BELTEX - THE STORY

IN THE BEGINNING….
Beltex arrived in the UK from Belgium in 1989 and with their double-muscle traits they brought a totally new dimension to British lamb production. The breed was originally developed as the Belgian Texel, by selection and breeding for the traits found in culards (double-muscled sheep). Belgian breeders were greatly assisted by Professor Roger Hanset of the University of Liege, who was a leader in the field of research into the genetics of double muscle and he also played a major role in the development of the Belgian Blue breed of cattle. His colleague, Professor Pascal Leroy carried out research confirming the superior carcase traits of the new breed which he described in his report as 'Texel DM' (Double Muscle). The results of the combined efforts of science and stockmanship can be seen today in the superb conformation and gigots which are the Beltex trademark

THE PIONEERS
Tom Ashton was the first UK breeder to see these heavily-muscled Belgian Texels and be convinced that they had a role to play in the UK, but the lack of sheep health schemes in Belgium put imports out of the question. However, thanks to the efforts of M. Paul Hardy, a Belgian ministry official, several flocks were soon tested and achieved the necessary health status to permit exports to the UK. Tom Ashton and Dr Mike Tempest formed the 'Bel-Tex' partnership which imported the first Beltex and gave the breed its 'Beltex' name. M. Hardy, in his role as organiser of Belgimex, a Belgian breeders' marketing co-operative, provided encouragement and the finance for the first Beltex stand at the Royal show. Mary Dunlop and John McIlwraith established the first Beltex flocks in Scotland, while David Brown and Jim and William Carson led the way in Northern Ireland and introduced the breed to the province.

MAKING A START
The first imported rams, 'Lotar van het Korenhof' and 'Mistral' were selected for their outstanding conformation and used extensively in the breed in the early years. The demand for Beltex quickly gathered momentum and the rapid expansion of the breed was assisted by entrepreneurs such as Gavin Shanks, John McIlwraith, Alan Thom and others who imported consignments of breeding females which became the foundation stock for many Beltex flocks.

SOCIETY MATTERS
The Beltex Sheep Society was established in 1991. Mike Tempest was elected as the first chairman and in 1992 Helen Ashton was appointed as secretary. In the same year another group of breeders formed the Belgian Beltex Society with John McIlwraith as its chairman. In 1995, the two societies merged under the Beltex Sheep Society banner with Marian Reed as chairman and the logo of the Belgian Beltex Society was adopted as the trademark of the new society. The Beltex Sheep Society was granted charitable status in 2006, and the same year saw the appointment of Rachel Buckle to the post of secretary following the resignation of Helen Ashton after 14 years at the helm of the Society. During this time she was assisted by Pat Johnson who retired in 2006. Rachel Buckle resigned after seven years in the post in 2013 when Barbara Huddleston was appointed, Barbara had assisted Rachel in the office for a number of years.

SALES TALK
The Borderway mart in Carlisle has been the venue for the Society premier sale since 1995 when 240 Beltex were catalogued. However, the very first sales of Beltex were held in 1990 and 1991 at the Ashton family's Lawns Farm near Wigan, before an increasing entry prompted a move to Chelford mart for the

1992 sale. The Belgian Beltex Society held their sales in Penrith in 1991 and 1992 with subsequent sales held in Carlisle. Northern Ireland Beltex sales initially took place at the Auto Mart, Portadown before relocating to the current venue at Dungannnon Farmers' Mart. The Society now holds over 20 sales in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland each year.

MAKING AN IMPRESSION
No other Continental sheep breed has made such an impact, so soon after its introduction, as the Beltex. The initial reaction from UK farmers was amusement, then amazement that so much meat could be packed into such a small-framed sheep, especially when Beltex lambs started to monopolise the silverware in prime lamb and carcase competitions. Between 1991 and 1995, the Smithfield Reserve Supreme live championship went to David Gardiner's Beltex no less than three times before he finally clinched the trophy in 1996. In 1994, just 5 years after the breed's arrival in the UK, Beltex lifted the 'triple crown' of supreme carcase championships with Robert Smith's triumph at Smithfield, Matthew Hamilton at the Scottish Winter Fair and D & A Bishop at the Welsh Winter Fair, not to mention the Bishop's Supreme live championship at the same event. Engravers have been kept busy ever since, adding the names of Beltex exhibitors to the silverware from all the major prime lamb and carcase competitions.

IT'S SHOWTIME!
In 1995, the Royal Welsh show became first of the four 'Royals' to include classes for Beltex which were judged by Mike Mulgrew. He awarded the championship to 'Rocky' an imported shearling, shown by John McIlwraith and Gavin Shanks, which went on to win the championship at Carlisle the following month and sold for 2,400gns. McIlwraith & Shanks repeated their success the following year at the 1996 Highland Show where 'Shogun' a 2-shear Belgian-bred ram, emerged as champion from among 38 entries which were judged by Ian Maxwell from Donegal. 1996 was also the year of the first Beltex classes at the Royal Ulster show where the judge, Robin Slade chose as his champion, Ardstewart Ulrika, a shearling ewe shown by Wade McCrabbe. She repeated her success the following year when the classes were judged by Tom Ashton. The Beltex breed finally made its appearance in the Royal Show ring in 1998 where they were permitted only two classes, male and female. 47 entries went under the critical eye of the judge, David Gardiner and the red, white and blue ticket went to the Belgian-bred ram 'Viagrow' shown by John McIlwraith. Beltex entries continue to grow at shows throughout the UK, having a strong presence at the major shows. In 2017 Beltex went onto win the interbreed championships across the UK.

RECORD-MAKERS
The record price of 34,000gns for a Beltex Shearling Ram achieved in 2003 was when Northern Ireland breeders J K Currie & Sons sold Tullygarley Elite to a syndicate of breeders, namely, Gavin Shanks, John McIlwraith, John Hall, Alan Thom, John Barclay (Beachy'), Evan Evans and Bob Roberts. This was broken in 2016 when Scottish breeders Grant & Gemma Anderson, Grant an auctioneer at H&H, Carlisle stood amazed in the ring as their Shearling Ram Topflite Al Pacino was eventually knocked down, after fierce bidding for 60,000gns to Paul Tippetts and Christine Williams from Shifnal, Shropshire.

The 6,800gns record priced ram lamb, Pentland Hero bred by Graham Burke and sold at Carlisle in 2004 to John Frazier for his Coningswick flock. Earlier in the year Graham was the auctioneer at the West Drums dispersal at Forfar mart when the record priced ewe lamb went under the hammer. This ET daughter of Southolm Carla was knocked down to 4,200gns to Blair Duffton, Huntly Aberdeenshire. Carlisle 2016 also saw the previous ram lamb price broken when Cumbrian breeders the Buckle family sold Broxty Boxer for 25,000gns to A J Wood, Preston, Lancs. The following year in 2017 Richard Wood took the mantle for the record priced ram lamb at 27,000gns for Kingledores Crusader.

The 5,000gns record for a Beltex female came in 2003 at the Carlisle in-lamb sale when a Shearling Ewe, in-lamb to Tullygarley Elite was sold by Gavin Shanks & Alan Thom to J McGarva, Horseclose, Annan. This price was toppled at the 2016 Carlisle In-lamb sale when E J & A M Fox, sold Shearling Ewe College Adele, in-lamb to Clary Ace for 8,500gns to the Buckles family, Cumbria. Topping this was a Shearling Ewe from Richard Wood Kingledores Arienne was sold at the private Beltex Beauties Sale 2016 for 10,000gns to Adam Neachell, Cromwell Livestock, Staffordshire.

THE WORD
The first edition of the Beltex Journal was published in 1995 and incorporated the Irish yearbook. The Journal was edited and produced by Ian Kerr who became CEO of the Limousin Cattle Society! Its 24 pages were in black and white and 123 breeders were listed in the directory. The front cover featured 'Showgirl', a shearling ewe owned by William Carson and bred in Belgium by Jacques L'Ohest. She was champion at the 1995 Irish National Show, and reserve champion in 1996. 'Showgirl' was the dam of Downkillybegs Viper, stock sire of the Downkillybegs and Ardstewart flocks. Over the years the Beltex Journal or Year Book has grown in size and now printed in full colour, the number of breeders has increased; many of whom now advertise their flocks in the Year Book. All members receive the Beltex Bulletin three times a year, with news of thr recent shows and sales along with updates and reminders from the Council and office.