

Oxford Down Sheep Breeders' Association

KNOW YOUR STOCK

A guide to selecting good Oxford Down breeding sheep

This booklet is intended to give guidance to new and novice breeders on the points to look for when selecting a good sheep and a good Oxford Down. It is hoped that these guidelines will assist breeders in developing the skill of sheep selection through careful observation and handling of stock in the field.

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OXFORD DOWN
SHEEP BREEDERS ASSOCIATION



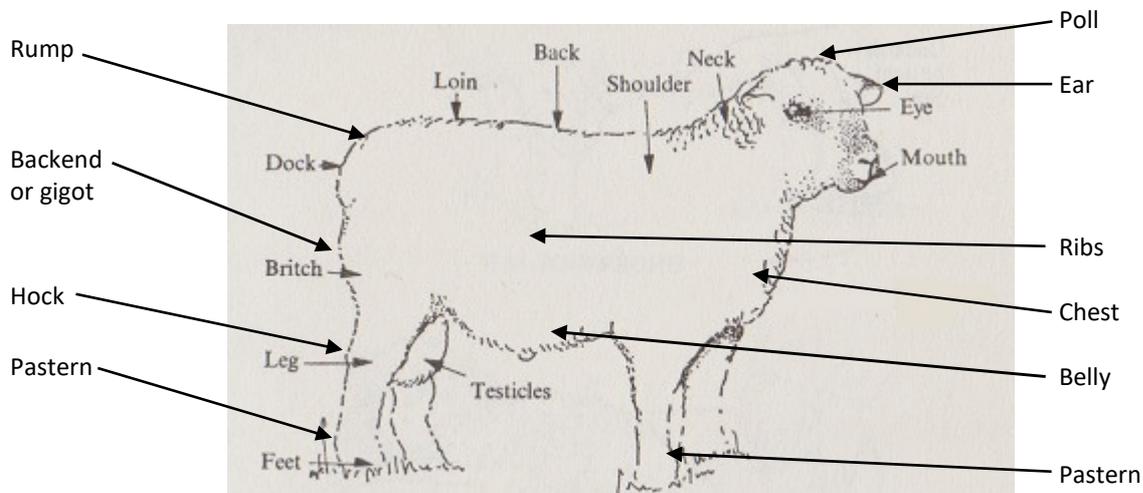
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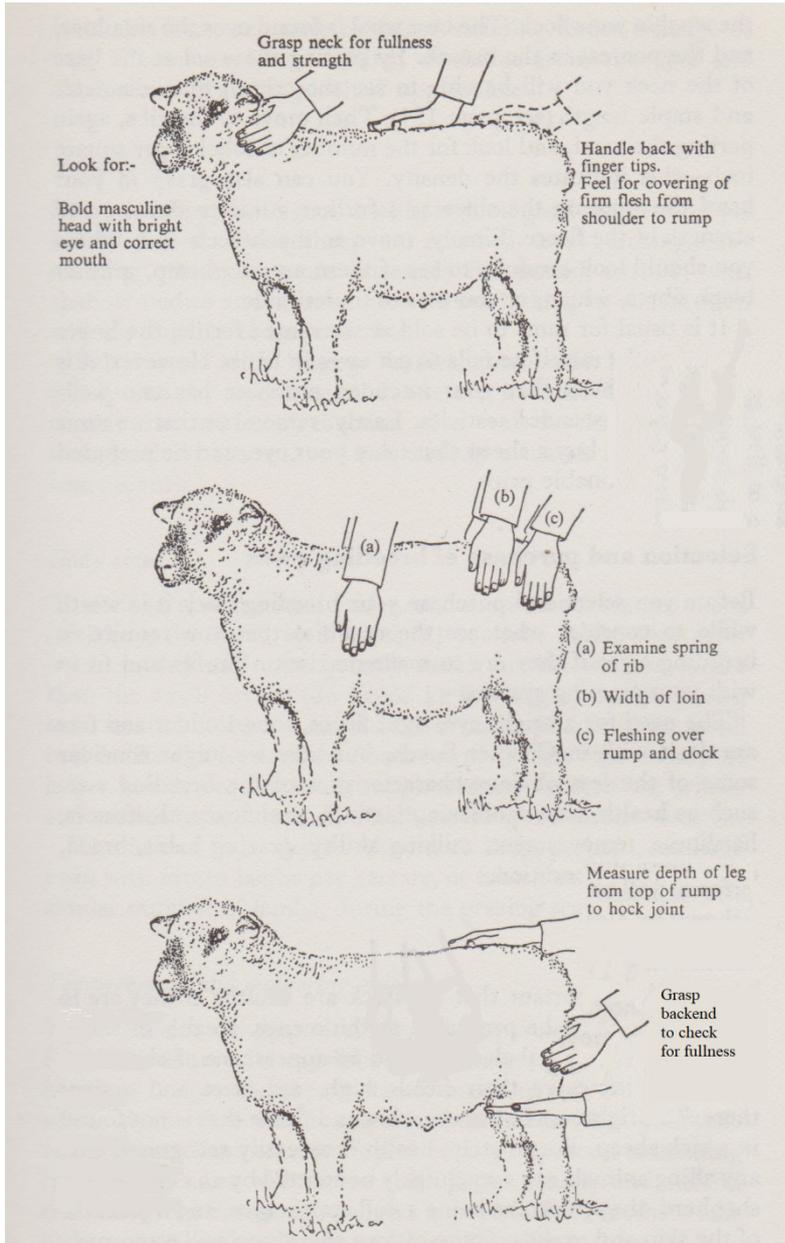
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Breed Description

The Oxford Down ram has a bold, masculine head, well set on a strong neck; the poll is well covered with wool, and adorned by a 'top-knot'. The face a uniform dark colour, the ears of good length, the shoulder broad, with a broad chest well forward. A full, level back, the ribs well sprung, the barrel deep, thick, and long with straight underline. The legs are short and dark coloured, standing square and well apart. The meat is firm, lean, and of excellent quality. The whole body is covered with wool of close texture, good length, and fine quality.



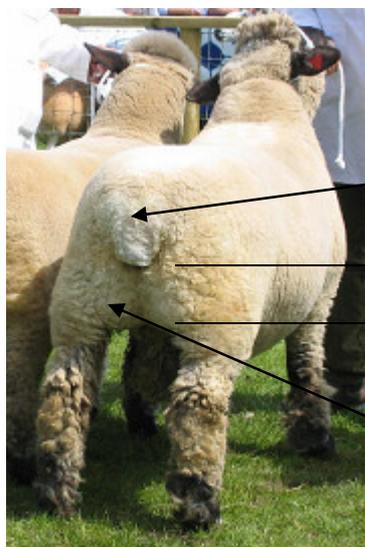
BODY & CONFORMATION



- A good Oxford Down must be a big, strong sheep with a large frame
- Good length, width and depth of barrel and good spring of rib
- Straight underline and full, level back
- Strong neck
- Shoulders not too wide (three broad fingers should be able to fit between shoulder blades)
- Broad chest, well forward and full

- Excellent backend, full and deep
- Wide and deep across the loin
- Firm, even flesh all over body (not overfat - use condition scoring technique)
- Thick at the dock

Skillful trimming for show will often use the wool to create the illusion of a good backend. When assessing conformation the sheep must be handled to understand the true conformation of the loin, dock and backend.



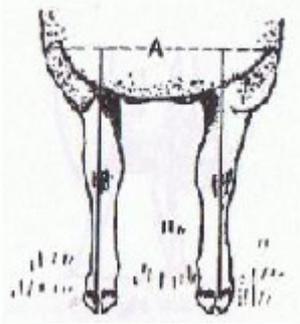
Thickness of dock should be checked by grasping the root of the tail

Backend should be deep

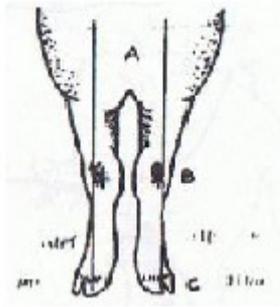
Backend should be full

LEGS & FEET

FRONT VIEW FRONT LEGS



Correct
Broad chest (A) standing square with legs square, parallel and well apart.



Fault
Narrow chest (A) standing with legs close together and knock-kneed (B) with feet not straight (C).

Front legs viewed from front of sheep

Sheep should stand square with straight, parallel legs well apart

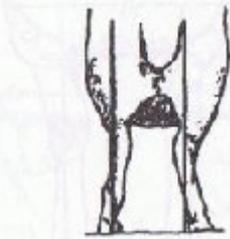
Feet viewed from front of sheep

Feet should be straight, not pointing in or out

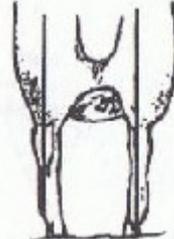
REAR VIEW REAR LEGS



Correct
Standing square with legs straight, parallel and well apart.



Fault
Cow-hocked. Legs turned in at the hocks.



Fault
Bandy-legged.

Rear legs viewed from rear of sheep

Sheep should stand square with straight, parallel legs well apart

Feet viewed from back of sheep

Feet should be straight, not pointing in or out

SIDE VIEW FRONT LEGS



Correct
Leg is straight when viewed from the side.



Fault
Leg is not straight.

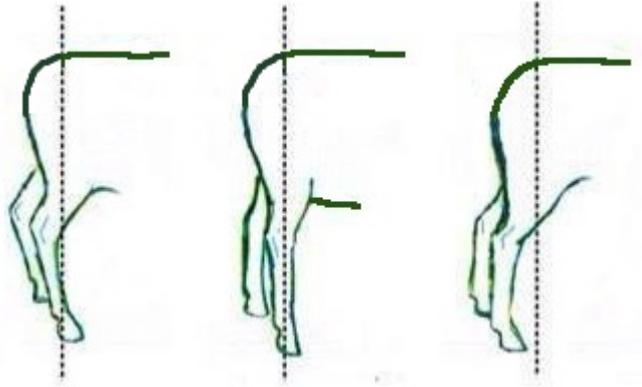


Fault
Leg is not straight.

Front legs viewed from side of sheep

Front legs should be straight

SIDE VIEW REAR LEGS



Fault

Sickle-hocked.
Legs too far under.
Too much angle at the hock and thigh joints.

Fault

Post-legged.
The leg is too straight with little or no angle at the hock.

Correct

Perpendicular from pastern to hock with correct angle at the hock.

Rear legs viewed from side of sheep

Rear legs should be straight from above the pastern up to the hock when viewed from the side. The hock when viewed from the side should be angled.

HEAD



A good Oxford Down must be bold in character. It should have a strong top-knot covering the poll. The face colour should be a uniform dark, chocolate brown, not truly black.

The nose should have flare i.e. a strong, broad nose that fills the span of the hand. Narrow, pointed noses must be avoided in Oxfords.

A few speckles of white hairs at the tip of the nose are acceptable but not necessary.

The degree of wool cover on the face varies and to some extent comes down to the personal preference of the breeder.

Most lambs will have strong wool cover on their faces during their first year that they partially lose as they age. For show, the cheek wool on lambs is plucked off.

Commercially, sheep which are wool blind are strongly disliked.

The eye should be bright and alert.

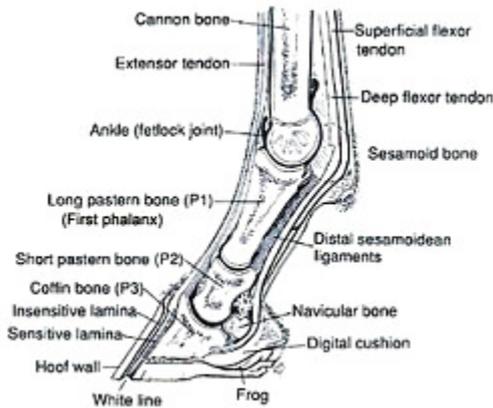
Faults:

- Scurs (rudimentary horn buds that are not fully attached) should be avoided. Always put your hand in the top knot to check for the presence of horns or scurs.

Disqualifications:

- Fully attached horns
- Entropion (in-turned eyelids)

PASTERNS



Correct
Up on the pastern.



Borderline
Weak pastern showing strain.



Fault
Down on the pastern.



The pastern is the joint between the hoof and the cannon bone of the leg.

It comprises of the long pastern bone, the short pastern bone and the adjoining tendons and ligaments.

A pastern may drop if the joint is not strong enough to correctly support the weight of the sheep.

Both front and rear pasterns should be well up at an angle of around 60° to the horizontal. Sheep with weak pasterns or which are down on one or more pasterns should be avoided.

The ewe lamb pictured is very correct on her pasterns. Note that it can be hard to assess pasterns when the sheep is on grass or in a strawed pen, but on hard standing faults become much more evident.

MOUTH



Overshot
The teeth project beyond the dental pad.

Just over
The sharp edge of the teeth can just be felt with the thumb.

Correct
The teeth meet the dental pad.

Just under
The teeth are just under the dental pad. A lamb may grow on from this to have a correct mouth.

Undershot
A genetic deformity.

An overshot or undershot jaw is a bad fault in a sheep intended for pedigree breeding.

A correct mouth is one in which the teeth touch the digital pad in such a way as to give an effective bite at the tip of the teeth.

EARS



Oxford ears should be a uniform dark chocolate brown, not truly black.

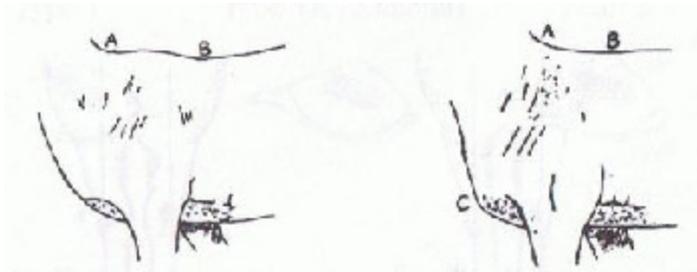
The ears should be of medium length and point straight out.

Prick ears or drooped ears are faults and must be avoided.

Some lines have wool on the back of the ears, others have ears clean of wool.

TOP LINE

SHOULDERS, NECK & CHEST



Fault

Hollow at neck (A) and dip behind the shoulder (B).

Correct

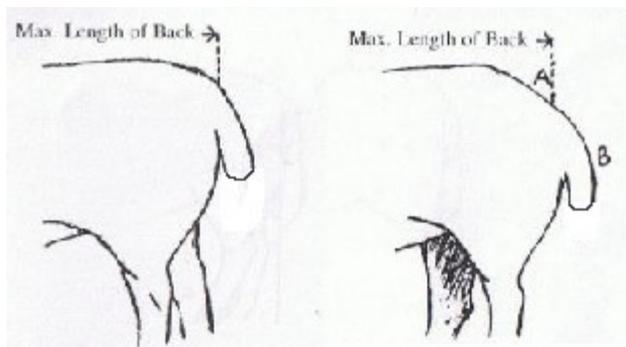
Neck well set (A) with level top line behind shoulder (B) and chest well forward (C).

The top line should be straight and level from the shoulders through to the rump.

This should be assessed by handling of the sheep's back. Do not be fooled by skillful trimming intended to hide a poor top line or hindquarter.

A dip in the back behind the shoulders is a common and bad fault.

HINDQUARTERS, TAIL & RUMP



Correct

Good hindquarter with level top line to rump and tail well set.

Fault

Sloping rump (A) and low set tail (B).

The level top line should extend from the shoulders to the rump. A sloping rump and low set tail are faults to be avoided.

The tail must be docked, but no shorter than UK animal health regulations allow. These state that the tail must be left long enough to cover the anus of rams and the vulva of ewes.

SKIN



When the wool is parted, the skin below should preferably be cherry pink in colour, not blue, black or grey.

WOOL

FLEECE

Part the wool at several points across both flanks of the sheep from the shoulder to the loin. Also check the chest and the britch. The wool should be fine, dense and of good staple, with good crimp and free of kemp.

Look in particular for spots of black wool. This is highly heritable and must be avoided.

Check the tightness of the fleece by grabbing it with the hand. You should not be able to close your hand. If the hand can be closed it indicates a loose fleece. A tight-skinned sheep is essential to produce good prime lambs.

It is hard to assess the true tightness of the fleece if the sheep is not carrying much wool or has been prepared for show.

Faults:

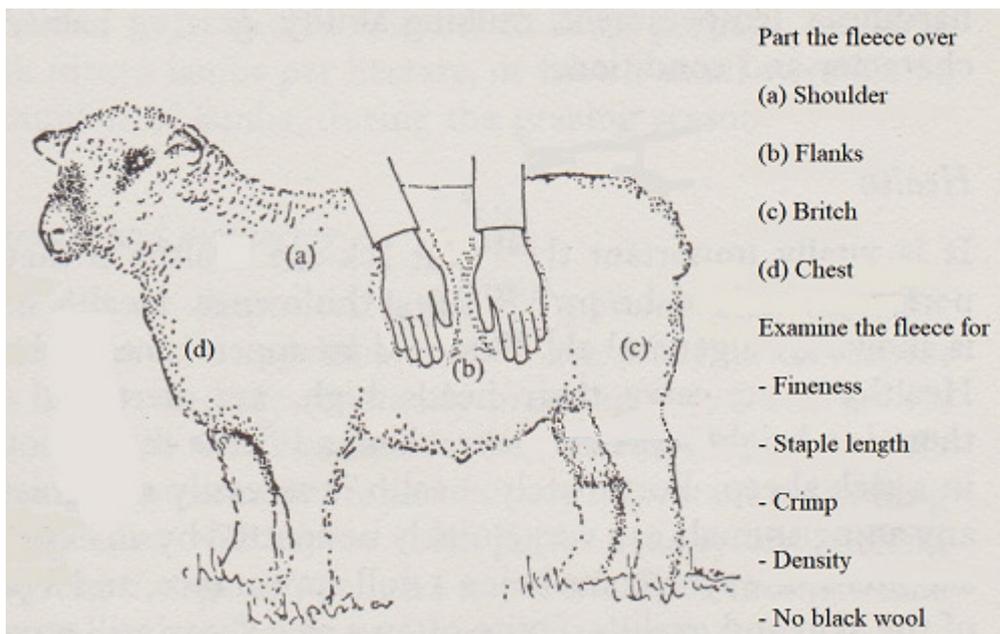
- Spots of black wool within the fleece
- Kemp
- Loose fleece

Disqualifications:

- Coloured fleece or any coloured wool in the fleece

Oxford Down fleece characteristics:

Fineness (Bradford Count) 54-56
Average length of staple 10-13cm
Average fleece weight 3.5-4.5kg



WOOL COVER ON LEGS & BODY



Body

The whole body should be covered with wool, including the belly.

Legs

Rear legs should have wool cover to the foot with uniform dark coloured hair beneath.

Front legs should have wool cover to the knees at least or to the foot with uniform dark coloured hair beneath. The knees typically do not have wool.

CORRECT BELOW

RAMS - TESTICLES

- Two testicles of even size
- Testicular size should be appropriate for the age of the ram (mature rams minimum scrotum circumference 36cm)
- The testicles should be fully descended into the scrotum
- The testicles should be free from palpable lumps/swellings

Disqualifications:

Rams which are rigs (rams with only one testicle, only one testicle fully descended, one normal and one small testicle, both testicles not fully descended)

EWES - UDDERS

- Two sound quarters free of lumps and hardness

MOVEMENT

- Observe the movement of the sheep when it is unrestrained – not on the end of a halter.
- A free action without stiffness or lameness should be observed.
- A straight action on all four legs is ideal, with no sign of any leg being thrown.
- Overall, the sheep should be a well-balanced animal.

STRENGTH OF BONE



- A good Oxford Down should display strong bone in the legs, although not excessively so.
- Rams may be expected to have stronger bone than ewes.
- Avoid sheep with fine bone.
- The ram shown has good strength of bone.

Acknowledgements

The Association wishes to acknowledge the use of the following material:

- Artwork of body structure of ram, conformation of ram and examining wool
© Derek H Goodwin and Hutchinson & Co (Publishers) Ltd.
- Artwork of mouth, pasterns, front and rear views of legs, top line and hindquarters
drawn by Lesley Partridge and used by permission of Lesley Partridge with thanks to the
Jacob Sheep Society.
- Photo of skin used by permission of the Shropshire Sheep Breeders' Association.
- Drawings of foot structure and side views of legs obtained from online image sources.

Point Checklist

	Point	Assessment			Standard	Comments
1	Mouth					
	Bite	Correct	Borderline	Bad	Can't feel teeth beyond the pad	
2	Legs					
	Front (from front)	Good	Average	Poor	Straight	
	Front (from side)	Good	Average	Poor	Straight	
	Rear (from rear)	Good	Average	Poor	Straight	
	Rear (from side)	Good	Average	Poor	Angled above hock	
3	Pasterns					
	Front right	Good	Average	Poor	Approx 60° angle from horizontal	
	Front left	Good	Average	Poor	Approx 60° angle from horizontal	
	Back left	Good	Average	Poor	Approx 60° angle from horizontal	
	Back right	Good	Average	Poor	Approx 60° angle from horizontal	
4	Feet					
	Straightness	Good	Average	Poor	Straight, not turned in or out	
5	Breed type					
	Head (OD character)	Good	Average	Poor	As bold as possible	
	Wool cover (body)	Good	Average	Poor	Well covered all over	
	Wool cover (legs)	Good	Average	Poor	Front to knee, rear to feet	
	Face, leg & ear colour	Good	Average	Poor	Uniform dark colour, not black	
	Strength of bone	Good	Average	Poor	Strong	
	Flare across nose	Good	Average	Poor	Broad, fills span of hand	
	Ears (size & set)	Good	Average	Poor	Medium, straight out	
	Top knot	Good	Average	Poor	Poll well covered	
	Scurs	Present?	Yes	No	Scurs are a fault	
6	Correct below					
	Ewes (udders)	Correct?	Yes	No	Two quarters, no lumps/hardness	
	Rams (testicles)	Correct?	Yes	No	Two, equal size, fully descended	
7	Body structure					
	Size	Good	Average	Poor	A good OD must be a big sheep	
	Shoulders	Good	Average	Poor	Broad, 3 fingers between blades	
	Chest	Good	Average	Poor	Broad, well forward and full	
	Neck	Good	Average	Poor	Strong, well set on	
	Spring of rib	Good	Average	Poor	Good spring	
	Length of body	Good	Average	Poor	Long	
	Width of body	Good	Average	Poor	Wide	
	Depth of body	Good	Average	Poor	Deep	
	Top line	Good	Average	Poor	Level, shoulder to rump, no dips	
8	Conformation					
	Backend	Good	Average	Poor	Full and deep	
	Loin	Good	Average	Poor	Wide	
	Dock	Good	Average	Poor	Thick	
9	Fleece					
	Density	Good	Average	Poor	Tight, can't grip with hand	
	Staple	Good	Average	Poor	Good length	
	Fineness	Good	Average	Poor	Fine, good crimp, no kemp	
	Black wool	Good	Average	Poor	No black fibres in fleece	
10	Other					
	Eye	Correct?	Yes	No	Bright and alert	
	Skin colour	Correct?	Yes	No	Cherry pink, not blue/black/grey	
	Movement	Good	Average	Poor	Straight, free action	
	Horn	Present?	Yes	No	Disqualification	
	Entropian	Present?	Yes	No	Disqualification	
Coloured fleece	Present?	Yes	No	Disqualification		