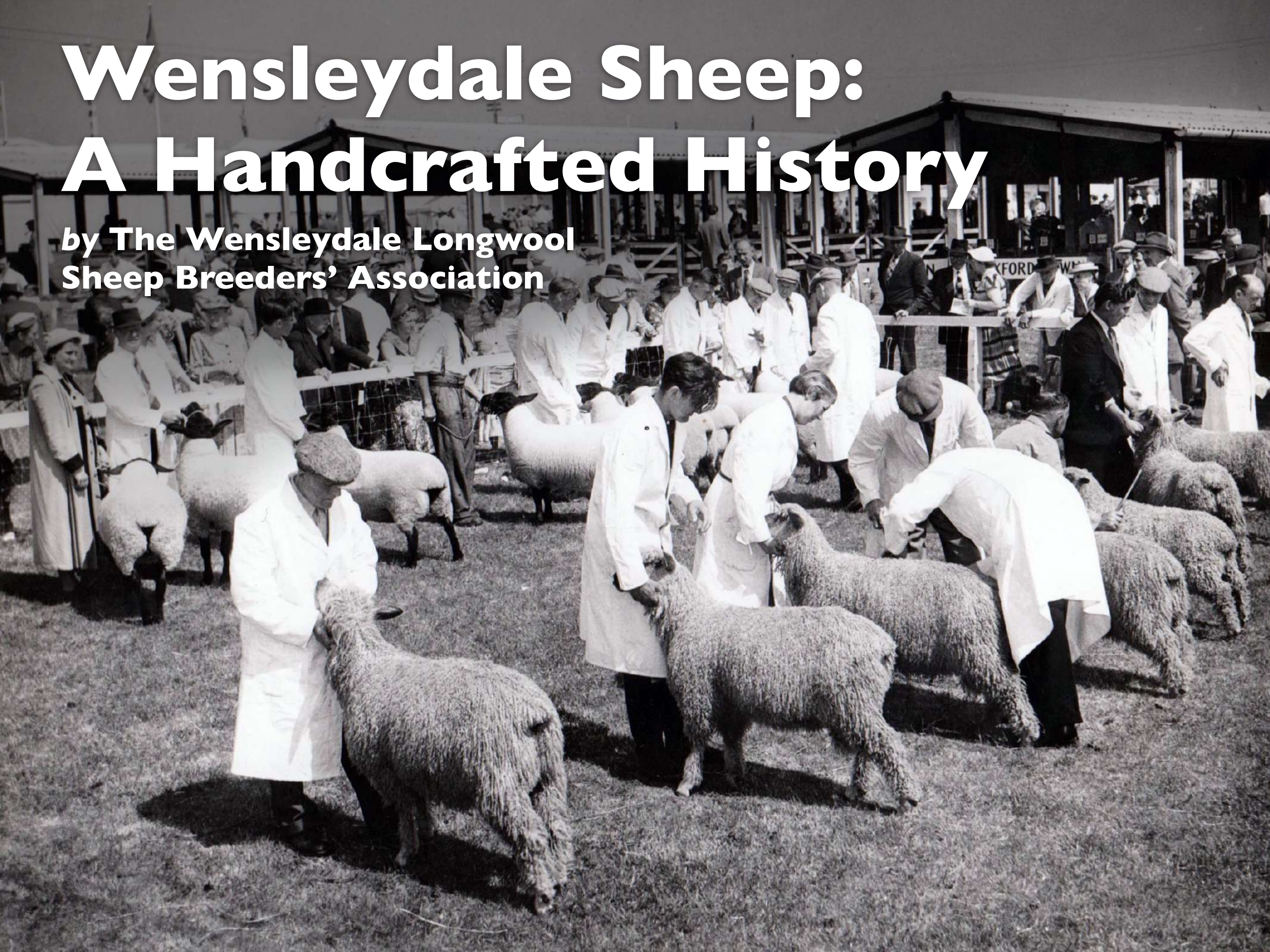


Wensleydale Sheep: A Handcrafted History

by The Wensleydale Longwool
Sheep Breeders' Association



Introduction

The **Wensleydale Sheep: A Handcrafted History** exhibition is organised by a small group of passionate individuals within the Wensleydale Longwool Sheep Breeders' Association. It collects the work of 40 textile artists throughout the UK, with every piece crafted using native, rare breed Wensleydale sheep wool. This exhibition is the first of its kind in promoting the unique Wensleydale Longwool fleece and the versatile range of textile crafts for which it can be used. It is a celebration of rural history, heritage woolcrafts and the increasingly popular and sustainable practice of using British wool in textiles. This exhibition will help to highlight the Wensleydale breed as a luxury wool producer. It will also bring to public attention the wide range of uses of the wool through age-old textile crafts, keeping them alive for the benefit of future generations and encouraging sustainable practices in textile production in a world dominated by a limited use, throwaway culture.

The exhibited pieces vary widely, from hand woven tapestries and knitted lace garments, to felted 'wool paintings' and re-upholstered furniture. Each piece is unique and almost every piece has been created especially for the exhibition, which is set to travel for two years, concluding at the end of 2026. There will be a selection of events for visitors to attend at the venues with demonstrations of various woolcrafts and interactive workshops, as well as talks about Wensleydale sheep and their history.

The Wensleydale Longwool Sheep Breeders' Association were incredibly grateful to receive grants from the Jack Brunton Charitable Trust and the Yorkshire Agricultural Society to help fund the exhibition. @YorkshireAgriculturalSociety

The official Wensleydale Longwool Sheep Breeders' Association website: www.wlsba.co.uk
Official Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/WensleydaleSBA>

Copyright of all historical photographs belongs to the WLSBA, all photographs of pieces belong to the respective artist. Individual artists must be credited when photographs are used in publications.

Venues & Dates

The exhibition has already been booked at the following venues with the dates confirmed:

Handweavers Studio & Gallery

13th October 2024 - 6th December 2024

140, Seven Sisters Rd, London, N7 7NS

Tennants Garden Rooms

21st January 2025 - 16th February 2025

The Auction House, Harmby Rd, Leyburn, DL8 5SG

Hartlepool Art Gallery

24th February 2025 - 31st March 2025

Hartlepool Art Gallery, Church St, Hartlepool, TS24 7EQ

Great Yorkshire Show

8th July 2025 - 11th July 2025

Great Yorkshire Showground, Railway Rd, Harrogate, HG2 8NZ

Dales Countryside Museum

19th July 2025 - 19th October 2025

Station Yard, Burtersett Rd, Hawes, North Yorkshire, DL8 3NT

There are other venues planned but since the exhibition is set to span a two-year period (concluding in 2026), the programme will be updated once dates and venues have been confirmed.

Reception

The exhibition has been really well received with wonderful feedback from visitors in the visitor books as well as from the venues themselves. The exhibition was recently invited to attend the 2025 Great Yorkshire Show in Harrogate, attracting a multitude of media interest as well as a few famous faces. The sheep have attended every venue so far, which is always a big hit with the public and particularly children. We also run popular heritage wool crafting demonstrations and workshops for visitors to see and try.



Rishi Sunak visiting the exhibition at Tennants, with WLSBA chairman Ernie Sherwin & secretary Jodi Shadforth



Exhibition in situ at the 2025 Great Yorkshire Show in Harrogate with an exhibitor demonstrating woolcrafts



The exhibition in situ at Tennants Garden Rooms, Leyburn

Media Attention

The exhibition has been fortunate enough to have attracted media interest from several media outlets and organisations such as Radio 4's Farming Today, BBC Radio York, the Yorkshire Living magazine, Darlington & Stockton Times, the Farmers Guardian, Richmondshire Today, the Tiny Studio magazine, York Press, the Canon Hall Farm podcast, the Rare Breeds Survival Trust and the Northern Farmer amongst others. We are always keen to raise the profile of our breed and the artworks created from their wool!



The Wensleydale sheep greeting a few celebrity faces at the 2025 Great Yorkshire Show (Rob & Dave, Canon Hall Farm)



Exhibition in situ at the 2025 Great Yorkshire Show in Harrogate with an exhibitor demonstrating woolcrafts



The exhibition in situ at The Dales Countryside Museum, Hawes

The Organisers

The exhibition is organised by a small but dedicated group of Wensleydale breeders under the auspices of the Wensleydale Longwool Sheep Breeders' Association (WLSBA), an organisation founded in the late nineteenth century to monitor and preserve the genetic heritage of the breed.

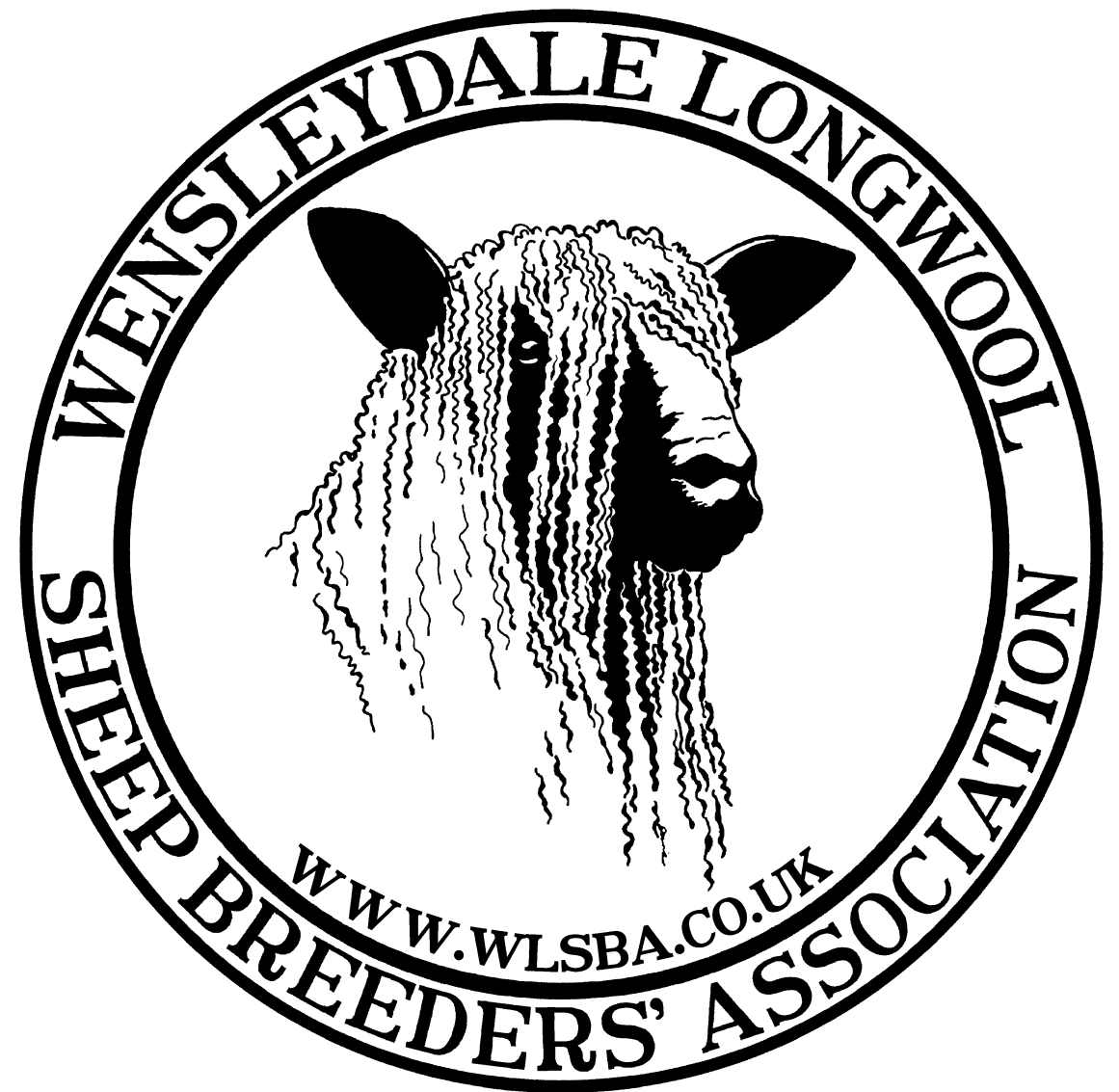
Bringing the exhibition to fruition has been a labour of love fuelled by a dedication to this unique breed and a desire to show what can be achieved by combining artistic skill and craftsmanship in producing beautiful products from its wool. Only by demonstrating its value can we hope to ensure the survival of the breed for generations to come.

Exhibition Lead Organiser

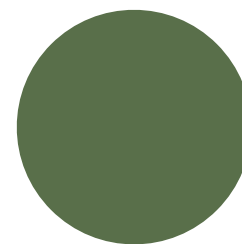
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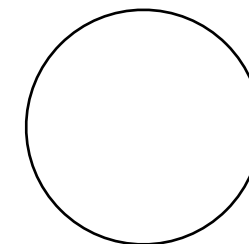
secretary@wlsba.co.uk



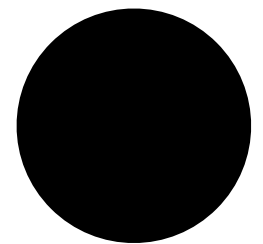
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About the Breed

Wensleydale sheep are a native UK breed originating from the Yorkshire Dales in the 1800s. They can be pedigree registered as either white or black - though the actual shade of 'black' Wensleydale fleeces can vary widely from silvery grey to jet black - and there is a separate register for each colour, both of which are maintained by the Wensleydale Longwool Sheep Breeders' Association.

The Wensleydale breed as a whole is a very large framed sheep, with rams regularly weighing up to 150kg. The breed sports a heavy fleece of long, highly lustrous locks of wool with staple lengths of up to 30 centimetres in a yearling sheep before first shearing. Traditionally, sheep are sheared leaving a long forelock, and white Wensleydales have a characteristic blue skin that hark back to their mid-19th century origin, while black Wensleydales have black skin.



A flock of black and white Wensleydale yearling ewes in full wool



A 2 year old white Wensleydale ram, sporting a raddle harness

Historical Aspect

Amongst the exhibited artworks, historical photographs of the sheep will be displayed. The exhibitors were given access to a bank of photographs from the WLSBA archives which have inspired their pieces. The photographs, some of which date back to the early 1900s, provide insight into the rich history of the breed as well as past farming practices.

The Wensleydale itself can be traced back to a single ram by the name of Bluecap, born in East Appleton in 1839. Over the decades that followed, the descendants of Bluecap developed into a breed in their own right, being formally named and recognised as 'Wensleydale' sheep in 1876 when they were given their own class at the Great Yorkshire Show.

The primary purpose of the breed was originally to improve wool quality and also to add size to crossbred offspring, producing a larger, leaner carcase to cater for an ever growing population. The Wensleydale was once recognised as the traditional sire of the Masham (Wensleydale ram crossed with a Dalesbred ewe), and while some



T. B. Earle (left) and Len Fawell at the 1956 Royal Show in Newcastle

do still use Wensleydale rams for this purpose, it has now largely lost this role to the Teeswater.

Unfortunately, as fashions have changed and our own population more than doubled since the inception of the breed, our movement towards quicker-fattening continental breeds combined with the decline in the Wensleydale's use as the Masham sire means that the breed has since fallen into decline. The breed is now 'at risk' on the Rare Breed Survival Trust's Watchlist. However, as this exhibition sets out to demonstrate, it is the wool quality that defines this breed and is likely to safeguard its future.



Freda Elliott with a pair of lambs



J. B. Smalley with a pair of sheep for the 1927 Great Yorkshire Show



Len Fawell with a ram lamb in 1957



Freda Elliott with a ram lamb in 1957

Exhibited Pieces

The exhibitors that are involved in the exhibition are located throughout the length and breadth of the UK, with every piece being created using British sourced Wensleydale sheep wool that has been kindly donated by some of the breeders. Most of the exhibitors have painstakingly hand washed and processed the wool themselves, from a "raw" product straight off the sheeps' backs through to finished articles.

While there are too many pieces being exhibited to include each and every one in this document; the organisers have instead selected a handful of pieces that they felt best represented the sheer variety of artworks created, as well as showcased the range of techniques that have been used.

If desired, the organisers are able to provide a short biography for each artist involved as well as a description of their piece. Please contact the exhibition organiser for more images or information about the artists and their work.



'Wensleydale Sheep' textile collage by Barbara Shaw



Wet Felted Loose Locks Capelet by Yvonne Le Mare



Wensleydale Locks Covered Chair & Stool by Sally McNeil



'Wensleydale Walk' bobbin lace hanging by Beth Walsh



Shadow Cushions handwoven by Sarah Affleck



'Daphne Lace Shawl' knitted by Stefania Garbacia