

What's not to like?

The Charmoise Hill is small, hardy, lambs easily and also boasts first-class commercial conformation and so deserves a fan base among the smallholding community, finds **Tim Tyne**, who also waxes lyrical about the Romney Marsh

For many years I have been aware of the interesting Charmoise Hill, a Continental breed that is quietly making its mark here in Britain. However, it wasn't until very recently, when a friend asked me to procure some Charmoise Hill rams for him from a breeder who I was planning to meet up with, that I actually had cause to handle and evaluate individuals of the breed. I now have three Charmoise rams grazing in one of my paddocks, where they will remain until I deliver them to my friend shortly. Meanwhile, I am giving a lot of thought to their place within UK agriculture, and the smallholding sector in particular.

Being so familiar, as we all are, with the physical characteristics of the native upland breeds of the UK (which, let's face it, do incline towards scrawniness), to see the Charmoise described as a 'hill' breed, but with the boxy conformation of a Continental terminal sire, throws us into a bit of confusion. Yet there



Charmoise rams. The Charmoise Hill is a relatively small breed, with ewes weighing in at 50-60kg, and rams a bit heavier at 80-100kg

must be some truth in the description, for the Charmoise has found itself at home on upland farms in Wales where, thriving on low-input forage based systems, it has proved itself to be ideal for crossing onto ewe lambs of the Welsh Mountain breed.

FACT OR FICTION?
Apparently, one of the early exponents of the breed in the UK eventually got banned

from entering Charmoise lambs into the Hill & Upland section in carcass competitions. Against our native hill breeds, the Charmoise simply couldn't lose, and other competitors soon got fed up with it and threatened to boycott the events.

A GLANCE BACK IN HISTORY
One of my main interests lies in the often unexpected

historical links between breeds that nowadays we consider to be quite separate. The Charmoise Hill is no exception. A quick flick through the section on French breeds in my copy of William Youatt's book *Sheep: Their Breeds, Managements and Diseases*, written in 1837, brings up a reference to the fact that a British traveller in France at that time may think that he recognises the sheep, ▶



The conformation of these Charmoise rams is not what is expected in a hill breed

BREED DESCRIPTION

The Charmoise Hill is a relatively small breed, with ewes weighing in at 50-60kg, and rams a bit heavier at 80-100kg.

The Charmoise Hill has the ability to breed out of season.

The short, deep body and

fine bone structure give them a very high killing out percentage, with the small head and wedge-shaped shoulders making them easy lambers

(hence their popularity for crossing with ewe lambs).

Their tight fleece should be white throughout.

They have a very distinctive facial appearance, with small ears, large, prominent eyes and a pink nose.

The breed is known to be hardy and will thrive in harsh conditions and on poor quality pasture with very little attention.

due to them having similar characteristics to those of his native country, and in this surmise he isn't altogether wrong for, as William Youatt explains, the local breeds had been improved by crossing with a type of sheep introduced from Kent, the Romney Marsh.

Turning now to the website of the Charmoise Hill Sheep Society, I find that the Charmoise breed was developed in the latter part of the 18th century in the Loir et Cher region of France by crossing the local upland breeds with Kentish rams imported from England. So there you have it! Another unexpected link between two very different breeds. Subsequently, the Charmoise Hill sheep were used in the development of the Charollais, the Rouge de L'Ouest (which was originally milked for the production of Camembert cheese) and the Bleu du Maine. It was from the Charmoise genetics that these three better known breeds derived their superior conformation and carcass qualities, for which the Charollais in particular is renowned to the extent that it now commands 20% of the UK terminal sire market. Meanwhile, the Romney Marsh is considered to be a 'disappearing' breed in the UK, and Charmoise Hill numbers are declining in France.

PERFECT SHEEP?

Smallholders are, on the whole, great enthusiasts for traditional native sheep breeds and are responsible

for bringing many back from the brink of extinction. This is a wonderful thing to do, if you can afford to do it, but what if you want your smallholding activities to be financially justifiable? Rare breeds became rare for the simple reason that they are no longer commercially competitive. This is particularly the case with the primitive types. The primitive breeds have many qualities that ought to make them economically viable, such as good maternal instincts, milkiness and the ability to thrive without costly inputs, but they are slow growing and tend to have poor conformation. They are fine for niche marketing purposes, but not so good for mainstream sales.

The sensible solution (both economically, and also to safeguard the future of the breed) would be to mate only the very best ewes in the flock to a ram of the same type (enough to provide flock replacements, and some pedigree stock for sale), with the remainder being crossed with a terminal sire to produce lambs for slaughter. But therein lies the dilemma: most terminal sire breeds are simply too big to use on primitive ewes, resulting in lambing difficulties, and the lambs, when they are born, may lack the vigour required to thrive under a low-input system. Enter the Charmoise Hill: small, hardy and easy lambing and yet with first-class commercial conformation. Possibly the perfect terminal sire for use on primitive breeds. What's not to like?

“The Charmoise Hill has a very distinctive facial appearance, with small ears, large eyes and a pink nose”



Marsh marvels

The Romney marsh breed of sheep, or Romneys as they are called nowadays, originates from the Kent marshes, which at one time were the tightest stocked sheep pastures in the world. In 1939, it was recorded that there were around 200,000 sheep living on the marsh at Romney. As a result of having developed in such a wet, exposed environment and under such intensive grazing conditions, this hardy lustre-wool breed is said to be resistant to foot-rot and to many internal parasites. The history of Romney sheep can be traced back to mediaeval times, and they undoubtedly descend in part from the longwool types originally introduced to Britain by the Romans.

Thanks to its high quality fleece, the breed thrived during the boom years of the wool industry, expanding its range into the rest of the South East of England and becoming known simply as Kent sheep. However, wool prices in England fell sharply at the beginning of the 16th century, which led to traders exporting increasingly

large amounts of raw fleece to the Continent where the textiles industry was better organised than in Britain. A law passed in 1660 banned these exports, with the result that the Kent marshes, lying so conveniently close to France, became the centre of a thriving trade in contraband. Specialist wool smugglers known as 'owlers' used the Romney marsh as their principal point of departure with shipments of fleeces, subsequently making the return journey laden with brandy and fabrics. Troops were despatched to the marsh in 1693 in an attempt to curb the trade. The area became the scene of a long-running conflict between excise men and smugglers, and it wasn't until 1696, following rioting in Rye, that the government began to get the upper hand. Despite this turning of the tide, the smuggling continued, albeit less prominently, right up to and throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. In addition to wool, sheep from the Kent marshes were also smuggled across the Channel during the period



Romney ewes with lambs at foot

BREED DESCRIPTION

The Romney is a fairly large sheep in general terms (ewes 85kg, rams 110kg), although probably about middle size within the longwool types.

It produces a heavy, white fleece (up to 10kg from an adult ram, although more typically 4-5kg) which is one of best quality wools of all of the UK breeds. Had wool remained the valuable commodity that it once was then Romney sheep (or crossbred derivatives of the Romney) would undoubtedly be at the forefront of the UK agricultural industry today. As it is, there are a few very successful large-scale Romney flocks in the UK, but the breed doesn't have the strong following that it undoubtedly deserves.

The Romney has a wide, level-topped head with no trace of horns or dark hair on the poll.

The nostrils (and hooves)

should be black, with the skin over the body being pink.

The breed is renowned for its foraging ability and so Romneys are ideally suited to grass-based farming systems that don't rely heavily on purchased feeds.

They are an easy breed to contain, meaning that fencing requirements are minimal.

The ewes make excellent mothers, although prolificacy, at 175%, is a little on the low side for a breed of this type.

The meat from Romney lambs reared in their traditional marshland environment is now marketed as Romney Salt Marsh Lamb. This rich, sweet-flavoured meat is available from farm shops and through specialist butchers in Kent. Ironically, a significant proportion of it is also exported to France!



Romney ewes make excellent mothers, although prolificacy, at 175%, is a little on the low side for a breed of this type

that trade with France was forbidden, which ties in very nicely with the story concerning the origins of the Charmoise Hill breed.

During the early years of the 19th century a consignment of Romney sheep were shipped to New Zealand, where the climate suited them very well. They're now New Zealand's predominant breed. Romneys have also been exported to more than 40 other countries (including Australia, Patagonia, Canada, Brazil, Portugal,

the Falkland Islands and the US), with the result that they have often been referred to as the best known sheep in the world - the breed on which the sun never sets!

DID YOU KNOW?

Romney Marsh sheep were at one time crossed with Lleyr rams to produce a commercial crossbred ewe known as the Kent Halfbred. I gleaned that little snippet of information from the February 1984 issue of this magazine, and it has stuck in

ROMNEY SHEEP IN COUNTRY SMALLHOLDING

Romney Marsh sheep featured regularly in early 1980s issues of this very magazine as the sheep writer at that time, John Bartelous, kept a commercial flock of 300-350 Romney ewes on a 60-acre holding in Devon. Eventually he

rented another two farms in Cornwall, and his pedigree Romney flock expanded to around 3,000 animals. In 1985 he won both the male and the female Romney Championships at the Royal Show. He also ran lambing and sheep husbandry

courses for smallholders, and started a mail-order business selling shepherding sundries such as dagging shears, marker sprays and raddle harnesses. In fact, I purchased items from the Peasridge Sheep Catalogue myself at that time. Now,

some 35 years later, the livestock equipment side of the Peasridge business has faded away, and the company currently specialises in animal grooming clippers. I wonder if they still read this magazine? ■

PICTURES: JULIE LUKEHURST



All about Tim Tyne

Career smallholder Tim Tyne was brought up on an eight-acre holding in East Anglia. He studied agriculture at Aberystwyth and then spent a few years living self-sufficiently on an offshore island. He now farms on a small scale in North Wales together with his wife, Dot, and their three children. Tim believes passionately that smallholding should be a financially viable lifestyle choice for young families.