1950s, Southdowns were the pre-eminent Terminal Sire breed widely used for crossing onto lowland meat producing half-breds. In the early days, and until the 1960s, the ram buyer’s principal selection criteria were what looked good in the show ring. This meant that short, fat, compact and blocky sheep were selected. Then fashion changed, and larger and then leaner sheep became the name of the game so initially the Southdown lost out to the Suffolk (which also gave the useful option of a breeding cross) and latterly Texel and Beltex. This led to a rapid decline in the breed and listing by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) soon after its inception in 1973. Southdowns remained under the auspices of the RBST for over 30 years only coming off their Watchlist in 2007.

Imports in the latter half of the 20th Century

In the 1960s, Southdown breeders tried to meet the demand from commercial flocks for larger Southdowns by introducing external genes to “improve the breed” using Dorset Downs, Suffolks and some New Zealand rams. Two French sires (Bordier 031 and Thomas 058) were brought in by the Southdown Sheep Society in 1971. *According to the online flock book (acc.fb)* Bordier 031 sired 52 registered progeny between 1972 and 1976 and Thomas 058 sired 89 over the same time period. Then in the late seventies, working with renowned Australian breeder the late Geoff Baker (Southern Pastures) and recognising that the Aussies and Kiwis knew a thing or two about commercial lamb production (as well as starting off with some original Southdowns in the 19th century) the late Philip Whitcombe brought over Southern Hemisphere¹ genetics to his Greencross and then Southern Cross flocks. However, numbers continued to decline, and with the growing risk of inbreeding, more French stock – known as Historic French - were bought in during the late eighties, notably but not exclusively by the Steepdown flock: the ram, Joseph Thomas (FR647), had many offspring (99 registered *acc.fb*).

¹ The vast majority of Southern Hemisphere imports came from New Zealand however a few came from Australia.

21st Century Modern French Imports

In the 21st century there has been a plethora of French imports known as Modern French. For some breeders there has been concern about the recent French imports. I certainly remember reading, on the old society website, a report from a member describing the apparent mixing – accidental or deliberate - of different breeds of tups (Vendéen?, Charollais?) amongst some French Southdown flocks... so there is a suspicion, for some, over the “purity” of some French imports²; matters are not helped by the French only requiring a three-generation pedigree³. Please note (EU) health rules make it virtually impossible to import semen from the latest New Zealand breeding lines although a few straws of some older (e.g., 1997) NZ rams are still around and being used by some breeders.

Pedigree Analysis

An investigation into historic pedigrees in 2017 by Grassroots for the Southdown Sheep Society showed that almost all Southdowns – whatever they look like - have some Historic French genetics and some of the earlier Southern Hemisphere genetics, even so the breed has ended up with different phenotypes; in my 10 (now 15!) years of keeping Southdowns and with the benefit of Signet Recording, I have had the opportunity to see how these different strains play out thus:

Traditional

These are largely based on the historic English population that was around in the fifties and sixties. None are “pure”, and all will have a proportion (5-20%) of New Zealand and Historic French, usually a blend of both. Importantly for some breeders they do not have any Modern French genetics, but to ensure this great care needs to be taken in tracing back pedigrees through 8 generations or more to identify the true origins as many long-established flocks have used a range of imported tups.



Figure 1 Spratton Wren SB

To look at they have the charming teddy bear heads, short woolly ears, shorter woolly legs, a very placid temperament – possibly lazy – and finish well on grass. They are smaller, can be too short in the body and can get too fat. Lambs tend to have a very good conformation (a great gigot) and at 21 weeks weigh about 32-36kg. These are often too small for the modern commercial farmer who is looking for

² Please note French breeders also import English Southdowns

³ However, if you ask – and you should ask - responsible breeders ought to be able to provide you with a fuller pedigree. They should have this information as they too will want to know more about the history of the stock they are importing.

lambs to be 40-44kg and they potentially can get over fat for modern tastes if not watched closely.

Southern Hemisphere

To look at, these are not as attractive and with higher proportions (>25%) of Southern Hemisphere breeding can look like llamas as shearlings! Their heads are narrower, ears lower set and more inclined to point forward and the wool a little longer, thinner and lankier but, they have length, height and size, all things that a commercial farmer want. There are reports (though there is no hard data on this) that their progeny are easier to lamb as their legs are thinner and longer, while lambs find it easier to suckle the taller NZ cross ewe. Likewise,



Figure 2 Waidale 872-14 photo courtesy of Ike Williams

anecdotally there is a little bit more vim in the lambs and the ewes... these are the ones that are a bit more scatty to round up and as rams, a bit more aggressive (but then there are rams and rams). They can cross very well onto a Traditional ewe, giving more length and height: a combination that is closer to what commercial farmers want. However, close inspection of recording data shows that they tend to be fatter and have less muscle than would be expected. In practice they do take longer to finish, and don't hold condition as well but are heavier (and leaner than the Traditional) reaching 42-44kg.

Modern French

Vary quite a lot in looks but often look closer to the Traditional type though their ears may be longer, heads and legs have less/no wool and some heads are more "domed", and backsides are more rounded. In temperament they seem a bit more sparky than the Traditional but not as feisty as the Southern Hemisphere. They have good width, are very well muscled, grow quickly and are a little taller than the Traditional. Their wool seems more creamy in colour and not as dense. Looking at performance recording data, most of the



Figure 3 Ridings Daniel

French rams are very average and no better than their British counterparts, however one import – Benoit FR215680-90019 (born 2009) – 124 progeny *acc.fb* whose sons have been used quite widely of late has been a quite exceptional tup producing extremely well-muscled very lean lambs. The flock book also shows the influence of another French tup, The Frog TC 4028 (born 2003) has spread even further with many flocks having purchased his progeny - 197 progeny *acc.fb*. A concern with some of the French lines is that they can be quite lean and so may need some hard

grub to finish. Size wise these also produce lambs around the 42-44kg mark and currently a high proportion of rosette winners have these Modern French genetics.

Both Southern Hemisphere and Modern French don't hold condition as well, but seem to milk better in the summer- possibly milking off their back. Conversely, Traditionals cope better with short grass supply and always seem to be fat but may not milk as well though they can be got away early off grass albeit at a lighter weight. The table below summarises - the more blobs the better - the different attributes of each strain.

Trait	Traditional	Southern Hemisphere	Modern French
Looks	*****	**	****
Overall Conformation	*****	***	*****
Lambing Ease	**	***	**
Lamb Vigour	***	****	***
Milkiness	**	****	***
Maternal ability	***	****	***
Adult Weight	**	*****	****
Gigot/Backend	****	**	*****
Length	***	*****	****
Width	****	***	****
Ease of finishing	*****	***	***

Does it matter?

It all depends why you are wanting to keep Southdowns. Clearly the most important point is that your sheep give you pleasure: staying alive, upright and rearing lambs for many years. If you want to change your flock – get bigger lambs, milkier ewes, reduce the risk of inbreeding, win rosettes (judges tend to pick the bigger ones), have woollier ears or sell rams to commercial farmers then there are breeders who have favoured the different strains that you can use to improve your flock...

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