

GENERAL INTRODUCTION.

In 1960 the importation of meat into Trinidad cost the country 20 million dollars . This the country can little afford, and the need to increase home meat production is very great. This potential demand for home produced meat is excentuated in the case of sheep by the demand for mutton b y the local Hindu population. This demand is so great that an aged ewe can command as high a price per pound liveweight as can the islands best beef cattle. With this in mind it is surprising that sheep are not more widely kept in Trinidad; and that those that are are generally kept under such poor conditions of feeding and management; and are normally but little improved:

On the New Farm, U.W.I,work has been done in recent years using a flock of Blackhead Persian Sheep to investigate the milk production of the ewes, the effect of nutrition on milk production, and the growth and liveweight gains of the lambs. Results from these experiments have indicated that sheep in this island will respond satisfactorily to more intensive systems of management. Since Pangola Grass (Digitaria decumbens) has been successfully introduced into the West Indies it has been shown to be capable of providing high quality pastures on which good fat lamb and mutton might be produced. Intensive rotational grazing at the University Farm has shown that it would not be impossible to graze as many as 9 or 10 ewes per acre on properly managed Pangola pastures.

With this potential of available feed, only the right type of sheep is still lacking, but it has yet to be established what is the most suitable breed of sheep for Trinidad conditions. The Blackhead Persian breed, as used on the University farm; is a member of the fat-rumped group of sheep indigenous to North Africa and Asia Minor. It was introduced into South Africa 90 years ago and farmed there as a mutton sheep, its coat having no commercial value as wool. The breed was favoured due to its great adaptability to unfavourable conditions, its hardiness during times of drought and its ability to exist on the poorest grasses. This hardiness was illustrated by Mackenzie (1958) in

Southern Rhodesia where one of the most important factors limiting production on free range is the low digestible protein content of the natural grazing during winter months. By crossing Blackhead Persian ewes with different breeds of rams Mackenzie showed that the pure Blackhead Persian sired 10% more lambs alive at birth than the improved breeds of rams although the improved lambs proved superior in conformation and growth rate.

However, the high rainfall conditions of Trinidad without the danger of serious drought renders the advantages of the Blackhead Persian unnecessary for sheep in this island.

Research at the University is aimed at studying the factors affecting the productivity of the sheep flock and at investigating some of the factors which have been shown in temperate and sub-tropical conditions to be of importance in lamb production.