

## STONE BUILT SHEEPWASHES IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

*John V. Garrett and Ted Hodgkins*

From mediaeval to comparatively recent times it was the practice to wash sheep before shearing. The Gloucestershire countryside shows a number of examples of the sheepwash pools used for this purpose, but very little has been written about them.

In mediaeval times records of the Abbey of Winchcombe show that each spring the abbot and his staff went to the Abbey's manor at Sherborne to supervise the washing and shearing of their flocks. The tenants of Sherborne had a duty to assist with the sheepwashing each year. In the latter half of the 15th. century the records show that up to 2900 sheep were shorn annually at Sherborne. (1).

The purpose of the washing was to remove dirt and grit and much of the natural oil from the fleece. It was usually carried out a week or two before shearing. The washed fleece, although lighter, obtained a small premium in price which made the process worth while. Sheepwashing time was an important and busy annual event for the villagers. The congregation of large numbers of sheep over days and even weeks was not however always welcomed. Very few people now living remember these occasions. Most had ceased in the early 1920s, some may have persisted up to the end of the second World War, and the procedure is described in farming books up to 1945. (2). The premium for washed wool gradually became so small that the process ceased to be worth while. Fleeces are now cleaned in the wool processing factory.

Originally the washing was done in a local stream, as at Sherborne; later, the convenience of having a built; sheepwash

controlled by poles or crooks, were pushed momentarily under water, well soused and allowed to run out by a sloping escape ramp. Sheep dips, on the other hand are concrete baths filled with medicated solution for the control of sheep scab and other infestations. This is the modern procedure. In making a list of sheepwashes failure to distinguish between these two processes can lead to many dips being recorded as washes. This is made more likely by the Ordnance Survey being apparently unable to distinguish the two when recording them on their larger scale maps. This is particularly the case with the modern Pathfinder series where the terms sheep wash and sheep dip appear to be used indiscriminately.

### MAPPING SHEEPWASHES

To obtain an idea of the number and location of sheepwashes in Gloucestershire it was decided to examine all the sheets of the six inch to one mile (1/10560 scale) of the third edition, 1922-23, covering the county. This edition was chosen as being most likely to show the maximum number of washes and also to be reasonably easily available in the county reference libraries. Word of mouth information or chance led to the examination also of some 25 inches to 1 mile plan (1/2500 scale) some of which showed washes not shown, or not named, on the six inch sheets. Again care has to be taken to distinguish washes from dips. Washes are usually in places where running water is available, in valleys and stream sides. The dips are usually in waterless places on hill sides or the wolds. Occasionally a place or house name gives a clue, as Sheepwash Cottage or Sheepwash Plantation.

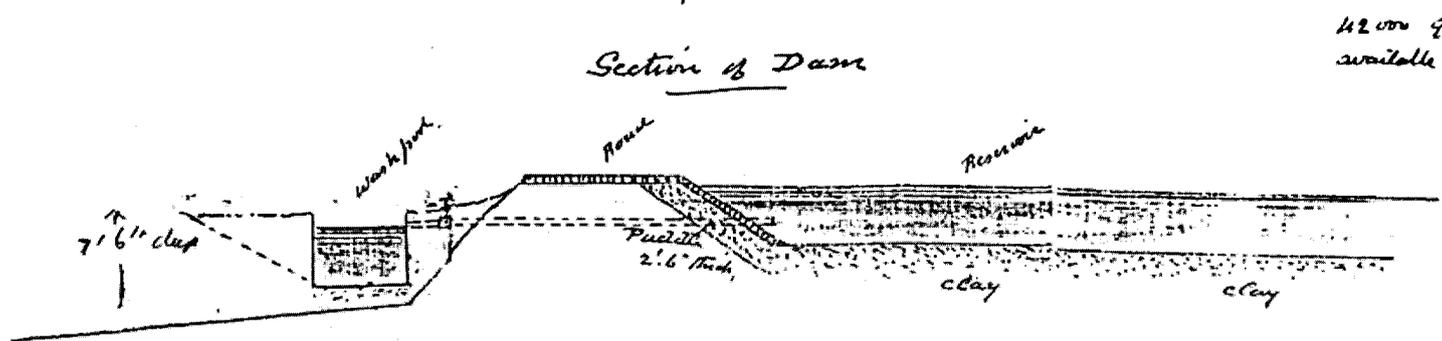


Fig.1. Part of the drawing for the construction of the sheepwash on Cleeve Common 1896.  
(by permission of the Board of Conservators)

was realised. This also did away with the need for the shepherds to get into the water with the sheep as is shown in a painting by Edward Duncan of sheepwashing on the Thames, probably in the mid 19th. century.

Sheep washing is to be clearly distinguished from sheep dipping. In sheep washing the sheep were thrown into a river or specially built pool through which water flowed continually. They were

By these criteria 29 definite sheepwashes were found in the present county of Gloucester, plus 4 others now in Avon County north of Bristol. These have all been reported to the Sites and Monuments Record at Shire Hall. They are not by any means a complete list and to them must be added four others not noted on the maps but recorded by the Cotswold Warden Service, and six others already recorded by Sites and Monuments some of which however may be sheep dips only. A further complication

is that there are at least three washes recorded on the first edition (1880s) or second (1908) edition not recorded on the third edition. It has however been possible to examine only a very few of these older sheets.

There are, or were, therefore, over 40 sheepwashes within the boundaries of the present county of Gloucestershire. Their distribution is not even. Most are in the northern part of the county and in the Cotswold area. There are appreciable remains visible in about twenty cases.

The date at which the washes were made is, except for one instance described below, very difficult to determine. Practically all are marked on the first edition of the 25 inch plans (1882-83), where it has been possible to examine them. Architectural considerations suggest the early 19th. century for some and it seems likely that many were built following the reorganisation of the countryside at the enclosures of the 18th. and early 19th. century. Only two tithe or enclosure maps have been found for parishes with sheepwashes and in neither is a sheepwash marked. Almost all are built of stone, often rubble stone, sometimes ashlar or partly ashlar. One or two show evidence of cement or concrete, possibly as a repair. Two, Hinchwick (now filled in) and Upper Swell Mill were either constructed or repaired with blue Staffordshire bricks, presumably late in the 19th. century.

The essential feature of a sheepwash is the bath or basin, usually circular, sometimes rectangular, about 10 feet in diameter and 5 feet deep into which a stream of water flowed. This might come from a holding pool a little above. Its entrance and exit might be controlled by sluices or valves allowing the depth of water and flow to be regulated. In addition there is always a sloping ramp up which the sheep walked when their washing was completed.

The details of the washes and their locations can be obtained from the Sites and Monuments Record, Shire Hall, Gloucester. In this paper we will describe some of the most interesting and accessible.

**SHEEPWASH ON CLEEVE COMMON IN SOUTHAM PARISH  
MAP REFERENCE SO 996264**



Fig 2. General view of Cleeve Common sheepwash undergoing repair 1994

This is probably the best known of the sheepwashes as it is on the Cotswold Way. It is the only one for which documentary evidence of construction exists. It was ordered to be built by the Board of Conservators of Cleeve Common in 1896. A drawing of the details of construction exists and part is shown at figure 1. It is interesting to note that the cost of construction was £89.18s. 10d. and it was for the use of commoners only.

The drawings show that a dam was made across the head waters of the Isbourne in Watery Bottom, Cleeve Common, to create a small pond of water. The washpool, below the pond, (Fig. 2), is 10 feet in diameter and is made of ashlar limestone blocks with a sloping ramp. The stones were set in cement with a clay puddle backing to keep the pool water tight. Water was admitted from the pond by an iron pipe controlled by a valve and allowed to flow out freely by overflow. The pool could be drained by another pipe and valve. Mr. Witts, civil engineer of Cheltenham, advised on its construction. It must have been one of the last, perhaps the last, sheepwash to be built, and was in use until at least the mid 1930s. A description of the wash in use is to be found in a 1919 book by J. H. Garrett *From a Cotswold Height*. (3). Figure 3 shows sheep being washed there before 1919. The wash has recently been repaired and fenced by the Cotswold Warden Service.



Fig 3. Cleeve Common sheepwash in use before 1919

**PRESCOTT PARK, NOTTINGHAM HILL. MAP REFERENCE  
SO 983291**

This is a specially interesting sheepwash complex of collecting pond, dam and wash. Without prior knowledge of its existence derived from the 25 inch plan it would now be difficult to identify. (Fig 4)

The pond and dam lie on the west side of the bridleway from Wickfield Farm, formerly Prescott Hill Farm, to Prescott and Pardon Hill. It is silted up with a willow tree growing beside the low dam. It collects water from springs higher up the slope brought to it by a channel probably at least partly artificial. The washpool itself lies on the other side of the bridleway. Some ashlar blocks are still visible. What appears to be the ramp leads down hill. This complex is well known to the local farmer who states it has not been used in his or his father's time. The construction he expects to have been not later than the mid 19th century. This elaborate complex, which must have cost a considerable amount of time and labour, illustrates how important it was to have a sheepwash at that time.



Fig 4. General view of sheepwash complex in Prescott Park. Trees on left of the track are in silted up pool. Those on the right are in the sheepwash

**YANWORTH. MAP REFERENCE SP 081139**

This area is now part of the Stowell estate. The wash is situated just to the north of the private road from Yanworth to Oxlease Cottages, well above the lowest point of the valley.

Examination of the map shows that it was fed with water from springs in Oak Bottom at the top of the valley to the north. The water is taken by a channel or ditch made artificially on the valley side for about 350 metres (400 yds) to the washpool. From it the water is taken by a further ditch to join the main stream, a tributary of the Coln.

The pool is a good example of stone construction, partly rubble, partly ashlar, with massive slabs along the top edge. Again much labour and expense must have been used in bringing the water to it. An old estate worker does not remember it being used as long as he can remember it, from the 1920s. It is of interest that he also mentioned sheep being sometimes washed in the stream near Stowell Mill. A system of sluices, or hatches, could be operated to direct water into a pool but there was no built construction.

**CUTSDEAN. AT THE EDGE OF THE VILLAGE OF CUTSDEAN. MAP REFERENCE SP 087303. BESIDE PUBLIC ROAD.**

This is a fine example of a stone built circular, or rather banjo, shaped sheepwash with escape ramp (Fig.5). Recently restored by local residents and the Cotswold Warden Service, it is described in Margaret Westerling's book of 1939, *Countryside Contentments* (4) where it is said to have been in use for weeks at a time before 1914.

Water was admitted to the basin by a pipe from the strong spring just across the road and its outflow was controlled by a wooden sluice in the lower side of the pool. The basin is about 12 feet in diameter and 5 ft 6 inches deep. The basin is made of fine ashlar blocks, the ramp of rubble stones. An architect's

opinion suggests from the method of construction it may have been made about 1810.

**BAUNTON NEAR CIRENCESTER. MAP REFERENCE SP 022047**

This is an example of a sheepwash in or close to a major stream. Set into the River Churn itself, this structure appears to have been intended partly for the flooding of the water meadows, and partly as a sheepwash. The structure is of ashlar blocks near the main sluice, and rubble elsewhere.

A local resident remembers helping in the washing process in 1920, when the system was last used. It was rumoured that chemicals were sometimes added -

probably a mild caustic solution to break down the oils in the fleeces. This solution would have been allowed to dissipate into the soil after release through the side sluice into the meadow, rather than into the river.



Fig 5. Cutsdean sheepwash being repaired



Fig 6. Baunton sheepwash reinstated 1994

Two wooden sluices control the level of the water in the wash and a sloping escape ramp leads into the west meadow. Further upstream another sluice directs water into the leet leading to Trinity Mill, enabling the sheepwash to be isolated during use. During 1994 the whole structure was renovated by the Cotswold Voluntary Warden Service after removal of several trees which were growing in the walls. (Fig. 6)

Altogether these stone structures are reminders of a bygone farming practice and the best are worthy of preservation.

#### **REFERENCES**

- 1). Finberg H. P. G. *Gloucestershire Studies*. Leicester University Press 1957. pp 104, 111.
- 2) Watson J. A. S. & Moore, J. A. *Agriculture. The Science and Practice of British Farming*. Oliver & Boyd, Eighth edition 1945.
- 3) Garrett J. H. *From a Cotswold Height*. Banks. Cheltenham 1919. Reprinted, Alan Sutton 1988.
- 4). Westerling M. *Countryside Contentments*. Constable & Co. 1939