

# NORTH ISLAND FAT-LAMB CROSSES

By

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THE Southdown-Romney lamb has been the only fat-lamb cross of any importance in the North Island during the last 20 years. The type of lamb produced by this cross has been found most suited to New Zealand's normal export market and, although other ram breeds have been tried, and are still being used to a very limited extent, farmers in the main have been content to conform with the policy of the New Zealand Meat Producers' Board and concentrate on the production of lightweight Down type lambs. Nevertheless, at the Department of Agriculture's Animal Research Station at Ruakura advice is still frequently asked for about other crosses. Because nothing better than opinions and prejudices, based on meagre observations and hearsay, could be offered by research workers or by farmers, and because it is the task of a research station to provide facts, it was decided 3 years ago to compare the various crosses under the same environmental conditions on fat-lamb country.

TO this end, for comparison with the normal Southdown and Romney as sires, six other breeds which were most common, suitable, and available were selected. These were the Ryeland, Dorset Horn, Suffolk, Border Leicester, English Leicester, and Cheviot. A selection of the rams used is shown in Fig. 1.

## The Sire Breeds

The Southdown with its small, compact, short-legged, and deeply-fleshed body is obviously the ideal quality meat animal and is generally considered to be the most highly improved mutton breed of the world.

In itself the Romney has no real importance or prospects as a fat-lamb sire of quality, but a proportion of the wether lambs off the hill country must be slaughtered each year and they contribute a substantial percentage of the total export kill. The Romney was, therefore, included in this comparison.

For many years the Suffolk, which originated from a cross between the Southdown and the old Horned Norfolk breed, has been one of the most popular fat-lamb sires in England. Both straight Suffolks and Suffolk

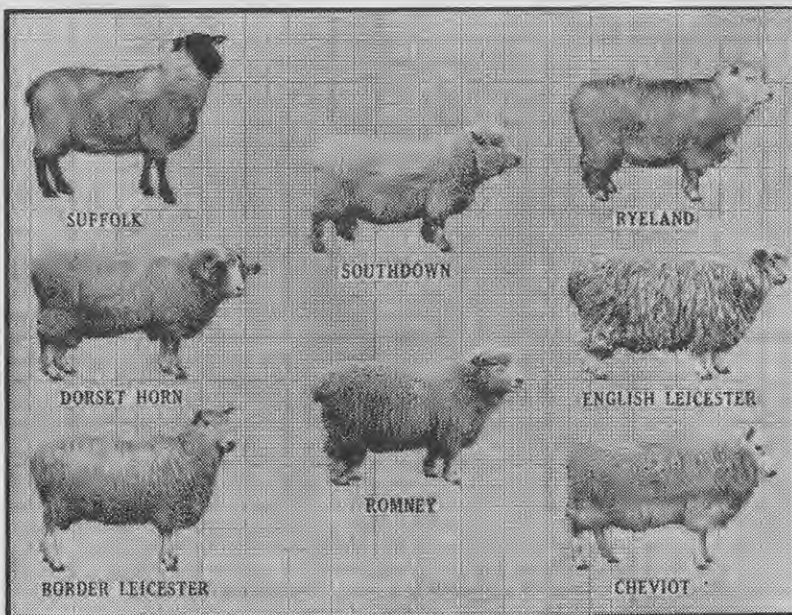


Fig. 1—A selection of the rams used in the breeding experiments.

crosses have been very successful in carcass competitions at Smithfield, and the breed is employed to produce carcasses of 50-65lb. dressed weight. Although it is a large, long-legged breed, the Suffolk is deeply fleshed and well proportioned.

The Dorset Horn is to some extent handicapped by its horns, which are a menace to fences in New Zealand and make handling in the shed and yards more difficult. However, it is becoming increasingly popular in Australia, partly on account of its extended breeding season, which fits it to the marked seasonal variations of that country. Australian breeders are seeking to evolve a polled type. Although a tendency toward long legs and rather ungainly bodies exists in the breed, short-legged, deeply-fleshed, compact strains are available.

Border Leicesters were formerly used quite extensively in the North Island, but have practically disappeared with the increasing use of the Southdown. They are a long-legged, big-framed, hardy breed, reputedly tracing their origin, through the activity of the border raiders, to the Cheviot from the north and the English Leicester from the south.

The Ryeland is a Down breed still used to a certain extent in the North Island. A larger animal than the

Southdown, it still has the thickly-fleshed characteristics typical of Down breeds. Perhaps partly for the reason that carcasses of this cross have the reputation of not grading quite as well as those of the Southdown, it has never attained the popularity of the latter.

Although the English Leicester was one of the earliest improved British breeds, it does not fulfil modern requirements of either the producer or the consumer. The cross is considered by many farmers to be one of the latest maturing and more useful where lambs are fattened on crops, as in the South Island.

In view of the fresh interest that has been aroused in the possibilities of the Cheviot for second-class hill country, this breed was included for the same reason as the Romney, although it was realised that there was little prospect of its becoming of any great importance except as a by-product of hill farms.

All these breeds have been tried out by individual farmers in the past and have been gradually abandoned over the years in favour of the Southdown, except in the case of a small minority who have always retained their partiality for one breed or another in the face of public opinion and trade

TABLE I.

Cross	Total % fattened off mother	% killed 1st draft	Carcass wt. (lb.)	Grading Percentages			Average return per lamb*
				Down	Prime	Second	
Southdown	91	39	34.6	90	8	2	34/-
Ryeland	94	47	34.9	39	56	5	34/4
Suffolk	89	47	39.9	13	81	6	37/4
Dorset Horn	91	54	38.1	14	81	5	36/-
Border Leicester	83	48	38.9	9	90	1	35/11
Eng. Leicester	76	29	37.1	10	87	3	35/5
Cheviot	80	36	35.7	6	77	17	33/11
Romney	72	18	34.9	5	73	22	33/6

\* Calculated on opening schedule based on 11½d. per lb. for Down 2's on December 9 (the ruling price for the middle season) to overcome seasonal price fluctuations.