

## Counting Sheep



### **What is the big picture for sheep in the crofting counties?**

*This project sets out to record the sheep in the crofting areas around Crofting Connections schools. With your help we will build a picture of shepherding in the crofting counties, on crofts, farms or estates, based on and including the*

*information suggested below.*

*In addition, using the expressive arts, - drawing, painting, collage, photography, film, song, story, poetry (original or collected, including local language and dialect), we will put together an actual and virtual exhibition celebrating the history, culture and skills of crofters and shepherds in the Highlands and Islands.*

<p><b>Where?</b> You choose what area to cover:  <i>Will it be the croft or farm next door to the school, the local crofting township or the grazing area of the local stock club?</i>  <i>Is your school in a clearly defined area such as an island or peninsula, or will you collaborate with other schools in your ASG to build up a bigger picture?</i>  <i>Can you provide a map of the area where you do your count?</i></p>	
<p><b>How?</b> You choose how you will do the count:  <b>Summer after lambing is a good time to count sheep.</b>  <i>How many ewes, rams and lambs?</i>  <i>Will you lean over a gate and count as many as you can see?</i>  <i>Will you ask the crofter, farmer or grazings clerk?</i>  <i>What are the local words for male and female sheep at different</i></p>	

<p>ages?  <i>Can you work out the return for the shepherd or crofter of singles, twins and triplets? An exercise in percentages?</i></p>	
<p><b>What breed?</b> <i>Let us know what breed or breeds are in the flock. Are they native or even rare breeds or are they more commercial breeds? Are they cross-bred? What are the reasons for cross-breeding the sheep?</i></p>	
<p><b>What feed?</b> <i>Where do the sheep graze, in summer and winter? Do they move from the hills to lower ground in the winter or to small islands in the summer? Do they get any other supplementary feed? Do they have a special diet such as heather or seaweed?</i></p>	
<p><b>Gathering</b> - <i>How does the shepherd or crofter move the sheep? Does he or she use a dog, a quad bike, a bucket or get together with neighbours? Are they transported in a trailer, or a boat? What does the fank or sheepfold look like in your area?</i></p>	
<p><b>What is the sheep calendar for your area?</b>  <i>When is scanning, lambing, dosing, shearing, going to the sales or other tasks? Can you make a calendar of the tasks of the crofters and shepherds who look after the sheep you have counted?</i></p>	
<p><b>What is the language of shepherding in your area?</b>  <i>There are many different words in Gaelic, Scots and the Northern dialects to name different ages of male and female sheep and also the numerous tasks associated with keeping sheep. Can you give us a glossary of terms used for sheep you have counted?</i></p>	

**Products:**

*What are the products from the sheep you have counted?*

*Lamb or mutton? When is the new season for this breed?*

*Are meat products processed locally, such as haggis and reestit mutton or mutton ham?*

*Where are these products sold?*

*What about milking sheep?*

*There are not many milk sheep in Scotland now, but they used to contribute to the crofter's diet.*

*What about the fleeces?*

*Who does the shearing?*

*Do they go to the Wool Marketing Board?*

*Are they used by local spinners?*

*Is the wool best for knitting, tweed, carpets, insulation or even killing slugs? [See our tools and equipment list for a clue]*

*Let us know if you have done or are you planning to do a project on wool.*



# Crofting Connections: Studying Sheep

## History

Sheep are closely associated with the history of crofting. Estate landlords throughout the Highlands and Islands cleared crofters from much of their land to coastal areas with poorer land in order to make room for more profitable sheep farms, hunting estates and forestry. Some crofters were encouraged or forced to emigrate. Shepherds coming up from the Borders with Blackface and then Cheviot sheep, took over the best land, in the name of 'agricultural improvements'. The small, hardy, native sheep breeds of the crofters prior to the Clearances, were kept mainly for ewe's milk and wool. These breeds have survived in the peripheral areas – mostly the islands. Their meat is now highly valued for its flavour and for being rich in Omega 3 fatty acids and their wool is undergoing a resurgence of popularity for its colours and properties for either cloth, especially tweed, or knitting.

## Reference

*Good social history can be read in:*

Go Listen to the Crofters by A. D. Cameron

Desperate Journey by Kathleen Fidler

*These are memoirs of 20<sup>th</sup> Century childhoods:*

The Heart is Highland: Memories of a Childhood in a Scottish Glen by Maisie Steven

A school in the Hills by Katharine Stewart

A Croft in the Hills by Katherine Stewart

## Sheep as Food

Crofters' staple diet was very basic, hearty food and meat was only occasionally consumed. When it was eaten it was in the form of mutton with barley and vegetables cooked in one pot over the croft house fire or mutton was also preserved by salting.

## Reference

The Good Scots Diet by Maisie Steven Pg 61

A Caledonian Feast by Annette Hope Pgs 124 & 141

## Wool

Processing wool around the hearth was also part of the provision of basic needs for the family – crofters traditionally produced their own food, shelter, clothing and energy from the local landscape. And telling stories or sharing news was also a part of that. What better way to study this year of [Scotland's History, Heritage and Archaeology](#)?



Today the famous wool product of Scotland, [Harris Tweed](#), has gone from being associated solely with hard wearing, durable, outdoor clothing to fashionable must-have articles, available in a variety of colours and used for everything from bags and keyrings to wedding bouquets and hooded tops. Small-scale processors throughout the country such as [North Ronaldsay Mill](#) in Orkney, [Knockando Mill](#) in Moray, [Uist Mill](#), [Jamieson and Smith](#) Wool Brokers in Shetland are active destinations not only for visitors but employment in an industry until 10 years ago was in decline.



## Other links for learning about sheep

[http://www.snipview.com/q/Sheep breeds originating in Scotland](http://www.snipview.com/q/Sheep%20breeds%20originating%20in%20Scotland)

<http://www.bahs.org.uk/AGHR/ARTICLES/27n1a3.pdf>

<http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk/know-your-sheep/>

<http://www.britishwoollearning.com/>

## Some hardy breeds of sheep suited to Crofting



*Scottish Blackface* are one of the hardiest sheep breeds in the country and are the backbone of the Scottish sheep industry. All Blackface's are horned, with black or black and white face and legs. The fleece can vary from short, fine wool used for carpets and tweeds to strong coarse, which is mainly sold for the Italian mattress trade. <http://www.scottish-blackface.co.uk/>



*Shetland* sheep come in a wide variety of colours from white through grey, fawn, brown to almost black as well as mixtures of these. Tough, hardy and fine-boned, the Shetland is renowned for the quality of its wool with Shetland knitwear being world famous. It has very high quality lean meat with outstanding flavour and fine texture. <http://www.shetland-sheep.org.uk/>



*North Ronaldsay* sheep are kept on the seaward side of North Ronaldsay in Orkney. They are the only animals in the world aside from a certain Galapagon lizard to be able to subsist entirely on seaweed. They have double-layered fleece with a very coarse outer-wool, and an extremely fine, soft inner-wool. <https://www.slowfood.org.uk/ff-products/north-ronaldsay-sheep/>



*Soay* sheep are smaller than other sheep. They come from St Kilda. They are excellent mothers and are able to lamb by themselves. They are very playful to watch. The texture of their wool can vary, from soft fine wool to more coarse hairy fibres (or "kemps"), and mixtures in-between. The fleece is, normally, shed naturally. <http://www.soayandboreraysheepsociety.org/soay-sheep>  
<http://soaysheep.biology.ed.ac.uk/meet-sheep>



*Hebridean* sheep are from the Western Isles. They are small, fine boned sheep with black wool. Both males and females have horns with some rams having 4. This is a very primitive breed and its meat is low in saturated fats. The Hebridean is a very active and long-lived sheep, ewes often still lambing well at ten years or more. <http://www.hebrideansheep.org.uk/>



*Gotland* sheep were first established on the Swedish island of Gotland by the Vikings and brought to UK in 1972. These sheep have a dense, soft, long, lustrous grey fleece, occasionally black, white or brown. They lamb easily and grow fast with a hardy and adaptive nature. <http://www.gotlandsheep.com/>