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The first domestic sheep were brought to Britain by Neolithic farmers about 4000 BC. The Soay sheep (right) which run wild on the remote island of St Kilda are probably similar to these ancient animals.

For many thousands of years sheep were valued as much - possibly more - for their milk than their wool. The Romans, for example, did not make cheese from cow's milk, but from sheep and goats milk. This was still the situation during the early Middle Ages. The illustration below right is from the *Luttrell Psalter* (about 1330) and shows a pen of sheep being milked.

The coat of primitive breeds of domestic sheep has a coarse outer layer and an undercoat of fine wool. Separating the fine from the coarse wool could be a time-consuming business. Gradually, however, breeds of sheep were developed which produced fine, high-grade wool. Perhaps the best British high-grade wool was produced in the late Middle Ages.



The drive to breed sheep producing high quality wool was in part caused by the huge sheep farms created by Cistercian monasteries. The Cistercian monastic tradition began in the eleventh century with monks who wanted to return to a simple and isolated life. They were given land to support their communities and soon their estates became enormous. Abbeys such as those at Fountains and Rievaulx (left) in Yorkshire became very grand because of the profits made by selling wool to weavers on the continent.



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The members of Cistercian abbeys came to be divided into two groups - monks and lay brothers. Monks spent all their time at prayer in the monastery church. Lay brothers were recruited from the peasantry and were simple uneducated men, whose function consisted in carrying out farmwork and other necessary but laborious jobs. They ate and slept in rooms adjacent to those of the monks, but the two groups did not mix. Many of the lay brothers would have been shepherds and it was their work in the fields, from dawn till dusk, winter and summer, which made the Cistercian monasteries rich. After the Black Death in 1350 the number of lay brothers began to decline. A drawing of a lay brother from a medieval Cistercian manuscript can be seen on the right.



Whether the wool came from the monastic sheep ranches or from private farms, during the first half of the fourteenth century most of it was sold to Italian merchants. Some made its way to Italy, most of it to Flanders (now in Belgium), where it was woven into expensive cloth.

In 1305, English wool exports reached 45,000 sacks. A 'sack' of wool was enormous. It took a whole wagon to hold a single one and each contained the wool of between 180 and 250 sheep. This was an exceptional year, but 30,000 sacks and more were frequently exported from England until the 1360s.



After that date Spain, which was developing the merino sheep from north Africa, became Europe's main wool exporter. England's exports declined because the king decided to tax wool exports to pay for his activities in the Hundred Years' War.

It is in the fourteenth century that the tradition of the Lord Chancellor in the House of Lords sitting on a woolsack (above right) began. The woolsack is a large, wool-stuffed cushion covered with red cloth; it has neither a back nor arms. The Lords' Mace is placed on the rear part of the woolsack. It symbolised the importance of the wool trade to the nation's prosperity.

Above left: Jan van Eyck's famous portrait of Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini (1400 - after 1452) and his wife. Arnolfini was an Italian cloth trader who lived in Bruges in Flanders. He and his wife are wearing some of the finest fabric available at the time.

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As England's wool exports declined, its weaving industry grew. Skilled weavers were encouraged to come to the country from Flanders to teach their craft, although rolls of cloth were still exported to the continent to be finished off and turned into a luxury product. Reading and Newbury were some of the towns that developed an important weaving industry. In the sixteenth century about a third of Reading's workers had a loom in their house to produce cloth from the wool brought in to town from flocks on the Berkshire Downs. Reading's coat-of-arms (right) is supported by two rams to symbolise the importance of wool weaving to the town's growth.



Although a number of people made a lot of money from the wool trade, it was dependent in the first place on the work of humble shepherds who cared for the sheep. Unlike Giovanni Arnolfini these people did not have their portraits painted, although occasionally we can catch a glimpse of these anonymous workers. The photograph on the left shows a medieval carving of shepherds from a nativity scene in Exeter cathedral. The men are clearly based on local shepherds. Their rough and sturdy clothing is similar to that found on the model in this box.



A shepherd's life was - and is - tough. Every day was spent out of doors in all weathers. Shepherds had to move the sheep to new pastures as the seasons changed. They had to tend the ewes when they gave birth and care for the lambs. They had to protect the flock from thieves and predators. They had to care for sick sheep, dabbing sticky concoctions onto sheep infected with sheep scab (right), for example. Some sheets describing the cycle of life for a modern shepherd are also included in the box.

In the fifteenth century a play was regularly performed in Wakefield about the shepherds who came to worship the baby Jesus. Its opening lines, given here in modern English, reflect the hard life of a medieval shepherd:
Lord, but these weathers are cold! And I am ill wrapped.
I'm nearly numb, so long have I napped. / My legs give way, my fingers are chapped. / It is not as I would; I am in sorrow lapped. / In storms and tempest, Now in the east, now in the west, / Woe is him that never has rest /Midday nor morrow.