SHEEP
in
THE BRECKS

A Report by The Breckland Society
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2017
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Some of Nick Sibbett’s flock of New Norfolk Horn sheep, conservation grazing near West Stow. © Peter Goulding
Introduction

The Breckland Society was set up in 2003 to encourage interest and research into the natural, built and social heritage of the East Anglian Brecks. It is a membership organisation working to help protect the area and offering a range of activities to those who wish to see its special qualities preserved and enhanced. The Society is one of the lead partners in Breaking New Ground (see below), under which grant funding of £7434 was made available for the Sheep in the Brecks project.

In March 2014 the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) confirmed the award of nearly £1.5 million to the Breaking New Ground Landscape Partnership, enabling a £2.2 million scheme to start delivering a range of heritage and landscape projects in the heart of the Norfolk & Suffolk Brecks over a period of three years.

The scheme is hosted by Suffolk County Council at Brandon Country Park and is supported by Norfolk County Council, St Edmundsbury Borough Council and Forest Heath District Council, as well as a variety of other local and national organisations. With a wide range of partners involved in the scheme, Breaking New Ground will deliver more than 40 projects across four programme areas:

a) Conserving or restoring built and natural features

b) Increasing community participation

c) Increasing access and learning

d) Increasing training opportunities

Whilst Breaking New Ground is required by the HLF to deliver its projects within an agreed core area (231km² focused around the Brecks market towns of Thetford and Brandon), most of the projects are relevant to the wider Brecks. They have been specifically devised to ensure that their benefits, and opportunities for participation and training will be available to everyone across the full 1,029km² of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks, and beyond.

The Sheep in the Brecks project aimed to investigate the historical importance of sheep in the Brecks by engaging and training volunteers to undertake research. Various training days were held: an introduction to the archaeology of bones; training on recording a shepherd’s hut; and conducting archival research at Norfolk Records Office. These took place throughout the winter of 2016/2017, and trained
fifteen volunteers. Volunteer research on organised visits to record earthworks and droves (paths used to move cattle and sheep) contributed £1700 worth of volunteer time, and individual research contributed a further £3000 of volunteer time. One volunteer alone, Pat Reynolds, contributed 91 hours’ worth of research.

In addition, one-day courses were held to give participants (12 in total) a taste of some of the craft skills associated with sheep husbandry, including the basics of shepherding and animal care, as well as instruction on the making of sheep hurdles. A further training day was held for practising smallholders, graziers and conservation workers to learn about the links between grazing and conservation – an important landscape management technique in the Brecks. At the time of writing a further one-day event is planned about making shepherd’s crooks (scheduled for summer 2017).

During the course of the project we became aware of the historical significance of shepherd’s huts in the Brecks landscape, and that many of them had deteriorated, been removed from their traditional location, and perhaps sold and/or converted to other uses. A shepherd’s hut near the village of Beachamwell was recorded as part of the project (see Appendix), and the Breckland Society was able to secure a further £2700 in funding from the People’s Pot element of the Breaking New Ground scheme to undertake its conservation and restoration, particularly of the woodwork and frame. These repairs will help conserve the hut for years to come, and the conditions of the grant have also secured public access for people to appreciate this fascinating survival of the history of sheep and shepherding in the Brecks.
1. The Sheep

Sheep were domesticated around 8800 BC in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains at the top end of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, across what is present-day Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Species of wild grass and other plants were developed by Neolithic communities in Mesopotamia as crops, and wild varieties of sheep, goats, pigs and cattle were domesticated into herds – a more convenient and dependable way of living than simple hunter-gathering. The cultivation of new cereal crops and the rearing of domesticated livestock (as well as the development of pottery, ground stone tools and timber buildings) was a hallmark of the Neolithic period.

This new form of agriculture rapidly replaced the Mesolithic hunter-gatherer lifestyle in Mesopotamia and provided its people with a better diet, which in turn facilitated the development of a growing population, larger settlements and early urbanisation. However, by 6000 BC the new method of farming had caused an environmental disaster in the region. The constant tilling of land without replacing nutrients served to exhaust the soil, while the felling of trees for construction and fuel removed protection from erosion – a situation exacerbated by the intensive herding of goats, their constant browsing and grazing stripping vegetation which would otherwise have protected the soil. Yields, and the amount of food that could be produced, declined accordingly. Big settlements could not be supported, and the society collapsed.

However, the new way of life of settled agriculture had already started to spread, through the lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea and then more widely across Europe. By c. 4000 BC, the Neolithic package of livestock and crops had reached Britain, introduced via trade routes along rivers and across seas. Domesticated sheep were not known in Europe prior to their introduction by Neolithic herders, although species of wild sheep (notably the Mouflon Ovis orientalis) were present. British woodland supported large mammals such as red deer, aurochs (a type of large and aggressive cattle) and wild boar, species that produced ample meat, protein and other useful products such as hides, but which took a lot of effort to catch.

With characteristics that make it extremely useful in agriculture, the domesticated sheep became an essential part of the Neolithic lifestyle. In addition to producing useful meat, milk and wool, sheep tend to herd with others of their kind for defence from predators and therefore take less effort to manage: a herd is as easy to find as a single sheep. Crucially, they also have a dominance hierarchy, i.e. they will follow sheep higher than them in the group structure, which is very important for control by humans as it means that a shepherd can move the entire flock – rather than a large number of individuals – to new grazing or water when required.
As part of a ‘package’ of agriculture, sheep have further advantages: they can unlock and concentrate fertility. They will eat through the day, with their gut bacteria converting nutrients into a more useable form. As they defecate during the night, they concentrate this animal waste fertility on wherever they are kept. Various techniques and regimes are used with different types of grazing animal in conjunction with crops, but all boil down to controlling where the animal eats, and where it drops the inevitable waste product. Optimally, these two activities do not take place in the same location.

The first sheep in the Brecks

The Brecks is characterised by extremely light and sandy soils overlying flinty chalk. But, much like the idea that East Anglia is flat, this is not the whole story. The generally infertile sandy plateau is cut through by fast-flowing clear chalk streams: the Wissey, Little Ouse and Lark, which are fed by smaller tributaries (such as the Gadder at Cockley Cley, Gooderstone and Oxborough). These small rivers flow eventually into the Wash, cutting shallow but distinct valleys through the sandy plateau as they go. These valleys carry alluvial silt, which spreads over the narrow floodplains to create markedly more fertile areas than is typical of the region.

Early agricultural settlements followed these river valleys. The rivers provided a means of transporting cereal crops such as rye and barley, which were grown on the fertile flood plains. Sheep played a role in the farming system, as they could be herded on the upper slopes – where there was often good grazing – without a cost in productive arable land closer to the rivers. This arrangement meant that there was somewhere for sheep to be kept when the crops were being grown in the fertile valleys, which is where the majority of people lived. When the fields were fallow, the sheep were moved back to the valleys, dunging and enriching the soil. In this way, early farmers were able to maximise the yield from their land.
The problem with archaeological evidence in the Brecks is the free-draining soil. Water percolates through the pores, mixing with air and creating acidic conditions in which organic material disintegrates rapidly. In the Fens, however, the heavier clay-based soils hold water and exclude oxygen; bacteria cannot thrive, and organic materials survive much longer, often in an incredibly well-preserved state. There are few archaeological remains of sheep in the Brecks, but it is a different situation in the Fens.

Excavations at the Bronze Age site of Must Farm, near Peterborough, give useful insights into the rearing of livestock and the consumption of meat during that period. Although Must Farm is definitely not part of the Brecks, it is likely that practices there are indicative of a wider husbandry culture that was spread across East Anglia. Lamb – being a thriftier size – was the staple meat of home cooking, with beef decidedly higher status and therefore usually reserved for feasts and other ceremonial occasions. The keeping of flocks of sheep was therefore primarily about the provision of meat throughout the year for the household or extended family. A major concern was how to preserve meat following slaughter, especially of larger animals. Without butchery and preservation techniques such as smoking, drying and salting, there was a high degree of waste on a larger carcass. At Must Farm, joints of lamb were split down the middle and hung from the rafters of houses, being slowly cured, air-dried and perhaps smoked.1

The people who lived in East Anglia during the Bronze and Iron Ages grew up with a close knowledge of the natural world into which they were born and raised and exploited it accordingly for food. They practised farming – growing and harvesting rye and barley, as well as rearing sheep and cattle – alongside the continued hunting of wild animals and foraging for other natural products. Whilst always vulnerable to the impact on their crops of poor weather or localised environmental disasters, communities survived and expanded, leaving their mark on the landscape. Farming provided the calories and means of sustenance that enabled the early inhabitants of the Brecks to dig the flint mines at Grime's Graves, build the burial mounds that survive throughout the present-day Thetford Forest, and construct and maintain the hillforts and camps of the pre-Roman British culture. By the late Iron Age, agriculture had already moved onto the higher, poorer ground, exploiting a greater proportion of the land, and the Romanisation of Britain saw the continued development and expansion of agriculture and animal husbandry. The Roman Empire demanded taxable and tradeable surpluses and grain was ideal, being relatively easy to transport – unlike meat, which spoiled more quickly. As a result, the Fens saw expanded grain production on the fertile soils, a development that may have reduced the land available for grazing. At the Fen edge, Romano-British agriculture was based around large villa farms, and superb examples have been excavated. Notable among these is the fourth-century villa and bathhouse excavated at Feltwell by Charles Green and Ernest Greenfield in the 1950s. Bones from such excavations have been largely overlooked, so we cannot tell to what extent sheep were important at that time. It seems likely, however, that the sheep retained its status as a day-to-day source of calories, rather than as a prestige meat like pork, beef or venison.

1 Symonds (2016), pages 12–18
After the power of Rome weakened and finally fell, a new invader appeared on the cultural and physical horizon: Germanic tribes from the East – the Anglo-Saxons among them – were moving in, in search of territory. It is from this wave of incomers that we gain a major insight into how sheep husbandry (and farming more generally) developed further in the Brecks.

**Anglo-Saxons and their sheep at West Stow**

Archaeological fieldwork at West Stow in the southern Brecks has highlighted the role of sheep in Anglo-Saxon farming society. The Anglo-Saxon settlement was located on the flood plain of the River Lark, inhabited for more than 300 years and clearly dependent on agriculture, with local farmers skilfully exploiting the combination of habitats and land types near which they lived. Excavations have unearthed over two tonnes of animal bones, an adequately large number from which statistically significant comparisons can be assessed and deductions made to explain how agriculture and animal husbandry were undertaken over three centuries.

Analysis of the bones reveals that sheep or goats – most likely sheep – were the most common animals at the West Stow site, with just under 50% of the total bones found being of either species. The next most numerous animal remains are of cattle, at around 35%. These were clearly a very important part of the farm economy, and all the more so because one cow produces ten times the quantity of meat as a single sheep. Pigs were also reared, despite the Brecks being poor ground for them (historically there was little pannage, i.e. forageable nuts or fruits such as acorns or beech mast). It is possible that pigs were more important in the earliest days of the settlement, being quick-breeding, quick-maturing animals, but their significance appears to have diminished later.

The slopes between the river terraces and the flat plateau provided the best grazing for sheep. Extensive areas of grassland were located near to the settlement, but were the furthest useable habitat from the dwellings themselves. The sheep were kept further away from the village than the cattle, for example, which were given the best grazing in the rich river meadowlands, and the pigs, which needed more attention. The flat river terraces were perfect for arable crops and also provided stubble, on which livestock could forage after harvest time, thereby dunging the fields and replenishing fertility.

Anglo-Saxon farmers had a balanced and varied system of farming that used a variety of different habitats. This diversity would have provided some insurance against small-scale environmental disasters, in that the communities were not overly dependent on a single crop or animal. The way in which animals were kept appears to have been stable and not to have changed much over 300 years (except for the decline in the usefulness of pigs). The Anglo-Saxons could make this system work, and broadly stuck to it.

Comparison with archaeological sheep remains from Iron Age and Roman sites reveals, however, that Anglo-Saxon sheep had been ‘improved’, in that they were slightly bigger than their predecessors and would therefore have yielded more meat. It is likely that these sheep were also being kept for wool. Evidence reveals that more

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2 Crabtree (1990)
adult male animals were kept alive, which is characteristic of flocks managed for wool (older male sheep produce more wool). Loom weights have also been found at West Stow, and while it is known that flax was grown to make linen, it seems likely also that fleeces were being processed into wool.

Sheep were usually slaughtered in autumn. The poor ground of the Brecks did not provide adequate fodder to keep all of them alive through the winter months and although the flocks were brought down from the slopes once the arable fields had been cropped, this land would only support a certain number of animals. It would not have been plausible to continually increase the size of flocks in such conditions. West Stow farmers would likely have traded their sheep for other commodities, probably with other small communities.

Useful evidence about Anglo-Saxon sheep husbandry also comes from studying the ‘kill patterns’ – ie. the ages at which sheep are slaughtered – of the sheep remains at West Stow. If the requirement was for meat, it appears that it was most efficient to kill the sheep at between two and three years of age, when the animal was fully grown and unlikely to get any bigger. For milk, farmers kept female animals, with the older animals retained for their wool. The West Stow ‘kill patterns’ show a mixture of all three options, with meat being slightly more important than the others. This pattern fits with the traditional model for self-sufficient farming communities, trading between themselves, wearing wool, drinking milk (or making it into cheese) and eating lamb.

West Stow is much closer in its sheep husbandry practices to Iron Age sites than to what was happening on the Continent at the same time. Although the Breckland sheep of the Anglo-Saxon period were slightly bigger, the patterns of slaughter and the poorer grazing limited what could be done with them. Slightly away from the Brecks, at North Elmham for example, sheep were kept more for wool, with these communities prospering economically as a result.
Breckland Sheep in The Domesday Book

In 1066, William the Conqueror invaded England, famously beating Harold Godwineson at Hastings. The Norman invasion brought about a hugely significant legal and social change in the country, primarily because from now on England was officially ‘owned’ by the King and all land came under the sovereign’s personal authority and jurisdiction. Barons who offered the king their military allegiance were in turn granted rights over areas of land, and could, in turn, offer rights to those below them in the social hierarchy – in return for rent or other forms of payment. Effectively, any individual’s right to work an area of land depended on what was granted to them by an individual from the social class above. The Church was a major centre of power, providing the religious and spiritual justification for this system, in an age when the dominant moral, political and philosophical thinking was all based around religion and scripture. The Church did not limit its power to the kingdom of God, also wielding huge political and economic power, owning vast tracts of land and maintaining a personnel running into thousands. It was no accident that William's brother Ódo was a bishop as well as a warrior, statesman and the organiser of the invasion fleet.

The Normans were effectively formalising a system that had applied under the Anglo-Saxons, during which period military leaders and other leading figures also depended on royal favour and patronage to acquire estates and other types of holdings. These were managed on their behalf by senior officials such as reeves, with the land itself worked by villeins and serfs below them. The West Stow settlement (see pages 8–9) almost certainly operated within such a system, with some of its slaughtered sheep (and perhaps other products such as wool) most likely ‘paid’ to a figure higher up the social hierarchy.

By codifying this arrangement into a system of land law, the Norman administration had to undertake a formidable bureaucratic exercise. Claiming formal royal ownership over England and its assets was meaningless without an assessment and understanding of what those assets might comprise and where they were located. The production of the Domesday Book (completed in 1086) was designed to achieve
just that, and was a vast endeavour that produced a huge amount of information on many different subjects, especially agriculture. However valuable as a starting point, the accuracy of this information is sometimes questionable: any document produced to enable the collection of taxes may not always secure a truthful picture of the income of those who were about to be taxed.

Domesday entries for the Brecks reveal the presence of some very substantial flocks of sheep: 1500 at Mildenhall, 800 at Methwold and Weeting, 900 at Eriswell, 800 at Santon Downham, for example. At first sight, these figures could be interpreted as the area by then supporting much greater numbers of sheep than previously, possibly due to a change in farming practices. However, the whole story is probably not so clear cut. These huge flocks appear to have been concentrated in those
parishes on the edge of the Fens, which had always enjoyed much better grazing on the lush wet, rich meadows over excellent soil. The exception in this case was Santon Downham, which although not on the Fen edge, is located in a fertile valley with good grass (and where there are also localised areas of glacial clay deposits, which provide pockets of excellent grazing).

For most Breckland parishes the model is very similar to that of the Anglo-Saxon farmers at West Stow. Communities of varying sizes – usually round about 20 households of villagers, smallholders, free men and slaves – were each keeping 100–300 sheep, plus perhaps 20 cows and 20 pigs. Some of the Breckland parishes were among the poorest in the whole country, a situation reflected in the low rents achieved by landlords. These sometimes amounted to less than £1 per annum, rarely to more than £10, and were more typically about £2–3. Having beehives, mills or fisheries would add to a settlement’s value, but the mainstay in almost all cases was sheep. The situation was not always constant, however. The value of the village of Stanford, for example, is stated in 1066 as being £3, with 200 sheep kept there. By 1086, its value had dropped to £1, with only 80 sheep recorded.3

Parishes with several hundred sheep were typically worth much more. Examples include £10 pounds per year in rent for Eriswell, £70 for Mildenhall and £30 for both Weeting and Methwold. Such holdings were definitely worth having, the landlord often being the Church and with the abbeys of Ely, Bury St Edmunds and Thetford being particularly important. Some parishes, such as Croxton and Feltwell, were owned directly by King William, presumably seized by right of conquest from nobles who had fallen at Hastings or been stripped of their lands following the Norman conquest.

By 1086 sheep were dominant in the Brecks in terms of farming and landscape management. Many of the settlements locally would have looked remarkably like Anglo-Saxon West Stow, mainly raising sheep, plus a few cattle and pigs, and with limited ploughed land. Parishes along the rivers might also have had fisheries and water-powered mills, which would enhance their wealth. Further east, in south Norfolk and mid-Suffolk, where the ground was heavier, cattle were dominant but in the Brecks sheep held sway, a situation that reflected the limitations of the soil and climate.

Following the Norman conquest, a new animal was introduced which could also graze effectively on the poor soils of Breckland: the rabbit. Raised for their meat and lucrative fur – the latter a high-status commodity that enjoyed royal patronage – rabbits thrived on the inferior heathland, and huge managed warrens were established across the Brecks (see the 2010 Breckland Society report, The Warrens of Breckland). These represented a huge source of income for their owners. Rabbits did not supplant sheep, however, as the two could graze side by side on the same ground, preferring different food plants. Sheep preferred grey lichens and mosses, while the rabbits favoured grass and herbs, with competition for grazing arising only under adverse climatic conditions.4

3 The Domesday Book, opendomesday.org
4 Bailey (1989), page 54
2. Wool and Wealth

Traditional systems of managing grazing access to the land had developed over the previous thousand years of sheep husbandry. Essentially, the sheep were pastured away from the arable land held by the village until after harvest, when they were moved back to graze the stubble – an arrangement called the foldcourse system. Crops would be grown on the marginal soil, which benefited from the ‘rathe’ of the sheep. The rathe was the improvement that the sheep made to the land, not just with their dung (which was called compos), but also with urine and by trampling and working the ground with their hooves. At the same time as improving the soil, the sheep were also putting on meat and growing wool and thereby increasing their value and economic contribution.

The foldcourse system set out which crops would be sown on which fields, and when other fields would be left fallow. Individuals therefore fulfilled different roles in the agricultural economy of the village which, at its best, accorded everyone a fair and broadly equitable way of keeping their sheep and growing their crops. Many of the interlocking rights of the tenants and ‘their’ lords were set by custom: it was done this way because it always had been so, and it was regarded as being broadly within everyone’s interests to continue in the same way.

In the village of Kilverstone, near Thetford, the Prior of Bury St Edmunds Abbey leased out all the pasture of the village and Croxton Priory to a farmer. It was the latter’s responsibility to provide the hurdles for the fold and pay the shepherd, and in return he was allowed the ‘thathing and compos’. There were legal stipulations against allowing carts to break up the grazing, and the ‘by legal agreement’ farmers could not plough or sow ground unless the sheep had enough pasture elsewhere to sustain them.5

Ambitious landlords and opportunistic tenants could see their way to increasing their wealth through this system – there were long-running disputes at the now-vanished village of Kilverstone, for example.6 Huge tensions could develop between the various elements of the social and economic hierarchy, with friction between landlords, tenants and peasants over access and use of the land providing a low-grade discontent throughout many Breckland parishes. A particular problem appears to have been the overstocking of sheep on common land, which is a common feature of court rolls in the area throughout medieval times.

5 Davison (1988), page 19
6 Davidson (1988), pages 23–27
The trade in sheep
From the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onwards, sheep wool and hides proved extremely lucrative. The trade in wool developed enormously because of better trading connections between England and overseas, as well as greater demand for these products in Europe. The wool trade appears to have peaked around the 1330s, with its longer-term history characterised by a cycle of boom and bust. The big monastic houses of Ely, Thetford and Bury St Edmunds based much of their wealth on rental income, but also benefited from the direct ownership of huge flocks of sheep. By 1530, Thetford Priory had a flock of 4300 animals. Following processing, wool and hides were much less vulnerable to being spoiled and so represented a highly transportable and durable commodity in a way that meat, for example, was not. It had to be transported either salted in barrels or as live animals, which required food, water and care.

The blackfaced Breckland sheep, descended from Anglo-Saxon breeds, produced coats of short wool. Although this did not deliver the weight of fleece that other breeds did, this wool was regarded as being of a higher quality. Because it was shorter it was finer, needing less processing, and was less tangled with burrs, seeds and dags (the faeces-encrusted wool at the back end of the sheep). While fewer sheep could be kept on Breckland acres, and less wool produced per sheep, their wool was still valuable. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, most of the local textile industry was based in the towns of Bury and Thetford. Wool would have been collected from small flocks throughout the Brecks and then sold to middlemen, while the big religious houses sold their wool in bulk through much larger agents.

The Brecks did not greatly profit by the wool trade, however. Surrounding areas did much better, and built huge, expensive, high-status ‘wool churches’ as a result. There is little evidence of wool-related wealth having such impact in the Brecks, where most of the income derived from sheep ownership stayed largely with the landlords and the profits went into the coffers of the religious institutions in Thetford, Bury St Edmunds and Ely.

There were other valuable sheep products to be traded. Skins were valuable for producing parchment on which to write. As the legal system grew, more and more information had to be written down and so the demand for parchment grew. Better-quality parchment came from the skin of lambs that were killed when young, before they had accumulated any scars from brambles, skin diseases or fly-strike, therefore producing an unblemished surface.

Lambskin required processing in order to be fit for use as writing parchment. The carcass would be skinned and the skin then scraped free of fat, hair and wool before being soaked. Once clean, the skin was stretched out to dry on stakes or a frame, any remaining membrane removed and the skin then greased to make it supple. This was a complex process requiring a skilled craftsman: the skinner. The surname Skinner occurs commonly throughout the Brecks, with historical records in Brandon, Mildenhall, Lakenheath, Thetford, Hilborough, Northwold, Stanford, Feltwell, Eriswell and Bridgham – although it would also have applied to those involved in that other lucrative Brecks commodity, rabbits.

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7 Bailey (1989), page 293
The result of the process was a fine, supple, whitish-cream parchment that served as an ideal writing surface. The sheet of parchment was made up of almost pure collagen; when ink was applied, this would slightly dissolve the collagen, which then mixed with the ink before resetting, leaving a slightly raised or embossed profile (for an illustration or text). This feature was much prized for its aesthetic and dramatic appeal in a document or book. Parchment would last for a long time if kept dry, although it had a tendency to fold and curl – many medieval tomes therefore had iron bands and clasps to keep the parchment clamped flat. This contributed to a distinct and impressive look to weighty religious or legal books, and these clasps and bindings became part of the culture of high-status books, something that continued even after the advent of vegetable-fibre paper made the need to clamp the pages unnecessary.

Wealthy landlords and monastic houses grew wealthy from their huge flocks of sheep, but smaller ‘household-scale’ herds still survived, providing meat, wool and other products for more humble folk. Small numbers of sheep are mentioned in wills of the time, the animals representing significant inheritable wealth. Shepherds might be employed to keep larger flocks, and it was also usual for them to keep some of their own sheep within their lord’s flock. A few individual peasants grew wealthy through a combination of hard work and ruthless overgrazing of common land: this allowed them to expand their own flock and therefore wealth, generally at the expense of the wider community of sheep grazers.
As with any commodity, sheep were always vulnerable to market forces. As the prices of wool and meat fell, the changing economics did not favour small operators. Competition caused quality to fall, with demand then dipping. Landlords at the top of the social hierarchy, which included the aristocracy and medieval monastic houses, consolidated their sheep into larger flocks and also controlled the granting of rights to graze on the foldcourse system. While the size of flocks increased, the actual number of sheep grazing the Brecks was probably no greater than before.

Transport and fairs
The selling and buying of sheep was of course essential to the sheep economy. Throughout the thirteenth century in particular, fairs were established by royal grant in many Breckland towns and villages. Markets were local affairs where goods were traded between local people on a fairly regular basis, whereas fairs were much larger in scale – places where larger deals could be done between visiting merchants and local producers. They often lasted for three days (but could be longer) and coincided with religious festivals, which were the medieval signposts of the calendar.

8 Bailey (2007), pages 289–294

With sheep less profitable, the keeping of them had to become more efficient. Fewer shepherds were employed to keep ever larger flocks. Bury Abbey and Thetford Priory both grazed huge flocks across the heathland outside both towns, maintaining an income from wool and providing meat that went to the abbey tables. But quality ultimately dropped, as more had to be done with less, and issues over the incidence of disease and poor health of the flocks went unaddressed.

Right
A Norfolk Record Office document valuing “Richard Williamson, late of Thetford’s goods and chattels” for the purpose of legal inheritance, held at Norfolk Record Office. It details his physical goods, as in numbers of sheep, lambs, ewes, crones (old toothless ewes), his wool and “apparel” (probably clothes and tools), as well as his “bond of obligation”, presumably a land rent of some kind.

© NRO, image by Peter Goulding
By the final day of the fair the deals would be done, and the last day was set aside for pleasure. The medieval mindset was determinedly pre-Puritan, and delighted in feasting, drinking and bawdiness.

The success of these fairs depended on the existence of good transport links. Flocks of sheep (and, indeed, herds and flocks of other domestic animals and birds) would be ‘driven’ to the fairs, often for many miles, and then driven off again afterwards. Ancient trackways like the Icknield Way, Peddars Way and the Harling Drove would have been well trodden.

These ancient routes are still traceable through the countryside and survive through Thetford Forest, for example. Fieldwalking carried out by project volunteers has confirmed the continued presence of the historical route taken by some of these droving ways, notably the Harling Drove and Icknield Way. The paths are often very sandy and rutted, and it may be that thousands of years of walking by people and sheep has compacted the ground to create a very distinctive feel to the surface. The movement of sheep from place to place would have required the flocks to be driven along well-defined routes, often banked on either side to help channel the animals along and to mark territory and ownership.

Access to drinking water was vital to the droving process, so the routes would have depended on the presence of reliable water sources at regular intervals. Water drains rapidly through the sandy Brecks soil, and clay-lined ponds are rare. However, there are meres and pingos across Breckland, and of course streams and rivers flowing through the valleys. Parish boundaries were drawn up to allow access to water on the higher land at places like Ringmere near East Wretham, for example. Such formal
boundaries were probably based on ancient customary agreements of access, as well as on the practical necessities of the time.

On the Harling Drove at East Wretham, a large earthwork is known to have been a medieval sheepfold. The earthwork surrounds the shallow and often dry Fenmere and is right next to the deeper and more reliable Ringmere. It could have held hundreds of sheep overnight and is located right on the Harling Drove, which connected the ancient route and Roman road of the Peddars Way with the Fens. The bank alongside the earthwork is lined with hornbeams.

Connections along the Rivers Ouse, Lark, Wissey and Nar to the Fens would have given access to bustling port of King's Lynn and the greater market of the North Sea and the Baltic beyond. Holland and the Low Countries were an essential market for wool and the vortex of an international trade that played an enormous role in the history of Europe, the vast revenues and incomes providing a material incentive for tension and conflict between rulers. The money also provided a tax base with which to wage war. The possibility of profits encouraged the development of trading voyages by ship, which opened up the world as the sailing technology of the time overlapped with trade networks further east.

The Age of Improvement

Despite the abuses of the foldcourse system, Breckland's sheep-corn husbandry was a stable system for centuries and one that maximised the limited returns across communities from what was a very meagre environment. Because of the low quality of land in the Brecks, it tended to stay as commonland for much longer than was the case in surrounding areas. More fertile parts of England underwent enclosure – the legal parcelling up of what had been commonland – throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, because enough money could be made from enclosure for it to be worth the trouble. Enclosure did happen in Breckland, albeit much later than across much of the rest of England. The last enclosures here took place after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, although by this point the Brecks was already consolidated into the hands of relatively few landowners.
In many ways, the great estates looked very similar to the old Norman-era manors. Their owners had generally unassailable legal powers over their holdings and the agricultural land management practices that went on there. Ideas of scientific improvement were coming to the fore, however. Often these comprised radical breaks with traditional farming techniques, and needed the dominance of the landowner over his tenants to implement such radical changes to centuries-old customary practice. Some ideas would not stick: for instance, marling the land, i.e. enriching it with quicklime, caused ewes to miscarry and so was often resisted by tenants. Experimental watermeadows – intended to produce early spring growth for grazing – were attempted in various locations in the Brecks, but failed. With hindsight, they stood little chance of success given the local climate and conditions. Other ideas had the logic of success behind them, while animal husbandry was an obvious area for improvement. New radical ideas such as Mendelian genetics and Darwinian natural selection offered the potential to boost yield and therefore income. By applying these ideas in practice, new types of sheep could be created by selecting desirable characteristics from different types of parent. The result was meatier, healthier, woollier breeds.

The poor soils of Breckland were traditionally grazed by descendants of the Anglo-Saxon sheep. By the eighteenth century these ‘Norfolks’ – with black faces and curly horns – were recognised as the breed indigenous to East Anglia. They were tough, highly energetic and able to roam across the sandy, gorse- and heather-riddled wasteland as they foraged for grazing. Highly adapted to the poor grazing, these animals looked more like deer than sheep and fitted perfectly within the foldcourse system. More impressively meaty and lazier sheep would simply have starved on the meagre grasses and herbs. Some distinction does seem to be made between the Norfolk Blackface breed and the Blackface sheep that grazed on the heaths of the Brecks. This would point to there being a sub-breed of Blackface, presumably even more adapted to the Brecks.

Farmers might have been inherently conservative and sceptical about breeds they did not immediately recognise, but the new farming logic was based on the measurement of returns, weights and ultimately money. A few pioneers – people such as Arthur Young, Thomas William Coke and William Macro – started to try these new breeds. They could see success, calculated in the greater weight of fleece, greater weight of meat and greater return of money.

The Holkham ‘sheep shearings’, agricultural shows run by Thomas Coke on his estate in north Norfolk in the late 1700s, were a shop-window for improved breeds and innovative agricultural practices. While the New Leicester and South Down breeds of sheep spread quickly across Norfolk, both needed reasonable pasture – particularly the South Down, which put on meat partially because of its great docility and laziness. Such breeds would not do well on the slimmer pickings of the Brecks, but when the South Down was bred with the Norfolk Horn, a new breed was created that could cope better with the local environment: the Suffolk. With the meatier characteristics of the South Down combined with the hardier qualities of the Norfolk Horn, this new breed was popular and successful from the 1830s onwards. It attracted the name ‘Suffolk’ from about 1858, and by the 1880s had

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thoroughly supplanted the Norfolk Horn as the Brecks sheep of choice. The Norfolk Horn continued to decline in popularity through the second half of the nineteenth century. A few (often cranky) individual farmers persisted with keeping small flocks, rather against the prevailing trend and public opinion, but the Norfolk Horn was on its way out. The Suffolk, however, carried a repository of the DNA of the Norfolk, having been bred from Norfolk Horn rams, and occasional individual Norfolk tups were maintained alongside flocks of Suffolks in order for the breed not to become too like the South Down – having a brown (rather than a black) face was particularly criticised, for example.

By the end of the First World War, the flocks of Norfolks had effectively disappeared. One farmer, J.D. Sayer, singlehandedly preserved the breed through his ‘pride and joy’, a small flock of Norfolks that he effectively collected from various farm sales and auctions over about 20 years. This was purely as a hobby flock and numbered only a few dozen individuals, which as a result became genetically ‘bottlenecked’ – inbred and unhealthy. Towards the end of Sayer’s life, after the Second World War, he succeeded in getting other individuals interested in saving the Norfolk Horn, and attempts were made to breed the flock up to health again. But numbers remained extremely small, and the gene pool critically restricted. Total extinction loomed.

This impending disaster – the total loss of a distinct historic breed – led to the emergence of the rare breeds movement in Britain. Other domestic breeds of animal were also going extinct across Europe, seemingly without public or scientific concern. Throughout the 1960s and ’70s, individual farmers and institutions made increasing attempts to save these ‘rare breeds’ of domestic animals. Sayer’s flock went to Whipsnade Zoo, to be joined there by a flock of equally endangered Manx Loghtans. This was the start of the Gene Library – which would later become the Gene Bank – an initiative to preserve rare breeds of domestic animals from extinction. Along with Sayer’s Norfolk Horns, other breeds were also at risk: Longhorn and Chartley cattle; Cotswold, Lincoln Longwool, Soay, Portland and White-faced Woodland sheep; and poultry breeds like the Sumatra Game Fowl, Silver-Spangled Hamburg and Silver Dorking. The names of many of these breeds are geographical as well physically descriptive, evidence that they had evolved in a specialised way to cope with particular conditions in specific places.

Of all these animals and birds, the Norfolk Horn was the one breed sustained solely through the actions of the Whipsnade staff. By 1968, there were six purebred rams and eight ewes there. The number of ewes needed to be built up to at least 20 in order to give the breed a fighting chance, so as well as inserting artificially fertilised eggs, six Suffolk ewes were bred with one purebred Norfolk Horn ram, which was considered close enough genetically to not hopelessly dilute the breed, but would add a critical degree of genetic health to the tiny flock. This initiative was successful, but when the flock was transferred away from Whipsnade to the National Agricultural Centre at Kenilworth, the breeding programme was not maintained in the same way. The flock dwindled, animals were heavily outbred, and records were poorly kept. The breed was on the brink once more.
In 1974, the last purebred ram of the Norfolk Horn died. According to rare breeds legend, it drowned in a ditch, although the reality was that it was found dead in a ditch but had perished from other unspecified causes. In any case, this was a very un-Breckland way to go: in the Brecks, standing water and ditches are rather rare. The plight of the ram aroused intense public interest. The rare breeds movement became the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, and amongst other projects there were attempts to recreate the breed as the New Norfolk Horn. Because of outbreeding with Suffolks, the breed was much diluted, but because the Suffolks were originally developed from a cross with the Norfolk breed, the look of the resulting cross animal was reasonably close to the Norfolk.

From this re-creation, other flocks raised by farmers in Gloucestershire, Devon and Worcestershire were ‘bred up’, creating sheep with a purer line. In 1980, a flock came back to Norfolk, to the Rural Life Museum at Gressenhall. A highly structured breeding programme was implemented between 1979 and 1986, with a dedicated group of breeders working to improve the purity of the flock. Today the New Norfolk Horn is a recognised breed and shown by breeders and enthusiasts at agricultural shows. Meanwhile, the original Norfolk Horn is often cited as being the breed whose extinction sparked the development of the rare breeds movement. It had been overtaken as an agricultural animal by animals with a more economic shape: producing a fatter, meatier backside makes the animal worth more.

Numbers of the New Norfolk Horn remain relatively modest, but there may be potential for them when crossbred with other sheep as a ‘terminal sire’, ie. the sire of sheep that will not in turn be bred from, but will go for meat. Perhaps the New Norfolk Horn’s characteristics will mean its mode of living – highly mobile and able to survive on poor grazing – might couple well with a meatier breed that is more valuable in death. This is, after all, how the Suffolk breed developed and ousted the original Norfolk Horn.
3. The Shepherds

Throughout the economic changes from medieval times to the modern day, the life and work of the shepherd was a unifying thread, ostensibly concerned with the same ever-constant cares and duties. Sheep were highly domesticated, and although they required human input to be successful, the level of necessary care was not as great as that needed by horses, for example.

The shepherd’s job boiled down to three seemingly simple jobs: moving the sheep around to maximise their feeding; protecting them from disease and danger; and increasing the flock, first by getting them to breed, and then by lambing them successfully. Moving the sheep around was necessary to make sure they had the optimum amount of vegetation on which to graze. The wild ancestors of domestic sheep would have ‘hefted’, i.e. stuck to a particular territory, which was part-instinct and part-acquired behaviour (they would have learnt their territory when they were lambs with their mothers). The heft would have been a large enough area to comfortably support the wild flock, with numbers trimmed anyway by predators. With domestication, sheep had to be kept at higher densities than in the wild. If they overgrazed an area, the amount they could forage would reduce and ultimately they would starve.

In reality, the shepherd would pay no more than an instinctive attention to how hard the ground had been grazed; the movement regime was governed more by tradition and customary access to common land. He would move the sheep around according to the religious calendar of the year, taking them to market along ancient tracks as generations of sheep and shepherds had done before him.

Tools of the trade

In the herding and moving of sheep a shepherd was greatly assisted by dogs. Historically these would not have been Border Collies, which originated in Scotland or North of England and are now hugely valued for their ability to work with sheep. Shepherds may instead have used dogs similar to Old English Sheepdogs, although breeds were only properly recognised and codified in the nineteenth century. Those used by shepherds in the Brecks were probably a local breed of no real pedigree, differentiated from hunting/poaching dogs and terriers more by their function than by their breed, appearance and characteristics. The animal remains at West Stow’s Anglo-Saxon settlement included dogs resembling modern German Shepherds in size, and it is entirely possible – like the Breckland type of Norfolk Blackfaced Sheep – that local dogs had a genetic heritage extending back to Anglo-Saxon times or further. Whatever the breed, dogs and humans have a strong sympathetic bond, and
shepherds of the Brecks would have been deeply attached to their dogs, with which they would have lived and worked so closely.

An essential tool was the shepherd’s crook, which ultimately became the badge of office of the shepherding trade. The crook was essentially a staff with a hooked end, and traditionally would have been carved out of a single piece of wood or fabricated by mounting a steamed piece of horn onto a stout stick. The purpose of a crook was to capture a sheep at close quarters by hooking its neck or leg, and it therefore had to be very strong. They were often objects of great beauty and craftsmanship, a well-made crook reflecting the pride and skill that a shepherd felt in his position.

The shepherd would have protected his flock through being in constant close contact with it. From the earliest domestication of sheep, shepherds had stayed with their flocks in the pastures and guarded them against predators and other potential misfortune, including thieves. By the Middle Ages in Britain, natural predators were a dwindling threat throughout the countryside, which was becoming an increasingly managed environment. Foxes might take lambs, and crows peck at lambs’ eyes, but bears were by then extinct in Britain and the threat of wolves was diminishing, especially in lowland areas like the Brecks. Sheep could therefore be turned out during the day for significant parts of the year, and the shepherd’s role included building temporary fenced enclosures, especially using hurdles, in which to pen the sheep at night.

Above
Shepherd Chris Reek expertly moves his flock of sheep to a pen. He has noticed that one, amongst 60 ewes and lambs, is lame. © Ed Goodall/ Breaking New Ground
Volunteers hard at work shaping ash to make traditional sheep hurdles on a project training day. © Nick Dickson/Breaking New Ground

Assembling a hurdle. © Nick Dickson/Breaking New Ground

Volunteers displaying their completed hurdles. © Nick Dickson/Breaking New Ground
By the 1950s, metal hurdles were in use. “You could also use metal hurdles that had wheels. Horses or tractors could pull a string of metal hurdles; this made it easier moving the fold across the field because it was quicker with the hurdles; but trying to control the hurdles wasn’t always easy because it would get out of line and it wasn’t easy to straighten it. You’d see all these hurdles trundling through the middle of the village sometimes.”

Disease threatened flocks more as the densities of sheep grew. Wild sheep live in such large areas that truly catastrophic levels of disease rarely build up, staying at low, fairly endemic levels. Poorly animals often ostracise themselves from the rest of the flock, which will in any case often chase off animals which seem sickly. While seemingly harsh, this does limit the exposure of the healthy animals to disease. Where disease does flare up amongst wild animals, it is often accompanied by atypical weather – a particularly wet year might prompt an outbreak of foot rot (infectious pododermatitis), for example.

Domesticated sheep live in very different conditions and require a careful eye, with a shepherd’s greatest weapon against disease and mishap being his attention to his flock. Spending a lot of time with the sheep provided a depth of observation and subtle information about their habits and condition. Experience was key: a seasoned shepherd familiar with sheep from his childhood and teenage years would know immediately if there was problem. Individual sheep showing early signs of disease would be noticed – perhaps as ‘something wrong with that one’, keeping to itself, or ‘just looking unhappy.’

Shepherds had recourse to a range of medical treatments, traditional and otherwise. Pine tar, easily synthesised, was regarded as a good general cure-all, disinfecting and sealing injuries, and no doubt there were other herbal remedies, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Simple acts like the trimming and cleaning out of a manky foot would always give an animal a better chance of beating infection.

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10 Interview with Rita Wing, recorded by project volunteer Pat Reynolds
11 Chris Reek, personal communication on the Grazier’s Day held as part of the project
Clipping away wool from an area of fly-strike (where flies lay eggs in the wool and skin of the sheep), or manually cleaning out maggots, were essential early treatments. ‘Dagging’ a sheep, ie. cutting away the faeces-encrusted wool from around its anus, was also necessary and routine – once done a few times, it may perhaps have lost something of its unpleasant nature! Generally, the Brecks was not wet enough to have serious problems with foot rot, with local sheep more likely to suffer from scald. This is caused by animals walking through areas of long coarse grass, the rough stems rubbing the skin between the two parts of the cloven hoof and forming blisters. These eventually burst, exposing the wounds to infection and causing the sheep to limp.  

Naturally-kept flocks would take care of their own reproduction, although as improvements in stock became better understood, then putting a good quality ram (or tup) among the ewes would be important. A shepherd would of course always spend time grading and observing the qualities of his sheep. Some lambs would go to slaughter long before having any chance to breed, and surplus males – those beyond a certain point of growth, at least – were just a drain on grazing. The size of a flock could be kept reasonably limited, but it made no sense to slaughter the best breeding animals.

A shepherd’s busiest season year was spring – lambing time. This was especially true once greater planning and control were exercised over a tup’s access to the breeding ewes – a narrow window of impregnation meant a very short period of time later when the lambs would be arriving. The shepherd would have to help deliver some of the lambs, at any time of day or night, and needed to deal with any complications. These ranged from bringing apparently stillborn lambs back from the dead to fostering orphaned lambs onto other sheep, and required the application of a wealth of valuable lore and knowledge. This was gained from both firsthand experience and information that was passed down from previous generations of shepherds and shared with peers.

The shepherd’s hut

The requirement for close contact with their sheep, especially at lambing time, meant that shepherds were often required to overnight among, or within easy range, of their flock. This was most conveniently done using a shepherd’s hut, essentially a shed on wheels with a bed, a stove, a cupboard for medicine and food, and a small cage or enclosed recess under the bed for lambs requiring special care. The hut provided the basics of life required by the shepherd while tending his flock, and its mobility was extremely useful given the peripatetic nature of sheep wandering across the landscape.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the shepherd’s hut had become a ubiquitous sight throughout lowland sheep-keeping Britain, although there is written reference of one as early as 1596. Shepherd’s huts could be ordered from a variety of manufacturers. While it was possible to order just the set of wheels and have the estate carpenter run one up according to his own ideas, it seems that many estates and farms ordered them ready built. They could be easily delivered to local stations, and then hauled by carthorse to wherever they were required. During certain

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12 Tom Thurston, research as a project volunteer, 2016
months of the year they would be kept perhaps at farms, ready for deployment out on the heaths or other grazing areas during spring.

These huts represented significant investments and could cost up to six months of an average shepherd’s wages. In most cases, therefore, it seems probable that they were acquired by estates and landowners, rather than by independent shepherds. Until the early twentieth century they were still something of a rural landmark in the Brecks, but agriculture changed enormously following the First World War and the role of the shepherd declined. Shepherd’s huts were no longer migrating around the landscape as had been the case for decades, and were increasingly put to alternative uses, such as storage or poultry sheds. During the Second World War some were used as Home Guard watch-posts or as accommodation for prisoners-of-war sent to work on the land. As the importance of the huts declined, so did the inclination to spend effort on their maintenance. Out in the weather, many rotted where they stood or were overtaken by brambles to become an unusual hedge-like clump by the side of the field or in a forestry plantation on a former tract of heathland.
However, many of these huts were made from excellent materials and proved surprisingly durable, albeit not in unchanging and perfect condition. Some undoubtedly decayed beyond the point of return and have been lost forever, but others were removed and taken for restoration, often sympathetically by enthusiasts. In the last few years, restored and kitted-out shepherd's huts have become fashionable additions to smart gardens and kitted out to provide a charming alternative to a tent or holiday cottage, perhaps even boasting a shower. The current vogue for ‘glamping’ has removed many shepherd’s huts from the landscape, perhaps saving them in the process, although others are perhaps waiting to be found. In the Brecks it appears that very few have survived in situ, although one was restored as a direct result of the project (see Appendix).

Shepherds in society
The role of the shepherd was easily mythologised, in no small part because of the Bible and its teachings. Shepherds watching their flocks were clear analogies for the Christian concept of God, Jesus and the Church as being a benign protective agency, loving and caring for its charges. The role of the sheep, one ultimately connected to the provision of food, helped define the analogy of sacrifice, although in this sense it was given a moral rather than utilitarian explanation.

More prosaically, shepherds were widely recognised as skilled practitioners within the countryside and enjoyed high status accordingly, being fairly elevated in the hierarchical tree of estate workers. This would have been especially so in Breckland, where sheep were so important for food and income, but there must have been some competition from gamekeepers as game shooting grew in importance on the great estates of the nineteenth century. The status of shepherds was such that societies and support networks developed around them. In Mildenhall, a branch of the Ancient Order of Shepherds was established as a kind of Friendly Society. Members paid subscriptions, and would receive help in times of hardship and illness, or with funeral costs. Such organisations were a selective – rather than universal – precursor of the modern welfare state, and reflected the longstanding tradition of shepherding as a valued craft and of shepherds as members of a type of guild. Some of the money raised from membership income was invested in ceremonial silver crooks, which members would carry at funerals and on ceremonial occasions. Such pomp and grandiosity served to underline the status of shepherds and shepherding within the rural community.

On a personal level, working as a shepherd often has a deep impact on the individual concerned. Quite apart from the sense of identity and the physical activities of the role, the work with animals has a significant effect. No one would doubt that shepherds have strong and deep relationships with their dogs, but they also develop a close bond with the flock. The protective nature of their role translates into an emotional concern for the sheep, some of which the shepherd would have brought into the world. Although sheep are often dismissed as being rather stupid animals – and, by implication, somewhat short on personality – detailed research does not bear out such generalisations. Studies have demonstrated that sheep can be clicker trained, much like dogs, and have good levels of recognition, being able to distinguish between individual humans, for example. This has an added poignancy, given that their primary role is to be killed and eaten.
The shepherd's contradiction, therefore, is to care for the animals as well as he can and give them the best possible life while accepting that they will, in most cases, ultimately be slaughtered.

Historically most shepherds were born to the role, living as they were in societies with limited employment options or concepts of career. Many simply followed in their father's and grandfather's footsteps, being familiar with sheep and shepherding from a very early age. More recently, some individuals will have chosen to become shepherds, or at least taken the opportunity to do so when it presented itself. However, there is an interesting example in the Brecks where a group of people experienced shepherding as a result of their conviction for a crime. In the 1990s HMP Wayland near Watton established a flock of New Norfolk Horn sheep (as well as cattle), with which some prisoners were able to work under supervision. “Most of the prisoners came from an urban environment and had no contact with any form of livestock before coming to Wayland,” recalls Tom Thurston, the prison's former Livestock Manager (and a volunteer on the project). “In fact, many of them were frightened of the sheep at first, but most gained confidence over a period of time.”

The prisoners undertook all aspects of livestock husbandry, including halter training, i.e. leading sheep around a ring for judging. The Wayland sheep were shown by prisoners at the Royal Norfolk, Aylsham and Wayland Shows, including participation in the Grand Parade at the Royal Norfolk Show. “When a sheep won a rosette or card, the prisoner who led the sheep was allowed to keep the card”, explains Thurston. The rehabilitative effects of this project appeared to have been highly positive. “It’s a fact that if you allow people with an aggressive personality to work with livestock, it can calm them down,” continues Thurston. “I certainly witnessed this personally on several occasions.” Sadly the prison farm was closed down in 2011, partly to cut costs, and the flock was dispersed.
4. Sheep, Ecology and Landscape

The Brecks is recognised as being a landscape unique for its ecology. The very factors that made it poor for farming, compared to the Fens or claysoils of South Norfolk, for example, make it ideal for a diverse array of plants and invertebrates. This was recognised from the early days of science, when collectors and natural historians explored the paths and heaths, collecting and recording beetles, wasps, moths and butterflies, and painting watercolours of plants. Statistics and rigorous scientific methods proved what most local people could already tell by observation.

Poor sandy soils, low rainfall and a continental climate held back the region’s agriculture, but provided a scattered diversity of conditions that allowed the existence of many different ecological niches. Over the course of human agriculture in the Brecks, several other factors splintered this landscape into fragments, further increasing the diversity. Two of the most important factors were the managed warrenning of rabbits and the grazing of sheep.

The Breckland Biodiversity Audit, published in 2010, identified the importance of the wildlife of the Brecks. Of nearly 13,000 species recorded in the Brecks, over 2000 – nearly a sixth – were already considered priority species for conservation. For 72 species, the Brecks is either their only UK site or their main stronghold in this country. These are impressive statistics, but also reveal a high degree of vulnerability. The audit also identified worrying extinctions and declines, and identified threats to these species.

One set of species (called a ‘guild’ by the report) was identified as dependent on areas of land that are both disturbed and heavily grazed. Other important guilds might need grazing but no disturbance, or disturbance but no grazing. The combination of sheep grazing on warrens and the fold course system – grazing sheep on poor agricultural land – had produced the very conditions on which highly specialised communities of plants and invertebrates depend. Regular disturbance creates bare earth that plants can colonise, wasps and bees can dig into, and other specialist invertebrates can hunt over. The action of grazing holds back more vigorous species such as coarse grasses and dandelions that otherwise can easily outcompete more vulnerable plants, shading them with greater leaf cover or sucking up any available water with their more extensive root systems.

Grazing animals such as sheep provide a major limit to the competitiveness of bigger plant species by nipping off the tops of seedlings, trampling and splitting

13 Dolman et al (2010), page 6
grass tufts and generally making life difficult. While sheep dung concentrates fertility, this fertility has to come from somewhere – the sheep do not create nitrates, phosphorous and potassium, they recycle it from the plants they eat. When sheep and goats were first domesticated, overgrazing led to impoverishment of the soil and environmental disaster. In the Brecks, it created a unique assemblage of living things, unwittingly maintained by generations of farming people.

The flagship species for which the Brecks are now so important did not appear with the first farmers. Plant seeds and propagules would have blown in on south-easterly winds to colonise the sands left behind by melting glaciers as the ice-sheets retreated 12,000 years ago. Eventually shrubs and trees colonised the area, but never effectively blanketed out these continental plants. Without sheep or rabbits nibbling off anything higher than a child’s thumb, less competitive plants should have been crowded out by trees, shrubs and rank grasses. The reason this did not happen is that other grazing animals were already performing that role. Among them were Red Deer, an indigenous British species and one that needs to eat an enormous amount of vegetation to support its muscular frame. Deer range widely across the landscape in search of food, consuming and burning many calories in the process and sometimes having a significant impact on the landscape. In the Scottish Highlands today, grazing by Red Deer and sheep has a huge effect on the vegetation – by inhibiting natural woodland regeneration, for example – and research indicates that, on a local level at least, grazing by deer can have nearly as great an impact as that by sheep.

In places such as Ben Lawers, this gives the opposite problem for conservation. The underlying rock is micaceous schist, which when weathered produces a nutrient-rich growing medium. This is limited by the harsh climate and only allows a variety of arctic-alpine herbs to grow, as well as tough trees such as dwarf willows and Juniper. Overgrazing by deer and sheep reduces the diversity, as many plants are promptly eaten. Rank grasses can survive the grazing, as they grow from their roots rather than their tips, and there are enough nutrients to support these energy-dependent structures. Where there is limited grazing, the flora is much more diverse.
Prior to farming, grazing by deer and other large herbivores would have held back competitive plants in the Brecks and allowed more niches to exist. The grazing would have occurred in an unmanaged way, so the prehistoric Brecks would have been a patchwork and highly varied landscape, not just different between the valleys and the sandy plateau tops, but also very varied within these distinct zones.

Agriculture in the Brecks replicated and expanded this situation. Big competitors such as trees were cleared, silty valley ground was ploughed and domestic animals grazed. Because the land was so marginal, a variety of sources of potential sustenance had to be exploited, creating a mosaic of very specific land uses. Because nutrients were so poor, soils were soon exhausted and fields would not therefore be covered in crops all year round or, indeed, every year. Whole areas would be rested, left fallow and abandoned, often reverting to heathland, for several years or even a decade or two. During such times sheep and rabbits would graze hard and the sparse nutrients were transported around, creating many windows of opportunity for specialist Breckland flora and fauna.

The human pressures that created the patchwork conditions of the Brecks over many thousands of years have changed vastly in the past century. Commercial rabbit warrening has ceased and new diseases, such as myxomatosis and Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD) have further hit rabbit numbers. This has reduced the amount of grazing and ground disturbance on which many of the rare plants and rare invertebrates depend. At the same time, Breckland’s fertility generally is increasing. The burning of fossil fuels puts a proportion of nitrogen oxide into the atmosphere, which is picked up by moisture and returned to the soil as rain – not rain as clean water, but as a light fertilising solution. Climatic changes have also complicated the microclimate of the Brecks, with an apparent trend towards wetter winters and less frequent frosts. Essentially the climate in the Brecks is becoming less like the climate on the Continent, which it has historically resembled. Meanwhile, managing the land as if it is a sheet rather than a patchwork is homogenising the number of potential microhabitats, squeezing out the individual pockets that support specialist plants and invertebrates.
Historically sheep (and rabbits) had a value as meat and wool- (fur-) producing organisms to help sustain human life. Coincidentally or accidentally, their modes of living also contributed to the formation of a unique landscape and ecosystem. Modern-day conservation grazing and ground disturbance initiatives seek to replicate these actions on the landscape. Heavy grazing produces some of the conditions needed, alongside mechanically disturbing the ground with diggers or tractors. Using machinery can reliably replace the bare earth created by rabbits, but maintaining sheep grazing is important to keep the sward down low. Additionally, sheep do not graze at the same level all over, but preferentially eat in patches. This creates a range of micro conditions and therefore allows more niches for a greater variety of tiny plants and insects.

Organisations such as the RSPB, Norfolk Wildlife Trust and Suffolk Wildlife Trust work closely with farmers and other organisations to maintain the habitats needed. Both wildlife trusts are very active in conservation grazing, maintaining ‘flying flocks’ of both sheep and Dartmoor ponies as a habitat management tool that can be moved around, and between, reserves as required. An example of the value of sheep is the grazing scheme carried out in the 1990s on Thetford Heath. The grass on the heath was ‘getting away’, growing more and more without being held back by grazing, to the point at which it had become so high that the rabbit population was declining. By very heavily stocking the heath with sheep over several winters, the grass was grazed down low, allowing the rabbits to recolonise and restore the component of disturbed ground (caused by their excavations and burrowing). Along with the short sward, the exposed soils and areas of bare ground are very valuable ecologically.

One of the most iconic threatened species of the Brecks is the Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*, a crow-sized bird perfectly camouflaged against the stony sands of the Brecks, which migrates from Africa to breed in Breckland each year. Stone Curlews need very specific conditions in which to lay their eggs and rear chicks: a low sward height, and bare earth. Research has shown that they forage in grass less than five centimetres high, but need grass less than two centimetres on which to breed. If the sward height increases, the birds will leave an area. This appears to be an evolved defence against being snuck up on by predators – like most ground-nesting birds, Stone Curlews rely heavily on camouflage to avoid being noticed, flying from a predator almost at the last moment. They lay their eggs in shallow scrapes, where the eggs are perfectly camouflaged, and so require a combination of low sward and bare earth. This occurs on the sandy heaths, but also on spring-sown arable land (winter-sown crops have often grown too high by the time the birds arrive from Africa), which has enabled the Stone Curlew to adjust, at least in part, to changes in its traditional Breckland environment.

Conservation efforts have helped increase the Stone Curlew population in the Brecks in recent decades. At their lowest ebb, in the late 1980s, there were only 100 breeding pairs in the Brecks (out of only 160 pairs nationally). Through the joint efforts of farmers and conservation organisations the total has since grown to around 250 pairs in the Brecks today. Keeping sheep and rabbits together are key to providing the required habitat for Stone Curlews on grass heaths, such as at the Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve at Weeting Heath. The sheep keep the sward low, and
the rabbits provide the bare earth (they may also provide a level of distraction for predators, a more visible prey to chase). Too many sheep when the Stone Curlews are nesting could be a problem as the trampling of the eggs would be more likely, so the conventional grazing regime has been to heavily stock the heaths through the winter in order to hold back the sward, then reduce numbers of sheep through the breeding season. Meanwhile, as rabbits have declined, machinery is used to replicate the continuity of bare earth needed for the Stone Curlews to nest on.

Various agri-environment schemes have provided an economic logic to undertake this work, and the farmers of the Brecks have worked alongside conservation organisations like the Norfolk and Suffolk Wildlife Trusts and RSPB. Funding has most recently come through the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy, and Britain’s withdrawal from the EU will almost certainly end this funding source. If this money is not replaced by the British Government, then the market logic to undertake this conservation work risks being lost, with an impact accordingly on the Stone Curlew (and other flagship Breckland species).

The Society’s Sheep in the Brecks project has highlighted the historical role of sheep and sheep husbandry in the Brecks, a position as important as that of rabbits in creating the distinct ecology of the area. Although the Brecks is an entirely human-influenced and thoroughly manmade landscape, it remains a place that can feel much wilder than most other lowland parts of Britain, a “ramshackle wilderness in which people and the land have conspired to strangeness”. The action of providing enough food to leave a surplus, and of converting animal products into money, has had a large and unintentional ecological effect on a landscape scale. The cultural history of this process goes hand in hand with the ecology, but is one that has more or less vanished within living memory. In the early twenty-first century, it is easy to feel dissociated from the production of our food – meat simply appears packaged in plastic trays. But when we enjoy the landscape of the Brecks, we are in fact intimately connected with the historic heritage of shepherding.

14 MacDonald (2014), page 7
Appendix

The Conservation of a Shepherd’s Hut

As a result of the project, a shepherd’s hut in need of conservation was identified close to where it has been used historically, on Beachamwell Warren. More than a century old, the hut was still in use in the 1960s. During lambing, which lasted four to six weeks, it was towed (originally by a horse, latterly by tractor) up to the warren from the farmyard where it was kept for the rest of the year. The shepherd and his dog lived in the hut when it was out on the warren. Rita Wing (née Rix), who ran the farm on behalf of her father Raymond Rix, remembers that someone relieved their shepherd for a period during the day so that he could go home to change his clothes and perhaps even have a sleep. John Rix, Rita’s brother, and who ultimately took over the farm from his father, recalled that the shepherd was allowed to go home at weekends if time allowed. During lambing the dog lived underneath the hut.

The hut can be clearly identified as having been built by the company Roots of East Dereham. Founded by John Root, by 1883 the company was a successful engineering company, including millwrighting and metal casting. By 1900, Roots were also making carts and wagons, and the shepherd’s hut was probably built at this time. Each hut manufacturer had its own design, and this example was identified by its pitched roof and the distinctive medicine cupboard built into the triangle of the roof above the shepherd’s bed. Other examples carry a cast ‘J. Roots East Dereham’ plate. This particular hut was probably built in the last years of the nineteenth or earliest years of the twentieth century and delivered from Dereham to Swaffham station, from where it was towed by horse the rest of the way to Beachamwell.

The Breckland Society recognised the importance of shepherd’s huts as part of the Brecks wider heritage and as a historical feature within the landscape, and so was awarded further funding of £2700 from the Breaking new Ground Landscape Partnership (‘People’s Pot’ fund) to conserve the hut in situ. Work took place during the spring and summer of 2017.

The aim of the conservation project was to keep alterations to a minimum and to retain the spirit of the hut whilst ensuring it was structurally sound and remain

15 Interview with Rita Wing, recorded by project volunteer Pat Reynolds
16 Recollection of John Rix, collected by project volunteer Pat Reynolds
17 See shepherdhuts.co.uk
secure for the next few decades of its life. This meant that the skilled carpenter employed (Peter Goulding, also project manager for the wider sheep project) was paid as much for what he did not do as for what he did. For example, it may have been quicker, and therefore cheaper, to entirely strip the external cladding, but many architectural characteristics would have been lost, and so painstaking part repairs were carried out, to ensure the survival of as much original material as practicable. Before work started, the hut was comprehensively recorded and photographed by volunteers working on a rainy and cold day.

Apart from its primitive gutter, which was sympathetically replaced, the hut’s corrugated iron roof had survived well. This solid ‘hat’ had kept the interior in good condition and helped ensure the survival of many interesting little details, such as the fragments of paper that covered the walls and the scraps of cloth stuffed into gaps to prevent a draught. These details, as well as the horsehair mattress for the bed and a sawn-off hook that would have held a lantern, help bring the hut to life as somewhere in which the shepherd lived and worked. One especially notable feature are the two round observation holes, about four inches in diameter, with one cut into each side of the hut, complete with sliding shutters to close them off. It was essential to preserve such details.

Although the cladding had suffered and obviously been repaired many times, much of the framework was in good condition. The actual chassis was generally free of rot and needed only one small repair. One full softwood bearer supporting the floor was replaced, and the other repaired where it had rotted near the door. The doorframe...
was rebuilt and the cladding repaired, retaining as much of the original as possible and reusing boards wherever feasible. The original cladding was made of a high quality softwood tongue-and-groove board, but simpler sawn boards were used for the repair. Not only was this approach appropriate in order that the repairs carried out should be visibly distinct from the original material, but it also reflects how an estate carpenter would traditionally have repaired a hut during its working life.

Under the green patina of woodland algae, the original boards had traces of many layers of paint and it was possible to take samples that could be colour-matched with a modern micro-porous paint system. In terms of repainting the hut, it was decided not to use a linseed ‘heritage’ paint, as these are hard to apply and actually do not perform as well as higher-quality modern paints. The hut’s original colour was of red oxide paint, a suitably nineteenth-century industrial/agricultural colour; many other huts were simply wood tared. The new woodwork was painted in Sadolin Superdec Woodstain, which has excellent durability and vapour permeability; as a woodstain,
it does not form a plastic layer trapping moisture and thereby speeding up decay. One face of the hut which required no significant repair was left unpainted, retaining the original patina.

On the face of it, a shed on wheels may lack the glamour of a medieval castle, Neolithic barrow or grand wool-funded medieval church. But a shepherd’s hut is an artefact of a more day-to-day part of our history, invisible because it was so ubiquitous, and thoroughly deserving of conservation given that so few have survived in anything like their original condition. The conserved hut will be available for viewing by appointment: enquiries via the Breckland Society website, www.brecsoc.org.uk.
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Archives

The Norfolk and Suffolk Record Offices both have relevant archival records. Their websites carry details of opening times and access arrangements:

**Norfolk Record Office**
The Archive Centre
Martineau Lane
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Shepherds’ crooks at the Wayland Show, summer 2016.
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The Breckland Society was set up in 2003 to encourage interest and research into the natural, built and social heritage of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks. It is a membership organisation which works to help protect the area and offers a range of activities to those who wish to see the special qualities of this unique part of England protected and enhanced.

In March 2014 the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) confirmed the award of nearly £1.5 million to the Breaking New Ground Landscape Partnership, enabling a £2.2 million scheme to deliver a range of heritage and landscape projects in the heart of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks. This report is a summary of the Breckland Society’s Sheep in the Brecks project.