



# Guide to Breed Standards and Characteristics



Published by the Ryeland Flock Book  
Society Ltd  
June 2023

## **Introduction.**

This guide has been produced to help with the critical selection of Ryelands and Coloured Ryelands for registering, breeding, showing and sale. It offers both pictorial and descriptive text, allowing owners, breeders, and purchasers to make informed decisions when selecting appropriate stock.

First and foremost, the Ryeland and Coloured Ryeland are dual purpose breeds. They should be capable of producing lambs suitable for market, either as pure bred or crosses, and growing a quality useful fleece. Conformation which allows them longevity to graze easily, breed well and raise lambs should be a priority. Only when correct conformation is established, should breed characteristics be considered.

Breeding programmes should aim to combine and enhance desirable characteristics, contributing to conformation, health, and breed character. Aspects of conformation affecting longevity, breeding soundness or health of an animal should make rejection an easy decision. Minor undesirable aesthetic characteristics can be different. A Ryeland or Coloured Ryeland intended as a show animal should display the very best of conformation, soundness, and breed character. A sheep with minor undesirable breed characteristics with good conformation may have beneficial breeding attributes. These individuals should not be dismissed and can be a good addition to a pedigree flock. Some Ryelands and Coloured Ryelands due to having major breed character faults, may not be destined for registration, but can have useful careers in commercial enterprises. It is important to view the animal as a whole and be clear of its intended market.

By assessing the general conformation and breed attributes of an individual, we are seeing a glimpse of the impact they may have on a flock. The genetic potential of a Ryeland or Coloured Ryeland to produce correct, sound, and true to type offspring can only be gauged, when each year's lambs are critically evaluated for correctness and breed character. Constant critical yet constructive assessment is vital when trying to produce Ryelands and Coloured Ryelands which sustain and improve the national flock.

## General conformation

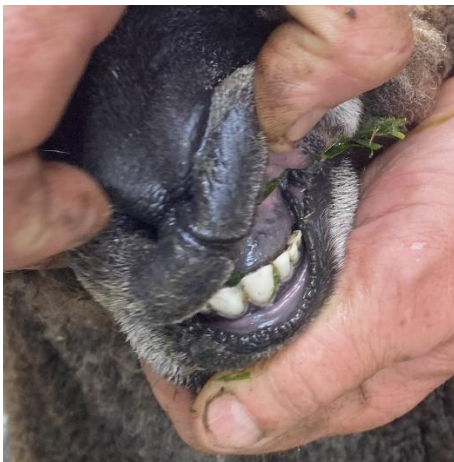
When selecting individuals, it is important to assess their basic anatomical structure. A sheep which shows poor conformation regardless of breed character does not make a good Ryeland or Coloured Ryeland.

The following section looks at the anatomy of a sheep and why having a balanced, correct conformation is of paramount importance. Form and function are intrinsically linked. Poor biomechanics and structure can have a detrimental effect on health and productivity.

### The mouth

The mouth of the sheep should be correct, allowing it to eat easily. The ability of the Ryeland and Coloured Ryeland to thrive on good grass relies on their ability to take in and digest fibrous material, readily converting it into useable energy. Mouth conformation which inhibits this, can lead to ill thrift in sheep of all ages and should always be avoided.

The incisor teeth of the sheep should be examined by running the index finger along the dental pad with the mouth closed and the head in the normal resting position. The teeth should be even, upright and meet the pad on the upper jaw firmly. Teeth which protrude beyond the pad, giving a sharp edge or sit significantly back from the front of the pad should be reason for concern. It should be noted, Teeth can move over time; it is important to continually assess mouth conformation of animals in your flock. Examples of the two most common faults seen are highlighted in photographs 1 and 2. Sheep with such incisor malalignment should be culled as fat lambs.



*Photograph 1: Showing teeth which are misaligned to the pad, being too far forward*



*Photograph 2: showing teeth which are misaligned to the pad, being too far back*

### **The Body**

The neck should be wide at the base and positioned to give a level top line from shoulder to dock. A dip behind the shoulder can be indicative of a weak back, affecting the longevity of a working sheep and should be avoided. Often a fleece can disguise this defect, especially when well carded. Placing flat hands on the back of the animal can be the best way of detection.



*Photograph 3: Ewe demonstrating a well-set neck with a level top line from shoulder to dock*

The shoulders, sit level with the spine and provide sufficient width to allow for the correct positioning and movement of the legs. Shoulder blades which sit too closely together are often indicative of a narrow chested sheep with close front legs. When viewed from above, the ribs should be well rounded, creating a broad back. This should be carried through to the loin and hips which should be well fleshed. A narrowing width from shoulder to tail head should be avoided. The back end of the animal should be evenly muscled. When viewed from behind, the top of the hind leg should be wide and deep. In poorly muscled animals, the area below the tail often appears as an inverted 'V' as empty space is created



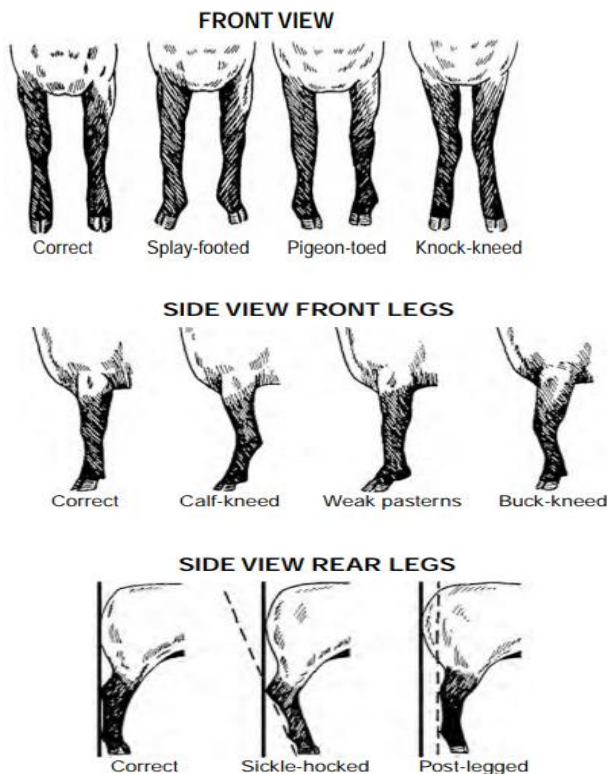


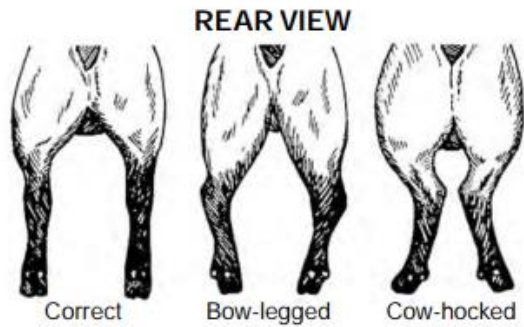
*Photograph 4: When viewed from behind it is possible to see the effect on the rear of the sheep. The Ryeland on the left demonstrates good muscling through the hips with depth and width at the top of hind legs. The ewe on the right has a narrower conformation of the hips and legs.*

### **The legs and feet**

The legs should be set perpendicularly under the body; allowing the sheep to stand squarely, with a leg at each corner. Both front and hind limbs should be positioned with similar width between the pairs allowing sufficient room for correct movement. Incorrect conformation can lead to biomechanical instability and interference with other body parts, such as the udder or testicles.

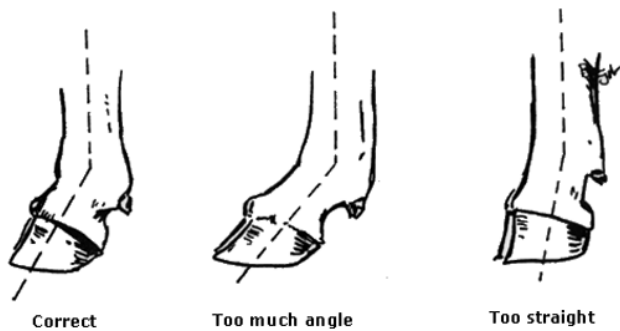
Correct joint angles allow for even weight distribution and smooth biomechanics, reducing the likelihood of mechanical wear and early break down.





*Diagram 1: Diagram depicting the correct conformation of the front & hind limbs and commonly seen faults. Taken from Shropshire-Sheep.co.uk*

Faults can be also found in the pasterns of the front, but more commonly the hind limbs. The correct angle of the structures allows for smooth biomechanics and reduces wear and tear on the joint. The weight carried on the hind limbs of the ram when covering ewes makes the structural stability of the hind limbs of particular importance. Down, dropped, and weak in the pasterns are terms used to describe some common faults in the area. Defects of the pasterns can be detected in lambs and young sheep and are likely to deteriorate as the animal gains more body mass.



*Diagram 2: Diagram depicting correct pastern angle. Taken from dpi.nsw.gov.au*

Feet should be compact with no evidence of hoof abnormalities. Damaged and miss shaped hooves, such as those which are cracked or splayed, are more likely to lead to multiple lameness over the lifetime of the sheep. A lame sheep often spends less time grazing and more time lying down, leading to management and welfare implications such as loss of body condition, lower lambing percentages, poor growth in lambs and reduced fertility in rams to name a few.



*Photo 5: A correctly shaped hoof on the left and a splayed incorrect foot on the right*



*Photograph 6: a severely cracked and diseased foot*



## The Testicles and Udder

### Testicles

The testicles should be equal in size and when palpated be firm and springy. The tone is often described as feeling like a flexed bicep. They should move freely in the scrotum and form an equal pair. The presence of lumps, unusually hard tone, softness, small or enlarged testicles can suggest the presence of disease affecting fertility. Having a larger scrotal circumference has been linked to higher ram fertility. The figures below give a guide, however individual variations may occur.

#### Mature Ram

Lowland breeds: 36 – 38 cm

#### Shearlings

Lowland breeds: 32 – 34 cm

#### Ram Lambs

Lowland breeds: 30 cm

A sub fertile or infertile ram can be costly for a flock and although visual and manual inspection cannot confirm the fertility of an individual, it can offer clues to problems which may occur.

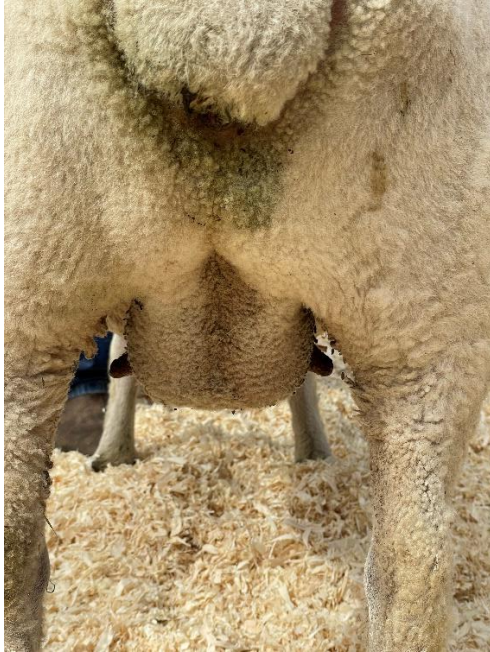


*Photograph 7: Photograph showing even testicles of appropriate size in two ram lambs aged approximately 10 months*



## Udder

Poor udder conformation, such as asymmetry or poor location of teats can make the first and subsequent suckling of lambs a challenge. The udder should be symmetrical, free from lumps and generalised hardness on one or both sides. Teats should feel soft and be free from damage. Supernumerary (additional) teats may be present, but it is important they do not interfere with the two main teats.



*Photograph 8: An udder of a weaned aged ewe showing symmetry, good placing of the teats and no obvious signs of disease.*

## Biomechanics

The way in which an individual moves is generally a representation of its conformation. This is where the relationship between form and function can be especially evident. Good basic conformation allows for free locomotion. When watching a sheep move the hind limbs should follow the front in a straight line. Movement from below the hock and knee should be straight, without deviation from the line. When walking the feet should be seen to be actively lifted and placed squarely back to the ground. Shuffling of the feet suggests lack of structural freedom. A sheep with good movement is pleasing to the eye but, more importantly correct movement reduces wear and tear on locomotory structures. Correct biomechanics has a positive impact on the longevity and health of the animal.

### Summary table

Evaluation of Ryelands and Coloured Ryelands starts with a critical and subject assessment of their conformation. The following table gives a summary of the points covered in this section and can be used as a guide when deciding on the most suitable marketplace for your stock.

<b>The Ideal</b>	<b>Undesirable</b>
Mouth conformation correct	Malalignment of incisors present. Prematurely missing or excessively worn teeth
Level top line from shoulders to dock. Breadth of back carried from shoulders to hind quarters. Shoulders positioned level with spine	Unlevel top line. Weak positioning of shoulder to create an A frame shape and sharpness or dip down to the spine.
Even muscling of the hind quarters being carried from the shoulders with depth and width when viewed from behind	Lack of muscling between the back legs with narrow placement of the hind limbs
Legs set perpendicularly to the body with correct joint angles. Straight movement from the limbs without biomechanical fault	Limbs set too closely together. Incorrect joint angles present. Limbs or part of limbs moving with biomechanical fault
Feet compact without abnormalities	Splayed, cracked, or miss shaped hooves present
Testicles of appropriate size, forming a uniform pair	Small or uneven testicles. Lumps and or hardness in one or both testicles
Symmetrical udder with two teats, soft and free from hardness or lumps.	Asymmetry of the udder. Lumps or hardness present

*NB The sheep should be evaluated as a whole, and consideration given to any fault found. Serious faults and defects may have a significant impact on the future of the animal. Sheep presented in the show ring and for sale at RFBS National sales should have no or minimal minor undesirable conformational traits regardless of breed characteristics. Serious conformational faults such as those found in the mouth, udder & testicles are reasons for animals to be excluded from sale when veterinary inspections are carried out.*

## **Breed characteristics**

### **What are breed characteristics and why are they an important consideration?**

Breed characteristics are a descriptive representation of the appearance of a breed, offering a picture in words. This creates a valuable tool for defining and preserving a distinct look. In essence, they outline the ideal Ryeland and Coloured Ryeland features. These characteristics are a standard by which registered Ryelands and Coloured Ryelands should meet. Along with sound general conformation they form the basis by which an individual may be judged.

By defining the breed characteristics, keepers of Ryelands and Coloured Ryelands have a written guide to which they can refer. Individuals can be assessed against these standards, evaluating their attributes and characteristics. Without these guidelines, the character of a breed can be lost over time and diluted. Most breeders will have chosen to keep Ryelands and Coloured Ryelands due to their distinctive appearance and nature. By acknowledging the importance of registering offspring which conform to the breed standard, the character of the breed can be preserved.

When assessing an individual against the breed characteristics, it is important to consider all the attributes present. Deviations do not necessarily preclude the sheep from registration or breeding however those successful in the show ring and achieving better prices at sale, often conform more closely to the characteristics as outlined by the RFBS. As with general conformation, assessment of the sheep will allow the breeder and potential purchaser to decide to which market the individual is most suited.

The following section provides some photographic examples of features which demonstrate both desirable Ryeland and Coloured Ryeland characteristics and variations which should be avoided.



## **Ryeland Sheep**

**Ryeland Breed Characteristics** (Updated by RFBS Council 29/10/16)

All pedigree animals must be white throughout.

### **Head.**

Medium length, masculine in rams, head with no trace of horn and face showing character, strength and constitution.

### **Face.**

Medium length, dull white in colour with variable amounts of wool on the face. Dark skin around the nose, nostrils not contracted. White hair on dark skin around eye; eye bright and clear of wool

### **Ears.**

Medium size, carried slightly back (not heavy or hanging down), dark colour – either brown shade with white hair (sometimes spotted with black) or covered with short white wool.

### **Neck.**

Strong, broad and set on so as to give the head a bridled appearance.

### **Shoulders.**

Smoothly and well set, no depression behind.

### **Chest.**

Broad and fairly deep.

### **Back.**

Straight, level from the base of the neck to setting of tail, which should be broad.

### **Ribs.**

Well sprung, body well down forming good bottom line.

### **Legs of Mutton.**

Full, well let down. Good length of hind quarter from hip to dock.

### **Legs and Feet.**

Dull white colour, single black spot not objected to as it is invariably a birthmark and not hereditary. Legs below knee and hock straight. Compact feet firmly set.

### **Skin.**

Healthy pink colour except where otherwise stated.

### **Flesh.**

Even and firm handling all over.

### **Carriage.**







Smart appearance when walking or standing. Head held high.







### **Fleece.**

To be good in quality, stronger in rams than in ewes, deep in staple, thickly set on skin, handling firmly, close level appearance, every part including belly and purse well covered, except where otherwise stated. Free from coarseness, kemp, black, grey or rusty fibres.







### **Style and Character**







The skin around the eye and nose should be dark. Ears of medium length, carried slightly back, not heavy and hanging down. Dark shade being the most desirable either of a brown shade without hair or with white hair, spotted with black, but not grey. Sometimes covered with short wool which must, of course be white, but an ear free from wool is preferable. White or pink ears or a white nose show anything but Ryeland character and should be avoided.

Ear Variation	Notes	Breed character
	<p>Full covering of wool on the ears. Breeders and buyers may have preferences regarding the amount of wool on ears and head</p>	
	<p>No wool covering on the ears, short white hairs present. As above, some breeders and buyers may have preferences regarding the amount of wool on the ears and head</p>	
	<p>Very dark brown ear colouring with short wool covering the ear</p>	

	<p>Brown ear colouring with short white hairs</p>	
	<p>Lighter brown ear colouring with short white hairs</p>	
	<p>Pink ear colouring with short wool covering the ear. A very pink ear does not show Ryeland character</p>	



Head	Notes	Breed character
	<p>Ram showing less wool covering on the head &amp; a masculine look. Ears of medium size</p>	
	<p>Ewe showing a more feminine head &amp; more wool coverage. Ears of medium size</p>	
	<p>Ewe showing a feminine head. Even more wool coverage shown. Ears of medium size</p>	

	<p>The skin of a Ryeland should be pink except around the muzzle, eyes, and ear. Wool should be free from coarse, grey, black, or rusty fibres</p>	
	<p>Correct dark skin around the nose</p>	
	<p>Black/brown fibres in the face wool of the lamb</p>	



Some black/brown fibres are not as widely distributed and need to be looked for more carefully. This shows a small patch of dark fibres on the shoulder of a yearling



Rusty fibres in the leg wool. Rusty and dark fibres can sometimes be seen in young lambs & may fade/grow out. It should not be present in older lambs or adult sheep





## Coloured Ryeland Sheep

*Coloured Ryeland Breed Characteristics (Updated by RFBS Council 29/10/2016)*

### **Head**

Medium length, masculine in rams, with no trace of horn and face showing character, strength and constitution

### **Face**

Medium length, variable amounts of wool around the face is acceptable with mealy markings around mouth. White tear-drop markings on inner corner of eyes must be present and may be variable in size.

### **Ears**

Medium size, carried slightly back (not heavy or hanging down) dark coloured and may have a covering of wool and or mealy markings on edge.

### **Neck**

Strong, broad and set on so as to give a bridled appearance.

### **Shoulders**

Smoothly and well set, no depression behind.

### **Chest**

Broad and fairly deep

### **Back**

Straight, level from base of neck to setting of tail, which should be broad

### **Ribs**

Well sprung, body well down forming a good bottom line

### **Legs of Mutton**

Full, well let down. Good length of hindquarter from hipbone to dock.

### **Legs and Feet**

Legs below knees and hock straight. Compact feet firmly set.

### **Skin**

Dark

### **Flesh**







Even and firm handling all over







### **Carriage**

Smart appearance when walking or standing. Head held high.







### **Fleece**

To be good quality, stronger in rams than in ewes, deep in staple, thickly set on skin. handling firmly. free from coarseness and kemp and can be natural colour or combination of colours (no colour or combination of colourers to be preferable to any others). Quality to be equivalent to Bradford Count of 56's - 58's or finer







Head, Ears & Face	Notes	Breed character
	<p>Lamb showing full wool coverage on the ears and wool extending down to the muzzle area. Breeders and buyers may have preferences as to the amount of wool present on the face and ears</p>	
	<p>Winter shorn shearing ewe with less wool coverage over the face shown. Wool on the face does not extend as far down as the muzzle compared to above</p>	
	<p>Limited wool covering on the ears. Short white hairs present giving mealy markings on the edge</p>	









	<p>Ear with wool covering present. No mealy edge to the ear</p>	
	<p>An ear free from wool. No mealy markings present on edge of ear</p>	
	<p>White tear - drop markings must be present in the corner of the eyes. These can be variable in size &amp; can extend down the face</p>	




	<p>No white tear – drop markings present in the corner of the eye. This does not show Coloured Ryeland breed character</p>	
	<p>Prominent mealy markings around the upper and lower mouth area.</p>	
	<p>Prominent mealy markings on upper lip but significantly less on the lower portion of the mouth area</p>	



	<p>Limited mealy markings around the front of the muzzle but obviously present at the side</p>	
	<p>The absence of mealy markings around the mouth does not show Coloured Ryeland breed character</p>	
	<p>The fleece of a Coloured Ryeland can be any natural colour or combination of colours. Here 2 lambs show the variation of colour found, from dark to a pale silver</p>	

	<p>Colour combinations can vary. Lamb showing a solid dark fleece. Breeders and purchasers may have a personal preference on colour and patterns.</p>	
	<p>A lamb showing lighter patches within the fleece and a more patterned appearance of dark and lighter wool</p>	
	<p>Breeding ewe with a fleece which has become lighter with age</p>	
	<p>Breeding ewe showing patches of light and dark fleece</p>	



	<p>Young lamb showing dark and light colouring throughout the head area</p>	
---	---	---

*Thank you to all who provided photos for this guide*