Sheep washing

Sheep were very important in the local farming economy.

The parish supported of the order of 2400 sheep in 1902, falling to around 460 by 1941[i]. However, Ewelme was also a centre for sheep shearing for the surrounding area, and many were brought in from other parishes. Prior to shearing the sheep were washed in the stream to clean the fleeces. At the end of the "season" there was an annual feast for the shearers and washers, for many years held at the Greyhound Inn; that for 1890 was described in the local press[ii]:-

"The Ewelme sheep shearers and washers held their annual feast at "The Greyhound" Inn, on Monday. A capital spread was provided as usual by the Hostess, Mrs Garlick, after which a convivial evening was spent, some capital songs being sung by Messrs. Goddard, Sheard, Brooks and Job Winfield. The season, we hear, was a very successful one, no less than 8388 sheep having been shorn here during the season."

Similar records exist for the years 1867[iii], 1868[iv] and 1891[v]; in this last year the number of sheep reported washed was 6856, and sheared 8373.

Figure 28. Sheep washing somewhere in the Upper Thames region. Although clearly not Ewelme, the procedures being shown are almost identical to those described for the village by George Leslie (see text). Note the temporary weir on the right, raising the water level, and the bar just above the surface under which the sheep are pushed. From Robertson (1875).

Leslie (1888) described this sheep washing:-

"It is great fun to look on at the performance; there are generally two pens above the wash, two divisions in the wash, and a large dripping pen for the sheep as they come out. At the wash at

Ewelme the men seize the sheep by the wool, and raising them in the air, drop them on their backs into the water, where they float at first like huge corks; very soon, however, nothing but their heads remains above. They are progged along with sheep-hooks to a narrow place, on each side a man seizes them and ransacks their wool; he then slips their heads underneath a bar, when they are allowed to swim away to the dripping-ground. On their first landing they stagger and fall with the immense weight of water carried in their wool; but they soon get up alright, and dry up beautifully white and clean. The whole scene, with the dogs and men, is very lively and amusing."

There were complaints that the sheep washing dirtied the water and caused inconvenience to villagers who drew their domestic supply from downstream (earlier in this chapter). Robertson (1875) stated that the process of sheep washing "soon discolours and sullies the water extremely, and it is some time before it recovers its purity. One effect of this is to sicken the fish to such a degree as to seriously interfere with the angling for some time". One must also wonder what affect it had on the watercress beds downstream; the two practices overlapped by at least ten years. One Ewelme resident, James Heath, took his objection to sheep washing to the extent of "deliberately fouling the stream" as a protest. He was summonsed to appear at a meeting of the Crowmarsh Rural District Council. The affair was reported in the local press thus[vi]:-

"At their last meeting the Council had under consideration a complaint that Mr Heath had wilfully fouled the stream at Ewelme. He attended before the Council and explained that his action was intended as a protest against the fouling of the stream by sheep-washing. Under the circumstances, the Council decided not to take further proceedings against Mr Heath, provided he would send a written apology to the Clerk. Mr Heath's compliance with this request took the following form:-

'Gentlemen – I am very pleased with your decision of Tuesday last with regard to the pollution of the Ewelme Brook. I trust that by your valuable aid this will be the last year that this beautiful spring will be contaminated by the washing of sheep and by other offensive matter being thrown into it. Allow me to thank you for your time you gave and the trouble that I put you to relating to this matter; and I would also like to thank my fellow members of the Ewelme Parish Council for bringing this case before your notice. Believe me to be, gentlemen, yours obediently, James Heath.'

The Clerk (Mr G F Slade) was instructed to write to Mr Heath informing him that his letter could not be received as an apology, and that unless one was forthcoming the threatened proceedings would have to be taken."

A subsequent more contrite communication was accepted and the matter was dropped. It is not known for how much longer large-scale sheep washing continued in Ewelme.

The location of the Ewelme sheep wash is also something of a mystery. From the description of the procedure given by George Leslie (above) there must have been provision for temporary deepening of the stream, presumably using stop boards; and other facilities such as narrow areas and the "dripping ground" suggest some specific bankside engineering. There are no indications of the location on either the 1840 tithe map or on the early editions (1871 and 1898) of the OS 1:2500 scale maps. As sheep washing was clearly still being done in 1900, the location cannot have been obliterated by the cress beds as these were already well established by then. The most likely location is immediately downstream of the King's Pool; here there is suitable narrowing, and steps down into the channel. Raising the water level would have been a quick and easy task using stop-boards, as the fall from the pond itself limits the area upstream which would thus require to be

deepened. There are some old iron rings fixed into the brick wall of the stream which may have been used to tether hurdles of other temporary equipment within the channel. No sign of any associated engineering is nowadays apparent on the road side of the stream as this concreted bank was engineered only in the 1930's[vii].

Above: Iron fixings in the stream wall below King's Pool; associated with sheep washing?

Some support for the location suggested above comes from an old manuscript[viii] in which Moses Winfield (born 1844) was quoted as referring to the outfall of King's Pool as "the sheep brook".

[i] Townley 2016.

[ii] Berkshire and Oxfordshire Advertiser, July 11 1890.

[iii] Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette, July 20 1867.

[iv] Oxford Chronicle and reading Gazette, July 18 1868.

[v] Newbury Weekly News and general Advertiser, July 23 1891.

[vi] Berkshire and Oxfordshire Advertiser, July 6 1900.

[vii] Memory of Norah Harwood recorded in Chisholm (2000)

[viii] Sawbridge (2020).