



# An honest man and his honest flock

*Karl Bowen has spent a lifetime working with Horned Dorset sheep*

BY JEFFREY CARTER

Top Left: At close to 300 pounds Bowen's favorite ram, Big Boy, is an exceptionally large Horned Dorset ram.

Bottom left: Genetics from veteran breeder Karl Bowen's flock are in sheep throughout Ontario and across the country.

Bottom right: Thanks to their propensity for off-season lambing, Horned Dorsets can produce three lamb crops in two years. Twins are common.

**H**e's an honest man who keeps honest sheep.

That's how Patric Lyster of Alberta sees fellow horned Dorset breeder Karl Bowen, who farms near Alymer, ON.

"He has some pretty good sheep. There's probably a little bit of his breeding in most peoples' flocks. I've bought sheep from him myself," Lyster says.

"I think Karl is one of those guys who has forgotten more than the rest of us remember."

People who buy from Bowen Pride Horned Dorsets know exactly what they're getting, Lyster explains.

That's because Bowen takes a commercial approach to this sheep. They're well cared for but not pampered.

Bowen says his flock is pastured during the warm months. Ewes receive an oats/barley mix and — in the winter only, a bit of corn. Lambs get a mix of whole oats, cracked corn and a complete creep feed.

Mineral and salt is available all the time. Ewes are vaccinated and receive one cc (cubic centimetre) of selenium when they go in with the ram.

Bowen's crowning achievement has been the maintenance of traditional Dorset genetics, Lyster says.

It's believed the Dorset sheep evolved after Merino sheep from Spain were introduced to the southwestern part of England and crossed with local breeds. The result was an all-purpose animal and one of the earliest recognized sheep breeds in Britain.

Bowen's interest in Horned Dorsets began when he bought three grade ewes and a crossbred ram on June 11, 1970.

By the end of the 1970s, he was well on his way to establishing a registered flock. Over the years, he's made purchases from several different breeders and credits those genetics for much of his success.

"There's 38 breeders in Ontario . . . We're all close knit. Somewhere along the line I've started them up or they've gotten breeding stock from me."

These days, the majority of Bowen's lambs are sold for breeding purposes. Ewe lambs start around \$300 — a bargain according to Lyster.

"I would say they would be an ideal sheep for the hobby farmer because they're easy to handle and you don't have the lambing problems . . . (but) you do need to like your sheep to get along with them," Bowen says.

Despite their many merits, Horned Dorsets are no longer as popular as they once were. In fact, they are now viewed as a rare breed, with only a few thousand left in Canada.



The rams' horns are large, curving downward and forward and then upward to form graceful spirals, as pictured here. The ewes' horns are more delicate, curving outward and downward and then back toward the face.

## The Horned Dorset

### *Notes on a remarkable breed*

After many years of observation, Karl Bowen has built up a great deal of expertise regarding the confirmation and characteristics of the Horned Dorset. Following are some of his thoughts on the breed.

- Mature Horned Dorset rams typically weigh from 175 to 250 pounds. Ewes average 125 to 175 pounds.
- They should have a deep body, strong back and a broad loin. Hindquarters should be reasonably full and generally “meated” well down the hock.
- The rams' horns are large, curving downward and forward and then upward to form graceful spirals. The ewes' horns are more delicate, curving outward and downward and then back toward the face.
- The fleece, pure white, weighs six to 10 pounds. Wool on the forehead forms a sort of tuft that stops at a line just above the eyes. Legs are usually free of wool below the knee.
- With the exception of mid-winter, ewes will receive ram at any time of the year in situations in which rams run with the flock.
- It is not uncommon — but not wise — to have two lamb crops in 12 months; three lamb crops in two years does not harm the future viability of ewes.
- Twins are more the rule than singles. Triplets are not uncommon.
- When buying a ram for breeding purposes, he should be a twin or triplet with his horns positioned out from the side of his head.
- Horned Dorset ewes are the Holstein cows of sheep. Lambs grow quickly on mother's milk. Ewes seldom fail to claim their lambs.

The declining numbers can be linked to the development of the Polled (hornless) Dorset.

According to the Department of Animal Science at Oklahoma State University, Polled Dorsets originated at North Carolina State College, the apparent result of a mutation within the purebred Horned Dorset flock there. After extensive testing to assure they could carry and propagate the traits of Horned Dorsets, they were accepted as a breed in the US in 1956.

Australia also lays claim to the Polled Dorset, according to the Australian Poll Dorset Association. The horns were considered “troublesome,” though they're not a concern to breeders like Bowen and Lyster.

The Australian polled Dorset was created by breeding the Horned Dorset to other breeds and then using backcrossing and careful selection to maintain the Dorset characteristics.

The process, begun in the 1930s, was complex and time-consuming. It would be another 20 years before the Polled Dorset was recognized as a separate breed.

Today, it's said Australia's top Polled Dorsets have close to 99 per cent pure Horned Dorset blood.

While Lyster is leery of both the Australian mixed bloodlines and the American claim of having developed the polled characteristic from a mutation, there may be a larger concern.

There's a considerable interest, especially in the US, among both horned and polled Dorset breeders, to produce show animals and animals that perform well on high-energy grain diets, he says.

Tall, large-framed sheep are often favoured for show.

There's also a demand for wether sires to be shown as market sheep. They tend to be tight-skinned and well-muscled but gain poorly. “These kinds of animals just fall apart when they hit grass,” Lyster says.

“Basically, if you select your genetics for

***“Karl is one of those guys who has forgotten more than the rest of us remember.”***

grass, the sheep tend toward a deeper body with more capacity.”

The situation explains why the work of Bowen, and breeders like him, is valued. The Horned Dorset is an all-around working sheep with many pluses: excellent maternal traits, out-of-season breeding, longevity, performance on grass and superior carcass cutability.

“I’ve only had the vet out three times in 40 years for lambing trouble,” Bowen says.

Lyster says Horned Dorsets also offer marketing options. Lambs at 50 pounds tend to have good carcass characteristics. So do those at 125.

And the horns, rather than being a nuisance, are actually an attribute. With Horned Dorsets their shape is an excellent indication of the purity of the bloodline. Lyster and Bowen say.

Bowen doesn’t have a driver’s license. He’s lived his entire life on a 108-acre farm — 90 acres of it workable — a few miles from Alymer.

Both of his parents are gone. His mother passed away in the farm house, at the age of 98, four years ago.



A picture of determination: Karl Bowen, who’s dealt with the health issues in his day, heads to the barn to see his treasured flock. Bowen says he “engineers” the chores performed by neighbourhood friends, Pete Neufeld and members of the Penner family.

Several ewes, together with Big Boy, are wary of a stranger in their domicile. The horns of Horned Dorsets are an indicator of the purity of their bloodline.

