



Skill needed to add value to island flock

Owners of North Ronaldsay sheep flocks might have a lot to say about the positive qualities of this ancient and distinctive breed, but the reality is that in terms of hard cash they are of relatively low value.

It is widely accepted that around 4,000 years ago their ancestors could be found all over the country, but were gradually pushed both north and west as more productive, white-fleeced breeds were introduced.

Today they are mostly found in the Orkneys and take their name from the most northerly island in that archipelago.

Each sheep takes between two and a half and three years to mature to meat weight so the only way to add value is to make use of their fleece.

It would be wrong to say that one of The Natural Fibre Company's most loyal and regular customers got into sheep farming by accident, but something needed to change 12 years ago when the family bought a smallholding with only five milking goats in what could loosely be described as the western Home Counties.

A local family moving north provided a solution and sold their small flock of five ewes and a ram which proved relatively easy to manage.

Over the next two years the size of the flock increased, the fleeces were particularly fine, but the British Marketing Wool Board didn't seem to be the best answer.

They found the Natural Fibre Company

which was at that time in Wales and stuck with them when the business moved to Cornwall.

While the return on capital is not rapid, with the products being sold in three local shops, it is both steady and regular.

Considerable skill is needed to produce consistently high quality fleece. The breeding ewes are carefully selected. They breed for one year first lambing when aged two, miss the next year and then mate again.

Account has to be taken of diet as Man North Ronaldsays traditionally graze on spend most of their lives on island foreshores.

The islanders, incidentally, have developed their own cottage industry, first for their own wool and second to boost the island economy.

'I've made many friends and now have private customers asking when new colours will be available' says the Home Counties flock owner.

'With a spinning wheel of my own and being in demand for demonstrations and talks everywhere, the wool spun by NFC comes with me and is much admired for its quality, colour combination and ethical processing qualities'.

This case history is unusual in that it is anonymous because the flock owner has more than enough business! It is, however, a good example of what can be done to boost income in what might otherwise be described as a 'non-commercial' flock.

