

Cistercian Sheep-Farming and Wool-Sales in the Thirteenth Century

By R. A. DONKIN

THE list of wool-producing monasteries drawn up by Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, a member of the merchant house of Bardi, contains a larger proportion of Cistercian houses (about 85 per cent) than of any other order.¹ Prices per sack are quoted for almost every house, but these must be used with care. They are not directly comparable with those fixed on a county basis for the wool grant of 1337.² The Pegolotti figures are the earlier, probably by at least forty years;³ they include the cost of carriage from England to Flanders and the profit due to the merchant; and they are usually given for three grades, of which the 'middle' wool probably represents the average county product. Nevertheless, if we subtract four marks from the prices of 'best' wool and two from those of 'middle' wool—amounts suggested by a study of prices actually obtained on various occasions by Cistercian houses—there is still every indication that the monks were getting more for their wool than most other producers. How much more would of course depend upon the proportion which 'best' wool bore to the total, and this we have no means of knowing. There is, however, some evidence to support the view that the Cistercians occasionally marketed an intrinsically better product and very often prepared their clip more carefully.

Here we are directly concerned only with the management of sheep and the preparation of wool, but it should also be taken into account that the monasteries supplied wool in bulk, thus, no doubt, saving the buyer miles of tedious travel; that they were in a position to make long-term contracts; and

¹ Printed in W. Cunningham, *The Growth of English Industry and Commerce* (5th ed.), Cambridge, 1922, I, App. D. A similar but inferior list is printed in G. Espinas, *La Vie urbaine de Douai au moyen âge*, Paris, 1913, III, pp. 232-4.

² *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1334-8, pp. 480-3.

³ This emerges if one considers the Cistercian houses included in the list. The critical entries appear to be: (a) Vale Royal (*Vareale In gualesi*), Cheshire, a community established—from an earlier site, Darnhall—in 1281; no house founded after Vale Royal, the last item in the list, is included. (b) Stanlaw (*Stalleo in Zestri*) is listed although the monks were moved to Whalley, Lancashire, in 1296 (there is, of course, the possibility that the earlier name continued to be used through force of habit after the change of site). Espinas suggests a date about the middle of the thirteenth century for the document he publishes, but it is doubtful whether this view takes into account the inclusion of Darnhall (*Dorenhalline*).

that they were prepared, if necessary, to carry their wool-sacks to some convenient rendezvous, possessing as they did numerous toll exemptions, suitable carts and waggons, and unsalaried lay brothers.¹

The improvements in sheep-breeding during the eighteenth century probably effaced any remaining traces of improvements made five hundred years previously. In any case, these traces were doubtless slight: three centuries had elapsed since the Dissolution, and nearly six since the height of the monastic interest in wool. Certain writers appear convinced, however, that early improvements did indeed take place. "Kirkstead (Lincs.) . . . cultivated the originals of the Lincoln breed," we are told,² and ". . . to the Cistercians this country is indebted for its finer wool."³ Fletcher, in his study of the Cistercians in Yorkshire, supposes that "the Order, because of its intercourse with foreign countries, brought about great and important improvements in the breeding of sheep."⁴ But little or no documentary evidence is produced in support of these assertions; and as far as better stock was concerned there was no need for growers in the poorer districts to look beyond England.

To illustrate, first, the reputation of the Cistercians as flockmasters, we may cite a letter written to the bishop of Chichester (1222-38) by his steward, Simon de Senliz. "Moreover, my lord, please to think about procuring sheep at the abbey of Vaudey [Cistercian, Lincs.] or elsewhere." Later Simon wrote: "I retain in Sussex the *frater* of Vaudey . . . as I have proposed to keep sheep in our lands, in your manors, and therefore I keep back the *frater* in order that the sheep may be more advisedly and usefully provided for through him." On yet another occasion he reported: "Know, moreover, my Lord, that on the Saturday next after the Exaltation of the Holy Cross [September 14th] there came to me a certain monk from *Bordele* [Bordesley, Worcestershire] telling me that forty lambs and two sheep had been sent to you from the abbot of *Bordele* and were at a certain grange of the house of Waverley [also Cistercian, Surrey]; in consequence of which I asked the said monk to lend you his shepherd until I could procure another suitable."⁵ Both Vaudey and Bordesley marketed wool of high quality according to Pegolotti, above the average of the order, but a clip of superior grade was the rule

¹ R. A. Donkin, 'The Disposal of Cistercian Wool in England and Wales during the 12th and 13th centuries', *Cîteaux in de Nederlanden*, VIII (ii), 1957, pp. 115-20.

² H. E. Wroot, 'Yorkshire Abbeys and the Wool Trade', Thoresby Soc. Pub., XXXIII, 1930, p. 11.

³ J. S. Brewer, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, Rolls Series 21, IV, p. xxiii.

⁴ J. S. Fletcher, *The Cistercians in Yorkshire*, London, 1919, p. 152.

⁵ H. W. Blaaw, 'Letters of Ralph de Nevill, Bishop of Chichester', *Sussex Arch. Coll.*, III, 1850, pp. 52, 54, 70. The letters are undated.

rather than the exception in Lincolnshire and Worcestershire.¹ The native wool of Sussex was generally of a much lower standard.² Now if the Cistercians had graded up their flocks as a whole by the mid-thirteenth century, it would surely have been unnecessary for men such as Simon de Senliz to look to houses as much as 150 miles away. Yet it may be that for some reason their flocks had acquired an exceptional reputation, or were thought particularly suitable: sheep from Vaudey, accustomed to the Fens, would presumably have prospered on the Plain of Selsey around Chichester and behind the Solent. Kingswood (Wilts., now Glos.), at the foot of the Cotswold scarp, was also an important wool house, having apparently an annual surplus of some twenty-five sacks of high quality. It was selling sheep in 1241, 1262 ('old sheep' to the abbot of Malmesbury and others), 1289 (24 sheep), and 1314 (43 sheep). On the other hand the house bought some Lincolnshire (Lindsey) rams in 1241—clearly most valuable evidence—and 20 sheep and 31 ewes in 1288.³ The New Year's gifts to Vale Royal (Cheshire) in 1330 included some sheep, among them twelve from the abbot of Dieulacres (Cistercian, Staffs.) and twelve from the abbot of Basingwerk (Cistercian, Flint).⁴

An agreement drawn up in 1291 between Pipewell (Northants.) and certain merchants of Cahors contained clauses covering the care and management of the flocks. "It is . . . ordained that 900 of the common two-tooth sheep (*bidentibus*) of the abbey shall be separated, half of which shall be ewes and the other half males, by the view of the merchants before Mid-Lent next, which sheep the monks shall hold of the merchants and they shall be signed with the mark of both parties, and then shall remain in divers places with the two-tooth sheep of the monks in as good pasture and custody of the abbey as the monks' own two-tooth sheep."⁵ The following evidence belongs to the fifteenth century, but there is every reason to suppose that the activities described were usual in earlier times too. In 1457-8 the expenses of the sheep-master at Fountains included "*Pro uno cado bituminis: viis. id.*" The

¹ In 1337 10 marks and 9·5 marks per sack. Hereford and Shropshire were the only other counties to exceed 9·5 marks. In another list (*Rotuli Parliamentorum*, II, p. 138), dated 1343, the wool of S.E. Lincolnshire—*Holand et le marrois*—an area including Vaudey, was priced at 11 marks while the rest of the county obtained 14 marks. Similarly the marsh wools (*le marrois*) of Kent, Essex, Sussex, and Middlesex were ranked in 1343 below those grown elsewhere.

² Quoted at 6 marks in 1337.

³ V. R. Perkins, 'Documents relating to the Cistercian Abbey of Kingswood', *Bristol and Glos. Arch. Soc.*, XXII, 1899, pp. 179-256.

⁴ J. Brownbill (ed.), 'The Ledger Book of Vale Royal Abbey', *Lancs. Chesh. Rec. Soc.*, LXVIII, 1914, pp. 179-80.

⁵ *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1288-96, p. 193.

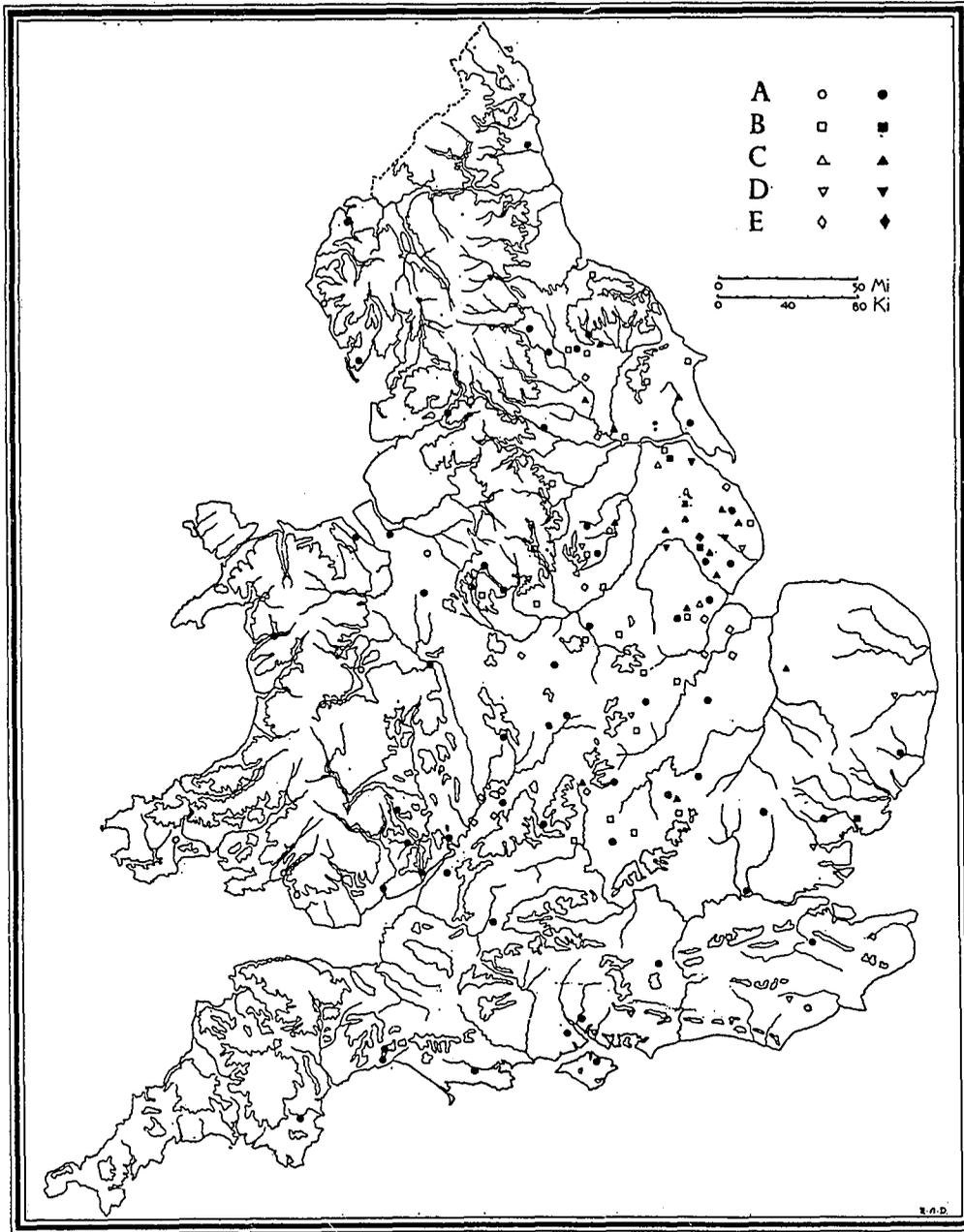


FIG. I

Religious houses listed by Pegolotti: A=Cistercian, B=Augustinian, C=Gilbertine, D=Premonstratensian, E=Benedictine. In each case the solid symbols represent houses marketing wool in the usual three grades and with quotations for at least two. The 500-ft contour is shown.

accounts for the preceding and succeeding years mention the washing and clipping of sheep (*lociones et tonciones*). Much tar was bought, usually by the barrel (*cadus*).¹ Mixed with grease it formed the sheep salve then in general use. Cistercian records sometimes mention disease among animals ('murrain', 'scab', 'rot'); yet we may assume that the monks, being able to isolate flocks on different estates, were more likely to escape disaster than smaller men.² Had woolmen this in mind too when they set out to buy and place orders?

The last of the monks' responsibilities was usually that of preparing, grading, and packing the wool. Buyers not only knew in most cases exactly what they were purchasing but could expect well cleansed fleeces. The monks more than most others had the wherewithal to do this, and no doubt expected appropriate recompense. In 1291 arbitrators decided that Pipewell should vouch that their wool left "the sheepfold well washed, dry, and cleaned."³ Darnhall, when selling twelve sacks of good wool to John Wermond of Cambrai, agreed that it should be washed before delivery.⁴ While washing, it seems, was normally the responsibility of the abbey alone, the merchant or his agent sometimes played a part in the further stages of preparation. Fountains in 1276 was under contract to supply to certain Florentine merchants "*sexaginta duos saccos lanae . . . sine clack'* (sheep's mark) *et lok'* (short clippings), *god et card* (clotted and coarse wool), *nigra, grissa* (black and grisled wool), *et sine pelliciis* (pelt wool)."⁵ Further, the house was obliged to "prepare" (what this means precisely is not always clear) and weigh it. A few years later the same community received a grant "for the use of the lay brother for wool working (*ad opus officii conversi de lanaria*) of an acre of land in Dishforth."⁶ The wool-shed (*lanaria*) is where we should expect the preparing and weighing of wool to be centred. In 1280 Rievaulx owed 3.5 sacks of 'good' wool to Hugelino de Vithio and Lotherio Bonaguide of Florence, and this had to be prepared and weighed (*prae-paratae et ponderatae*) before it was dispatched.⁷ The following from the

¹ J. T. Fowler (ed.), *Memorials of Fountains*, III, Surtees Soc., CXXX, 1918, pp. 10, 44, 88, 112.

² F. M. Page, 'Bidentes Hoylandie', *Econ. Hist.* (Suppl.), I, 1926-9, p. 609, tabulates sheep losses through murrain on the various manors belonging to Crowland. There was great variation between different parts of the same county.

³ *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1288-96, p. 193.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1272-9, p. 254.

⁵ *Mem. Fountains*, I, p. 177; *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1272-9, p. 387. For a like example *vide Cal. Close Rolls*, 1288-96, p. 194: wool had to be delivered from Pipewell "without cot, gard, black, gray, clacc, and without villain fleece."

⁶ W. T. Lancaster (ed.), *The Chartulary of Fountains*, Leeds, 1918, I, p. 255.

⁷ J. C. Atkinson (ed.), *Rievallense Cartularium*, Surtees Soc., LXXXIII, 1887, p. 409. In

Pipewell contract of 1291 suggests that the buyer sometimes nominated the 'dresser': "It is ordained that the merchants' preparer shall be at the costs and expenses of the abbey . . . and he shall prepare the wool well and faithfully without hindrance from the monks and that the merchants shall have free entry and issue to the preparer while he is occupied. After the preparation of the wool . . . neither party shall have power to reject or refuse any part of the wool against his deed, or challenge his proceedings in any way." The earlier Darnhall agreement stipulated that the wool should be (a) "as good as the better crop of Dore" and (b) 'dressed' in Hereford by an employee of the merchants. Dore (Cistercian, Herefordshire), within an area renowned for its fine wool,¹ marketed a clip of exceptionally high quality. Cheshire wool, while good, was not generally comparable. For it to have been possible for Darnhall to supply wool equal to that of Dore suggests that the best wool of these houses did not differ as much as the standard county products.² Finally, to turn again to the Pipewell provisions, the wool sometimes had to be "faithfully packed (*impaccatas*) . . . according to the ancient and due custom of the abbey . . . in the sarplers of the monks, at the expense of the monks."³

First-class wool always, it seems, commanded a substantially higher price than the standard clip. This at least is clear from Pegolotti. In 1429 the finest selected wool was sometimes twice the value of the unsorted fleece, and in 1454 three times.⁴ Fifty-six of the sixty-five English and Welsh Cistercian houses (86 per cent) and all seven of the Scottish houses in the wool list are shown as supplying wool in at least two of the usual three grades (Fig. I).⁵ Three-quarters of the Gilbertine houses apparently did so too, but in all there were only twenty. The proportion was small in the case of the remaining orders—never above 23 per cent. Even among the Cistercians it is unlikely that any house invariably supplied separated wool. In 1292 Kirkstall

Fountains' expenses under 1457-8 there is: "Joh'i Burton . . . pro preparacione lanae . . . iis. xid."—*Mem. Fountains*, III, p. 51.

¹ Quoted at 12 marks in 1337.

² Pegolotti does not supply figures for Vale Royal (formerly Darnhall), but the top grade from Combermere and Stanlaw, both in Cheshire, is listed as worth 21 marks and 18 marks respectively: Dore's stood at 28 marks.

³ Kingswood bought 'canvas' and 'cloth for sacks' in 1240.—'Documents of Kingswood', pp. 193-9. Meaux agreed in 1287 to deliver eleven sacks of wool at Hull prepared in round bales.—R. J. Whitwell, 'English Monasteries and the Wool Trade in the Thirteenth Century', *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, II, 1904, p. 33, n. i. Fountains bought canvas for sarplers 1457-8: "*In canvase pro lanaria . . . ii s. vi d.*"—*Mem. Fountains*, III, p. 49.

⁴ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, IV, p. 360; V, p. 277.

⁵ *la buona, lla mozano, locchi*: in addition, the price for *la buona* is quoted for Hulton (Staffordshire) and Margam (Glamorgan).

agreed to supply certain merchants of the Society of Betti of Lucca with all the wool of the house for the following decade. Only after three years was the wool to be graded (*bona, mediana, locca*): at first it was to be delivered unsorted at an almost strictly average price.¹ While the Cistercian distribution in Fig. I is notably widespread, altogether there appears to have been a concentration of more specialized producers in East-Central England, in particular around Boston, the focus of the export trade with Flanders.

Evidence of a superior Cistercian product, justifying a higher price, increases as we pass from a consideration of enlightened breeding through the care and management of sheep and the cleansing and sorting of wool to its grading and bulk delivery. There may be some doubt whether the monks were, to any significant extent, forerunners of the eighteenth-century flockmasters, but there can be none that they were pre-eminent in the preparation of wool for sale.

¹ W. T. Lancaster (ed.), *The Coucher Book of Kirkstall Abbey*, Thoresby Soc. Pub., VIII, 1896, pp. 226-7. H. E. Wroot in 'The Pennines in History', *Naturalist*, March 1930, p. 109: "They [the Benedictine monks and Augustinian canons] sold their wool in the entire fleece and sale by the unbroken fleece would seem to have been the custom of the secular market." For further examples of separation into three grades *vide* 'Documents of Kingswood', p. 200; *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1288-96, p. 193, Pipewell; H. Hall (ed.), *Select Cases Concerning the Law Merchant*, Selden Soc., XLVI, 1930, pp. 63-4.

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