

## CHAPTER 8: SHEEP

Charles T. Coker, the gentleman distantly located tenant farmer of Home Farm, West Dean Estate, was my Dad's boss, also, my Godfather, who never gave me anything, except the occasional boiled, fruity, hard sweet. He just loved those things and ate them all the time. He would sometimes give me a sixpence piece to hold and then demand it back before we parted. He ate frugally. I remember staying at his farmhouse at Binderton during harvest time, when I was helping at Binderton Farm with the horses in the fields and being hungry mid morning, after the breakfast he gave me; which was part of my meager wages. He was very tall and skinny and had a rather haughty and aristocratic personality. Occasionally he would smoke a very aromatic cigarette. He preferred good quality clothes of tweeds and worsted usually with brown brogue shoes; always very well polished by Miss Besant, his housekeeper: who also washed his clothes and ironed them, cooked for him and did all the house work with great loyalty and attentiveness. He was addicted to financial economy and profit and my Dad was just the right employee for him, because he was an organized, efficient, dedicated and economical servant; who, incidentally, made him a fortune during the over twenty years he was in his employment. This was particularly supported by the very high milk yield that my Dad obtained from the cows and the consequent, substantial milk cheque that he received every month.

Coker's main interest, apart from the bottom line in the ledger, was sheep, he just loved them. In fact, Southdown Sheep, he always had a flock of about one hundred. The Shepherd (Old Shep) who lived at Double Barn cottages; had the day and night care of the sheep but Coker came over perhaps two or three times a week to see their condition and just gaze at them. Crooking some of them for close inspection. During the lambing and sheep dipping times he was always present. He paid scant attention to running the rest of the farm, because he knew that he could rely on my Dad.

He did, however, frequently take me with him in his two seat American Essex Doctor's coupe with a 'rumble' seat in the rear. Like sitting in the boot, or, since it was an American car, the trunk. Quite naturally I used to love to go with him. It was, of course, a selfish arrangement on his part, because in retrospect I realize, he liked the company.

Some years, Coker took me in his car to the annual Findon sheep fair, where he exhibited fine examples of his flock and bought and sold rams. Buying them especially to bring back to his ewes, to introduce new genes and improve the health and quality of the flock. I remember this

was always a wonderful and thrilling day out for me. Of course, my Mother always packed me a sandwich and a Tizer drink, or, I might have starved.

Whilst he was of an urbane disposition, I never heard anything that passed his lips that could be construed as humour. Rumour had it that he had been denied marriage by the parents of his only and dearest love and therefore, all his life he remained a bachelor.

During the 1960s I took my Mother to see him at his retirement residence, a totally isolated house, with sweeping views, in the hills of Dorsetshire. At that time he was in his 90s and mostly confined in bed. We sat beside the bed and talked; his mind was still as sharp as ever. He and my Mother held hands all the time we were there, looked into each other's eyes and conversed about former acquaintances and old times at West Dean. They had always been close-friends; I remember he often came into our house at Home Farm and joined my Mother for afternoon tea. The only other person present at this re-union, was a 24 hour care giver, who clearly doted on Coker. She fussed about the bed adjusting the bedclothes and pillows. She received us with some suspicion and after prompting by Coker she scurried off to make us some tea. Another Miss. Besant! Married or not he was blessed all his life with women who took extreme good care of him. She may have anticipated that he would reward her in his will. Some hopes! Shortly after this meeting we heard that he had died and donated all of his fortune to a cat's home and recovery center.

Old Shep or Shep the Shepherd; as he was known to everybody locally, was a mainstay of the shepherding at Home Farm; for how long I do not know, certainly before my Dad took over the running of the farm. To the best of my knowledge, he never took a vacation; he was in love with and cared so much about caring for his sheep. He spent every hour of light every day with them. In the lead up to and during and after lambing, he would spend 24 hours a day attending to them. In these periods he lived next to the flock in a small Gypsy type van with a corrugated iron roof with a small chimney pipe poking through. It was mounted on wood spoke wheels with iron tyres and shafts for a horse to tow it. My dad's Cob horse was used for this, whenever the sheep were moved to new pasture. Old Shep's chosen sheep dog was a Welsh Collie and this obedient and accomplished dog was his constant companion, both on and of the field because they slept together; at home and in the shepherd's mobile hut.

Old Shep lived at normal times with his sister in one of the cottages at Double Barn; she took care of him and brought him food to where the sheep happened to be grazing. Mother also

took him food and had conversations with him and I would sometimes go with her. I remember he actually stank just like a sheep. He told my Mother he bathed once a year and sewed himself into his fresh clothes for the ensuing year. When my Mother inquired; “Don’t you find it rather hot in those heavy clothes during the Summer?” He replied in an assured manner: “What keeps the cold out, keeps the ‘eat out!’” I just wondered about his toilet arrangements? I believe that it is quite understandable that ‘Old Shep’ never found a lady that was willing to marry him! Old Shep was the only person I ever met who still wore a Sussex farm worker’s Smock, a kind of linen night shirt but worn outdoors. It had smocking across the upper front which consisted of tightly drawn hand stitching. This form of country dress went out of use after the First World War.

A 2<sup>nd</sup> World War period scandal occurred when it was exposed that the house next door to Old Shep and his sister at Double Barn, was being used by ladies of almost unmentionable behavior to entertain multiple male visitors. A large number of soldiers were camped in the nearby forest, where they manned anti aircraft guns. This location, with such local and lamentable notoriety, was spoken about between my parents, with covert surreptitiousness. However, as I was about thirteen at the time, I was pretty cognizant of the subject to which they were referring

Double Barn, so called, I believe, because it was an ancient ‘Tithe’ barn. These barns had large double doors in the centre on each side that accommodated the specific size of harvest wagons. They would enter and unload, then exit the other side. Each wagon would be recorded and a Tithe (tax) would have to be paid to the Government revenue service. Before the 1<sup>st</sup> World War this practice fell into disuse and was not used afterwards.

Having grown up alongside the farm animals I was very conversant with all of them. The sheep, I found particularly interesting. They were usually grazed on high ground, which was relatively drier than the fields near the river. When visiting West Dean Park in the autumn of 2008, I was surprised to see a flock of sheep by the river in Park Field which is a natural wet ground area. I noted the ‘shitty’ backsides of many of the sheep; probably due to absorbing excess moisture and richness of the grass. When I lived on the farm the preferred high grounds were; Chiltdown and the field next to this; sometimes they were let into a turnip field that had ‘gone to seed’. Weekly sections of such a field were ‘hurdle fenced’ off, so they were rationed and did not over eat this food.

Sometimes Coker, the Farmer, would rent fields at East Droke, about 3 miles north of West Dean, then his flock of sheep and Old Shep were taken there in sheep-lorries. The sheep lorry had a number of floors with sheep on each layer. Old Shep stayed nearby the flock in a convenient barn. Coker and I, in his car, would sometimes go there and visit the flock of sheep.

Sheep dipping was an annual event every summer. This was carried out at Double Barn in a cement tank, which was built into the ground and it was filled with a powerful disinfectant and insect killer and mixed with water. The sheep were driven and made to dive in one end they then swam to the other end and climbed out. Their fleeces were totally saturated, although sheep wool has scales which have pockets of air, these keep them warm.

Naturally, however, a warmish day was always chosen for the operation. Sheep are prone to collecting fleas and ticks on their skin and this treatment was sufficient to free them of these parasites for a while. If any of the sheep were discovered with 'shitty' back sides that often secreted fly maggots; they were grabbed and all the offensive stinky stuff was trimmed off by hand with sheep shears. This was an important procedure because the maggots could hibernate in the mess and eventually start eating into the sheep. Sometimes when being around sheep, I would be attacked by a flea, but the worst was a tick. The latter black insect, half the size of a grain of wheat, would quickly bite into one's skin and burrow through to suck blood. They held on securely with their front legs. If one tried to pull them off they left their legs in one's skin. The best way to remove them was to light a match and when just out, touch the hot end on the rear of the tick and they would release themselves. One has to remember, almost everyone in those days smoked tobacco and they carried matches with them.

When lambing time was imminent in the spring, the flock was driven down from Chiltdown, across the Park and up to the traditional lambing field above the Park golf links. This field was ideal during the late winter and early spring; sheltered from cold north winds, frosts and possibly rain or snow by the beech tree forest on the north and west sides. The open south and east sides were exposed to whatever sun and better temperature that might be prevalent. The lambing pens were built of temporary straw bales and corrugated iron panel roofs. Old Shep's hut on wheels was parked there for him and he basically worked 24 hours a day during this period. Most years I helped with the lambing A most intriguing and indeed biologically enlightening experience for a youngster but as I got older, it was routine. What was not routine were the peculiar births; sometimes there were lambs born with two heads, both operational.

Some had five or more legs, which stuck out from other legs or parts of their bodies. All of these freaks of nature were peremptorily dispatched and buried nearby. Some other farmers sold their freaks to circuses and travelling fairs. Some ewes had twins and triplets. Usually one of the latter was a runt. There were only two teats and the weakest one would get pushed aside and began to expire. Sometimes we took such a waif home to feed it with a baby's bottle or it could be put with another ewe that had lost its lamb in birthing. This was not easy because each lamb would bond with its mother when it was born. It was amazing that in a large flock of sheep mother and lamb could find one another by odour and voice tones. Actually the shepherd had a way of encouraging the foreign mother to accept an adopted lamb. He would take the skin off the still born lamb and drape and tie this on to the body of a rejected lamb and thus fool the surrogate mother. The familial musk smell of the dead lamb's fur would usually trick the surrogate ewe into caring for the introduced lamb.

The birth ratio of rams to ewes was about 50/50. The lamb rams were looked over carefully and the lucky ones were selected for maintaining their masculinity. They were of the sturdiest, friskiest, big boned standard. The method of deflowering of the remaining young rams was to turn them upside down in a wooden cradle. The shepherd then used a sharp shaving razor to slit the ball sack open and pull out each testicle with hammer head pliers. The Shepherd once demonstrated to me how they used to pull out the testicles with their teeth. The ex-lamb-rams were then released and they healed in a few days. Then were fattened and sold for meat. The lucky selected young rams were then kept for later impregnation of the flock of ewes or taken to Findon market for sale and use in some other flock of sheep. The lamb testicles (Sweetbreads) were considered a rural delicacy and shared out between the Shepherd, who took the most, Coker the farmer and some for me and any other helpers. I always ran home with these with great pleasure to present them to my Mother. They would not keep long because there was no means of refrigeration for lowly country people. The sweetbreads were usually covered with seasoned breadcrumbs and fried.

The other sheep delicacy for those of us versed in country fare was lamb's tail brawn and pot pie. All the lamb's had their tails cut off soon after birth, before the tail's structure changed from gelatinous to bone. This was to prevent the tails from dragging on the ground and picking up fleas and ticks when they matured to adulthood.

First, the tails were boiled and the wool was scraped off, then after appropriate seasonings were added, they were compressed into an enclosed bowl, re-heated and then left to set into a gelatinous cold sliceable slab. This was eaten with slices of bread. Sometimes the tails were made into a pot pie with vegetables, Unlike the sweetbreads, the tails cooked into brawn, would keep in a cold larder for about 10 days.