

# **'The Exmoor Pony of the Goat World' Breed Points of the British Native Goat**

Raymond Werner, May 1998

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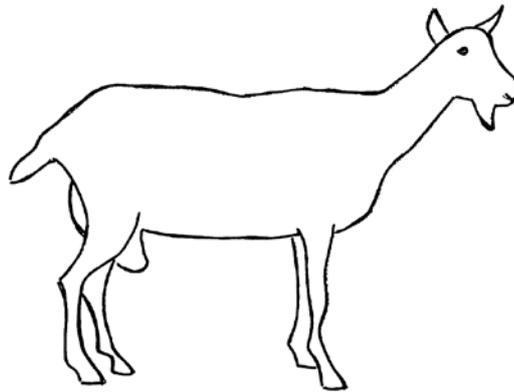
Summary and checklist



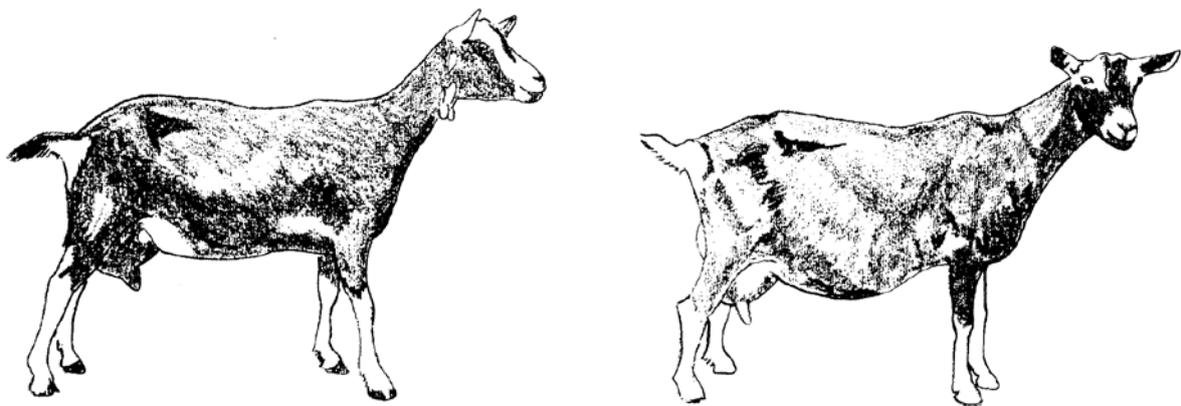
## Origin

The British Native Goat belongs to the Northern Breed Group, comprising the old native types of Finland, Scandinavia, Iceland and the British Isles. So long-established that they might genuinely be termed “native” goats, their origin is bound up in the history of goat development in Europe generally.

The original goat of Europe belonged to the Mountain Type. Robust in appearance, it was stocky and large framed with medium-lengthed legs. In conformation it resembled the wild form closely, although less sexually dimorphic. As a type it emerged into recent history as the dominant goat of Europe’s central belt from France to Eastern Europe.

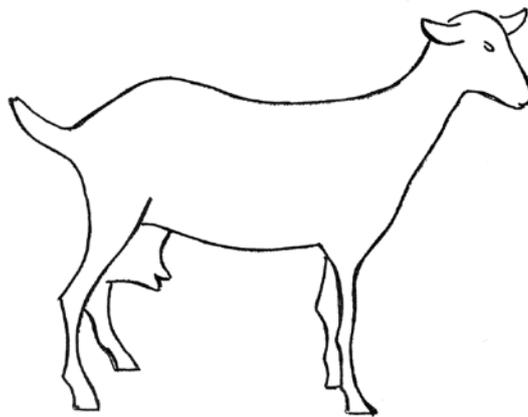


As much at home on lush lowland pasture as on craggy mountain meadows, the Swiss began improving their own Mountain Type to an improved dairy standard in the 1840’s. By single-minded systematic breeding, it was rapidly developed into the large, mainly polled and short-haired Alpine Type, with its ideal or wedge-shaped Swiss dairy conformation.



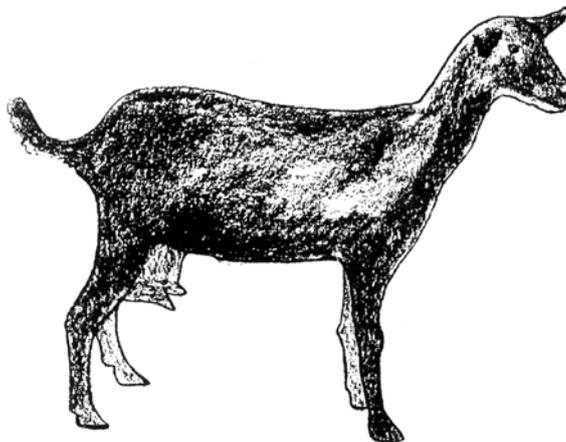
The two other types of goat in Europe are very different to the wild form, and both owe their origin to diverse climatic changes.

As the Middle East and the Mediterranean Basin dried-up and became increasingly arid, a new type of goat emerged. The Scrubland Type is today exemplified in the Anglia-Nubian. Gracile and elegant in appearance, with a delicate bone structure and sleek, glossy coat, it is the Arab horse of the goat world. Its conformation is markedly different from that of the Mountain Type, which has a straight back and underline, and the Alpine Breed Group, which rises slightly from rump to shoulder and slopes steeply down from the chest to the udder- the classic dairy wedge. Standing high on extra long legs, the Scrubland's top line slopes up quite steeply from shoulders to rump, while the underline is roughly horizontal from the top of the udder to the chest.



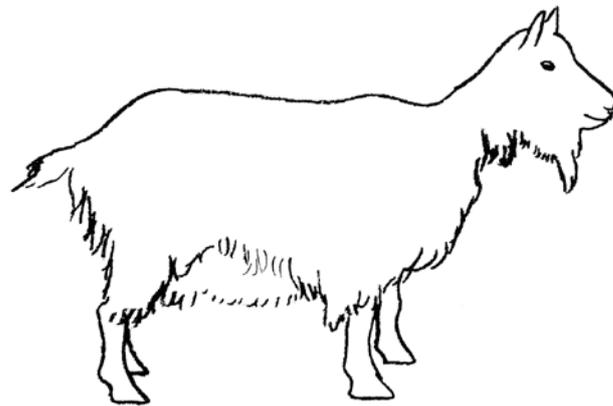
Ideal for hot, arid scrubland, its leg-length helps to keep it cool, gives a better ground clearance to an easily punctured udder, and a high reach for browsing.

Moving into Europe by way of the Balkans and the North African coastline, and to varying degrees mingling with the already-establish Mountain Type, it is today found all along Mediterranean Europe from Iberia to the Balkans.



The third type is the Northern All-weather goat, which most likely developed out of the Mountain Type as a response to climatic changes along the peripheral fringe of Northern Europe itself.

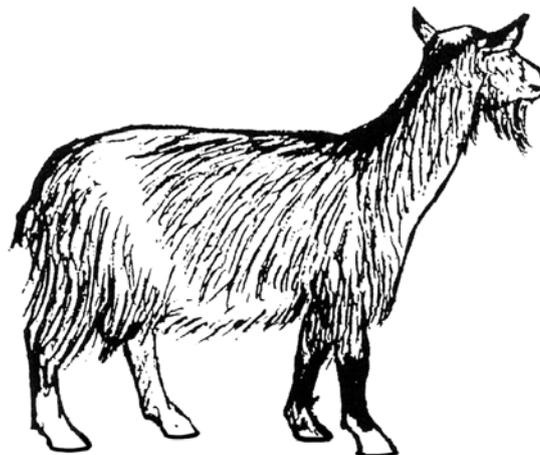
During a phase of ice-melt and climate change, when the summers were cooler than today and the winters were becoming colder and drier, an All-weather Type emerged.



It was required to adapt to both outwintering in severe conditions, subsisting on branches, leaves, and even seaweed, and enduring long periods of housing on an equally meagre fare. In summer, it had to search out its nutritionally poor forage, coping with cold rain and harsh wind. It reared its kids, was milked for a few months more, and provided milk, cheese, hair and skins for clothing and parchment, and even stomachs for bagpipes.

To adapt to such conditions, it developed a robust constitution, a thick and waterproof coat, and the ability to survive on the bleakest mountain and moorland.

If the Mountain Type was the equivalent of the Northern Cold Blood to the horse world, and the Scrubland Type the Arab, then the All-weather Type was most surely the Exmoor Pony.



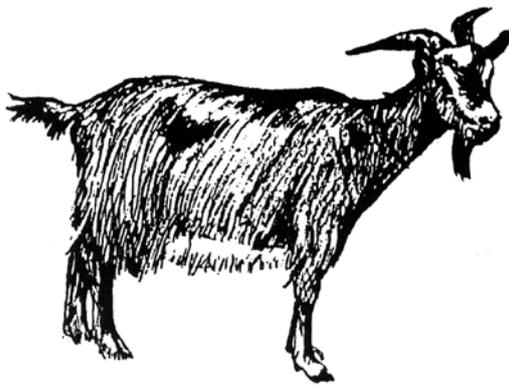
This little hairy and All-weather goat, was moved around the periphery of Europe by Celts, Vikings, Saxons and the like. It was the goat of the Bronze and Iron Ages that, alongside a few cattle and sheep, helped to sustain generations of farming settlements, very often being an important factor in the difference between subsistence and starvation.

Compelled to live roughly on scant fare in bleak conditions, it struggled through adverse conditions to reach a tough maturity and provide a return to its owner. It was the little goat of the Viking fjords, glacial Iceland, damp Ireland, the rolling hills of the Hebrides, the Glen-filled Highlands, Welsh Uplands, and England from the Borders to Cornwall. Above all, it stands unique, being portrayed to perfection in the British native Goat.

### Regional types

Over the years it has become fashionable to present the British Native Goat as four distinct varieties or even breeds- the Old Irish, Old Welsh, Old Scotch and Old English- differing markedly in size, colour, coat length and horn type. Studies have shown, however, that all these so-called breed characteristics were common to all four.

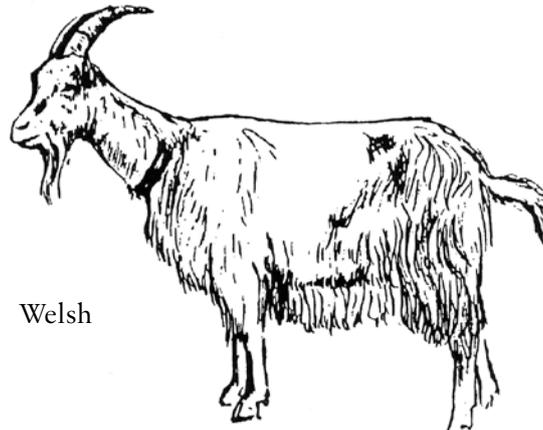
Being an unimproved breed of no fixed type, and therefore having a wide genetic base, it is arguable that “regional types” may have emerged. But “regional” in this context was as likely to apply, say, to the goats of Norfolk as opposed to Cornwall or the West Midlands, as to the goats of Wales and Ireland.



English



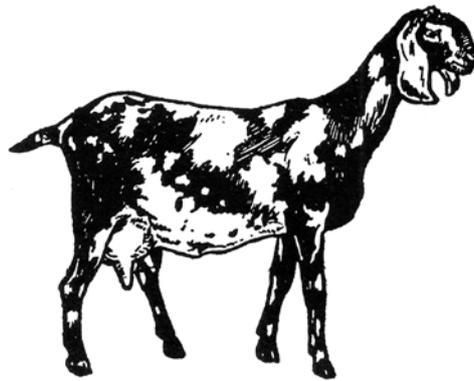
Irish



Welsh

## The introduction of foreign breeds and the decline of the British Native Goat

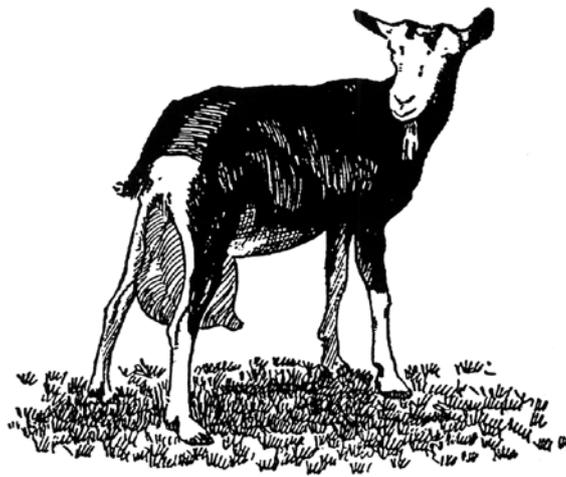
Goat showing in this country began in 1875, and with a small but dedicated and influential group of enthusiasts. The aim was to improve the goat of England to a dairy breed ideal by prize-winning and the recording of pedigrees. From the outset, these Late Victorian goat breeders wanted an animal that was as large as possible, short-haired and hornless with a classic milch goat conformation and high yield. The British Native goat, being small, homed and hairy with only a moderate yield, was quickly marginalised, the early prize-winners being goats descended from Eastern stock of Scrubland Type that had been established in this country for well over a century. And so it was that in the early years of pedigree goat breeding the Native goat lost out to imports from India, Africa and the Middle East, the finished product being the now world-famous Anglo-Nubian.



When, in 1879, these same enthusiasts formed themselves into the British Goat Society, they had two main aims: to promote goats and goat keeping generally and to breed 'a superior English milk goat' that would become 'as famous as the Shorthorn cow', from its outset, and despite the initial success of the prototype Anglo-Nubians, the Society avowed that it would not base its superior breed on goats already established in this country, but instead set up a Goat Importation Company to bring in already improved breeds from abroad. An attempt to import Dutch and Maltese goats in 1880 failed, but breeders turned to Switzerland, where improvement had been going on apace for several decades. In 1884 the first batch of Toggenburgs arrived, taking the show-ring by storm and with it the prizes. Swiss goat mania had begun in earnest. These Toggenburgs were followed by Appenzels, Alpines and Saanens, and in 1925 the dairy breeds of this country were either Swiss or acknowledged Swiss in their name and pedigree- the Saanen, British Saanen, Toggenburg, British Toggenburg and British Alpine.

In 1938, more than 85% of our goat population was Swiss, Angle-Swiss or basically Swiss in type, the Anglo-Nubian accounting for only a little over 8%, the remaining 5% being called 'English, or possibly Irish or Welsh', although few were in fact pure-bred British Native Goats.

Today the British Native Goat in domestication is no more, the remaining stock of the breed being either feral or the descendants of ferals in farms or private hands. For this reason most people have no idea that a British native Goat ever existed, accepting as 'our British goat' an animal that is substantially Swiss in breeding and conformation. Not only has the breed been forgotten, but also the characteristics that made and still make it unique. This study therefore aims at redressing the balance, presenting the breed points of the old type in such a way that anyone seeing it will discern that it is quite distinct, being able to appreciate that it is quite unlike any British goat of foreign origin. It should also demonstrate that there is no Anglo-Nubian or Swiss cross in it, and hopefully once knowing of its existence, no one will ever again take it for anything other than what it is- a British Native goat.



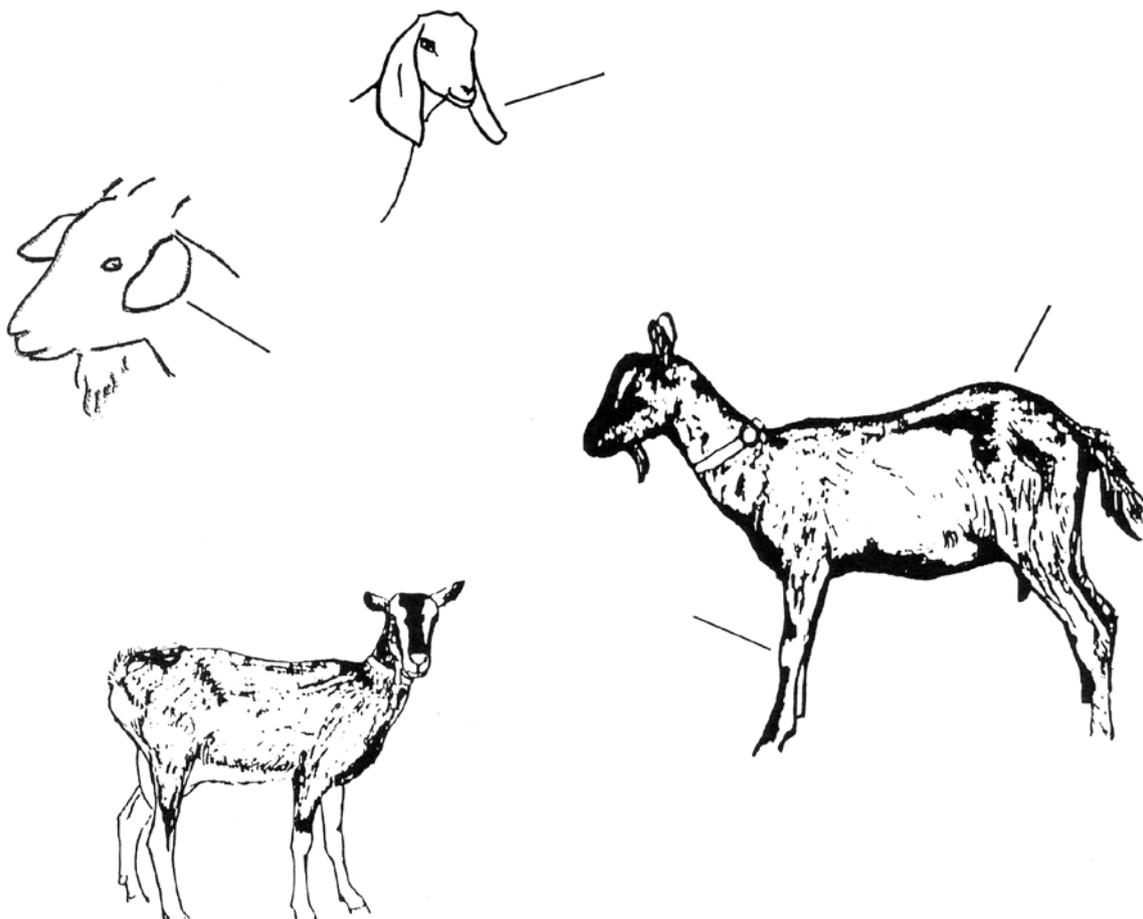
### Breed characteristics

The distinguishing breed points of the British Native Goat are to be found in its head; ears; horns; the issue of tassels; conformation, and namely shape, proportions and rumen size; coat; colour and size.

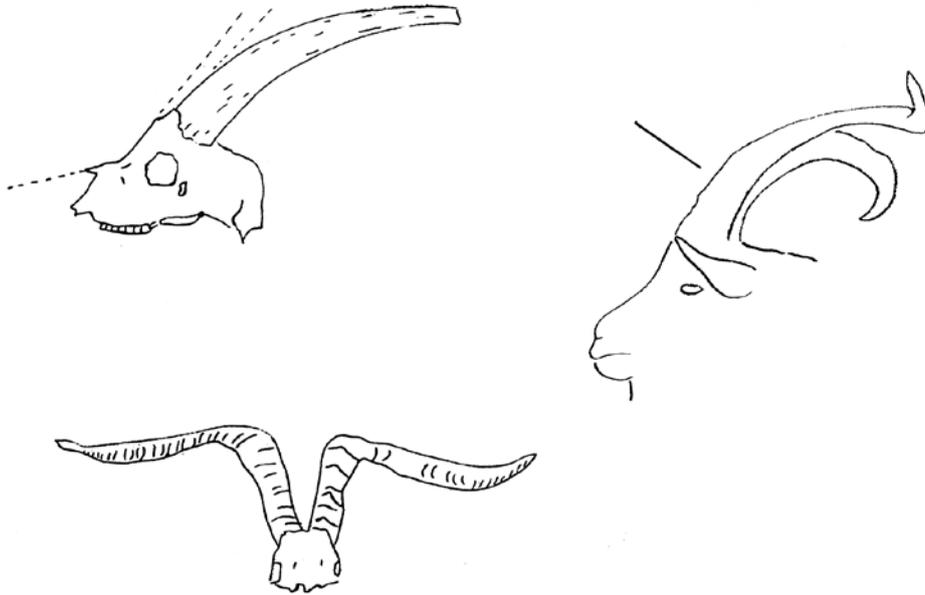
Milch goats in this county belong to the recognised Swiss or Anglo-Swiss breeds, the Anglo-Nubian, what is known as the British (pedigrees of mixed breeding based on mainly Swiss and Anglo-Nubian), and non-pedigreed stock of usually Swiss type.

### Distinguishing between native goats and goats of scrubland type

Milch goats descended from early Eastern imports and later Anglo-Nubian ancestry are easily distinguished from the Native goat, having something of the Scrubland conformation with long legs and high hindquarters, convex nasal profile, and usually large ears that vary between broken and semi-lop to pendant.



Also, goats of this type usually have a different horn form. British Native Goats have horns with a high angle of emergence, which appear quite upright in profile.



Goats with Eastern breeding, and Anglo-Nubians when horned, have a completely different horn form, the angle of emergence being low.



## Distinguishing between Native Goats and goats of Swiss type

The main point of confusion will be between the Native goat and the British milch goat of Swiss type. Their breed points are less exotic than those of goats of Scrubland type, and so are more easily confused with those of our original breed.

### 1. The head

The British Native Goat has a broad forehead and a long head that narrows down to a fine muzzle. Characteristically, the facial profile is concave or 'dished', there being what breeders of pedigree dogs call a 'stop'.



Swiss-type goats in this country most usually have a straight profile. The head is generally broader and deeper, and the muzzle heavier, so that in profile the head appears larger and thicker.

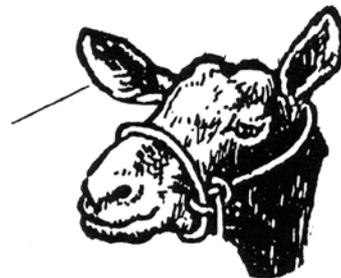


## 2. Ears

Ears are small and pricked, not being wide.

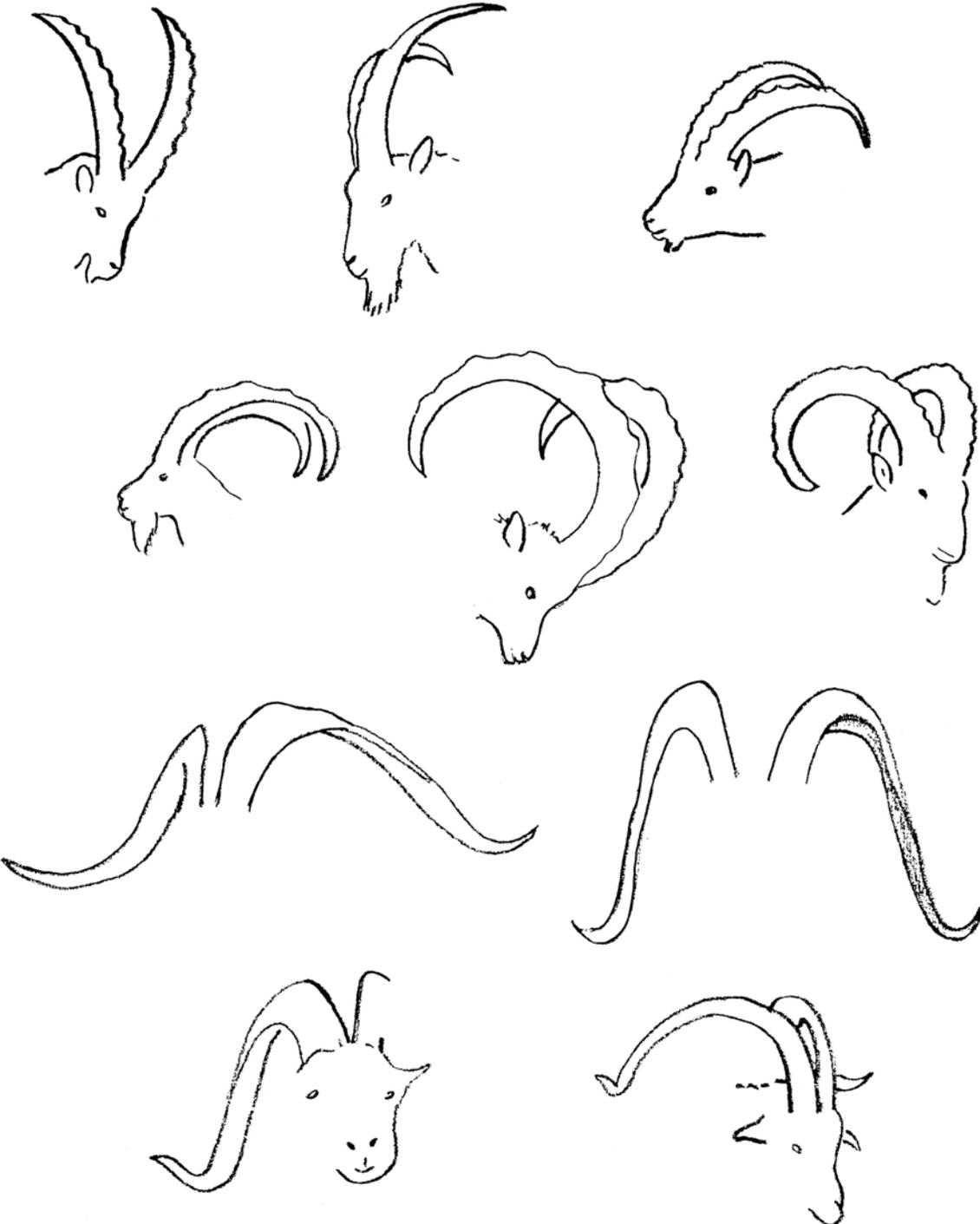


Goats of Swiss type, by contrast, have larger and wider ears, most usually held horizontally.



**3. Horns**

Horns in the Native goat may be recurved (scimitar), semi-circular (curling) or twisted outwards (dorcas twist). Whatever their shape, the angle of emergence is high.



Goats of Swiss type, when horned, most usually have horns with a dorcas twist or which are scimitar in shape, the angle of emergence being high. However, Swiss improvement concentrated on breeding for hornlessness, and it is quite common for goats of Swiss type in this country to be polled. Although hornlessness was known in the British Native Goat, albeit infrequently, feral herds that emerged into recent history were horned. It is therefore safe to assume that hornlessness in a British Native Goat is a good indication of mixed breeding.



#### **4. Tassels**

Milch goats of Eastern, Angle-Nubian and Swiss type in this country are quite often, even characteristically in the case of the Swiss, tasselled.



Whether or not the British native Goat was ever tasselled has been debated, although research has shown that references to tassels in English books referring to goats trace back to translations of Continental works. Also, tassels are not characteristic of feral herds, and whenever and wherever they occur there is usually a traceable history of mongrelisation with domestic stock of foreign origin. As with hornlessness, the presence of tassels in a British native Goat is a good indicator of mixed breeding.

## 5. Conformation

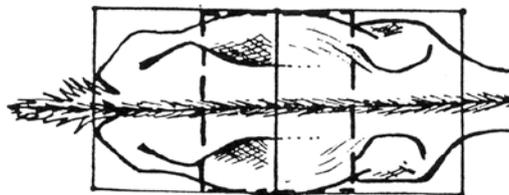
British Native Goats have a markedly different shape and body proportions to goats of Swiss type. The size of the rumen in relation to overall size is also a characteristic.

### 5.1. Shape

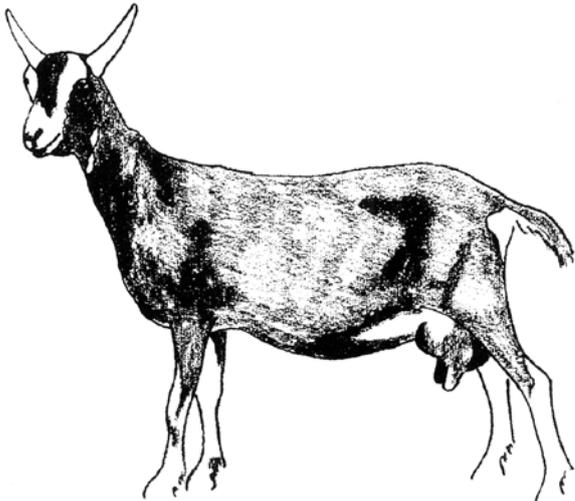
The overall conformation of the British Native goat has been described in various ways, all conveying the idea of a stocky, cobby, robust and deep-bodied animal standing firmly on short, strong legs.



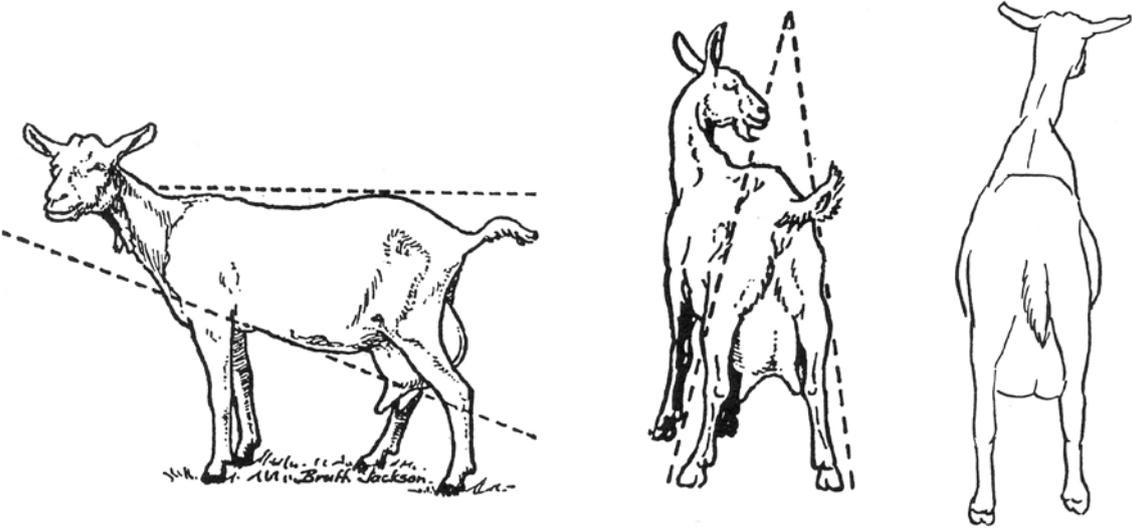
The neck is medium to short, the latter sometimes being referred to as ‘ewe-necked’. The breast bone is wide and strong, being projected forwards, helping to give the breed its solid and cobby appearance. The back is of variable length, but straight, rising neither to the shoulders nor the rump. The hindquarters are square, the tail being set high. The belly line is deep, the breed standing firm and square on short, strong legs. All these features give the ‘British Native Goat the appearance of being square from all angles.



Goats a/Swiss type are, by contrast, much less compact. The neck is longer, being fine and graceful. The legs are longer and finer boned, the body having less depth. The hindquarters are more sloping, the tail being set lower.

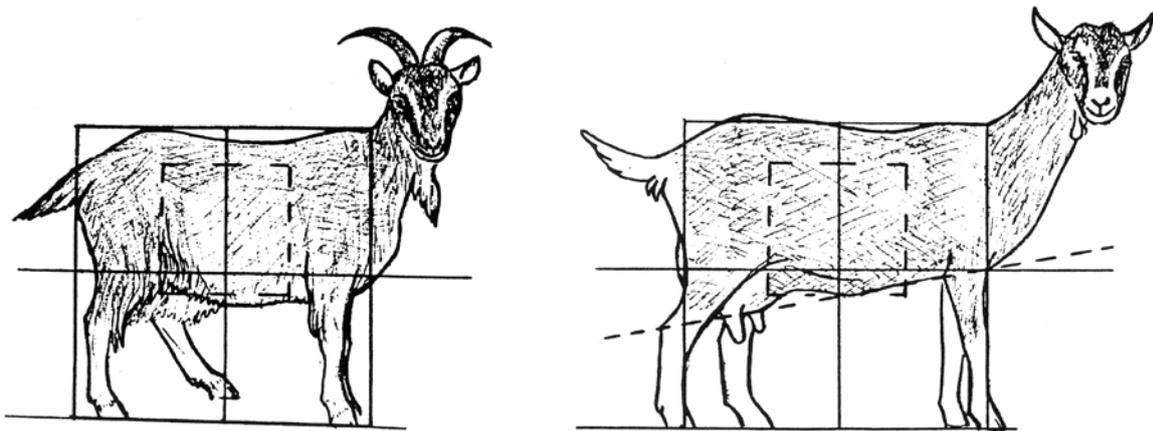


The most notable characteristic, however, is that goats of Swiss type have the classic dairy wedge-shape. Whereas the Native goat is compact and square from all angles, with a straight top and bottom line, Swiss type goats are wedge-shaped from all angles, giving a completely different outline.



## 5.2. Rumen size

Although, as we shall see, Native goats are significantly smaller than goats of Swiss type, their rumen size is similar. This is due to the depth and width of the native goat, and accounts for why, in domestication, it gave such a good conversion rate from food to yield for its size. As feral stock it also helps to keep the body warm in harsh conditions, acting as a fermenting furnace.

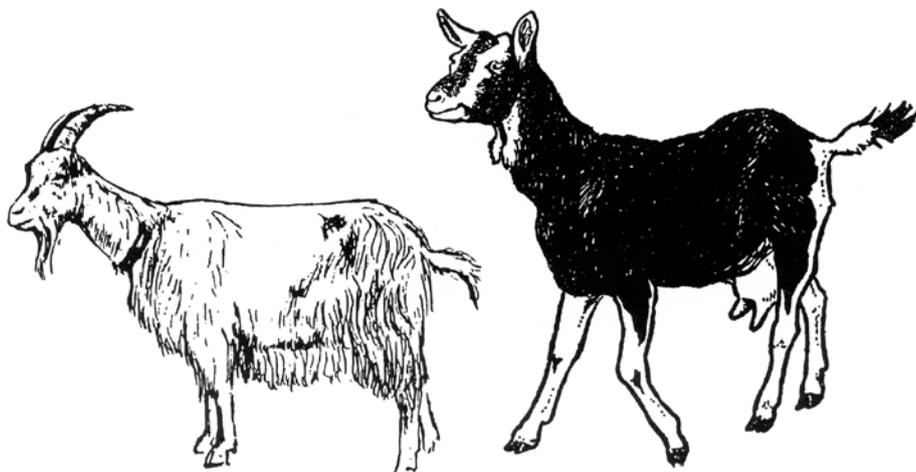


## 6. Size

Mature male British Native Goats stand between 26.5 inches and 28 inches at the shoulder and weigh between 99 and 110 pounds. Male goats of Swiss type may stand between 32 and 38 inches at the shoulder and weigh between 132 and 176 pounds.

Female Native goats stand between 22.5 and 24.5 inches at the shoulder and weigh between 59.5 and 77 pounds, female goats of Swiss type may stand between 28 and 32 inches at the shoulder and weigh between 110 and 132 pounds.

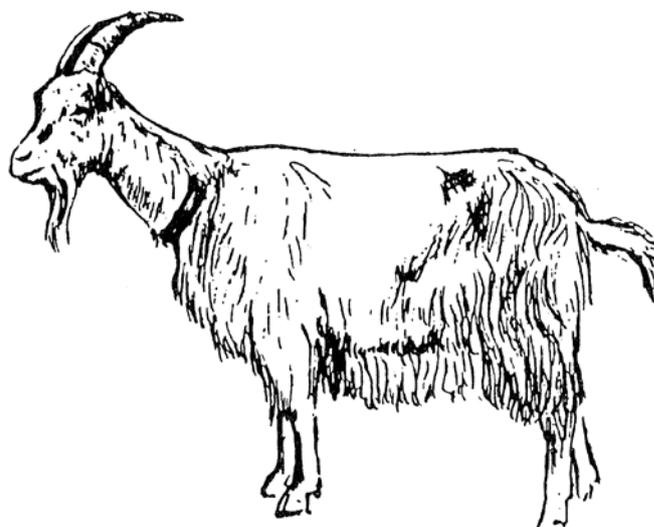
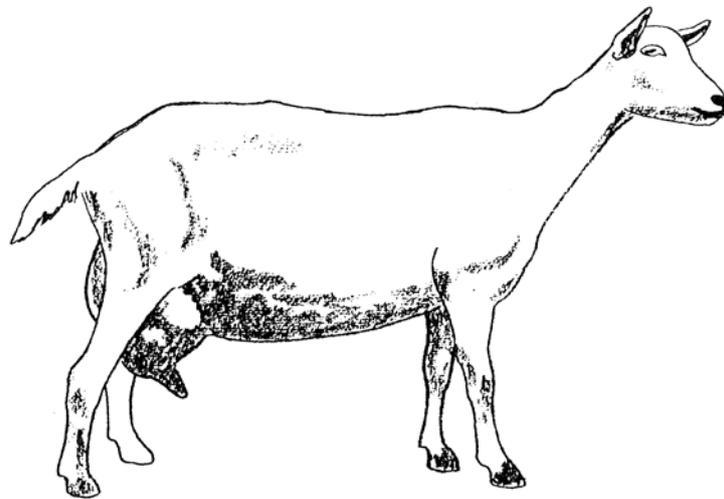
It should be noted that a small female British Native Goat stands only a couple of inches taller than a large female Pygmy Goat.



## 7. Coat

Male British Native Goats have a long coat which may reach to the hocks. The coat of females is more variable, ranging from short but thick and dense, with or without fringes of longer hair on the quarters and along the belly-line, to medium or long like that of the males. Below the coat there is usually a fine underwool or underfluff which, since the rise of a goat fibre industry in this country, has popularly been wiled “cashmere”.

Goats of Swiss type may have long hair in the males and short hair with longer hair over the quarters in the females. It is most usual, even so, for both sexes to have uniformly short coats, the hair not being thick and dense like that of the Native Goat but fine and close.



## 8. Colour and markings

British Native Goats may be faded black, white, piebald, skewbald, all shades of grey, grey-brown, fazon, fawn-roan, or brown. In pied goats there is a tendency to darker forequarters, and a saddle or white belt round the middle are also characteristic.

There may be a darker eel-stripe, and occasionally also a shoulder-stripe. Legs may be black, white, pied or striped.

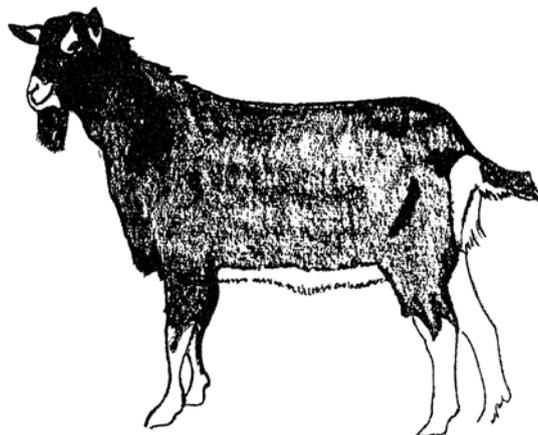
The belly and rump may be dark or white.

The head is often darker than the body, and head markings include a forehead patch of varying size, eye stripes, eye flashes or diamonds, white face (blaze), and white muzzle. A grey muzzle or white spotting on the muzzle occurs, as does a white throat patch.



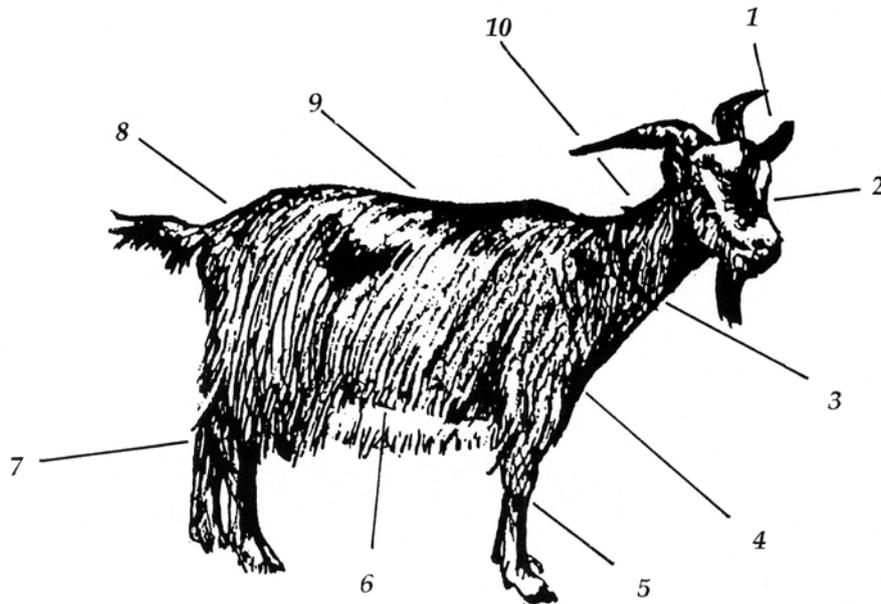
Native goats are never agouti, glossy black (which is of Eastern origin and a dominant gene as opposed to the recessive of the faded European black), black-and-tan, red, mahogany or spotted. In other words, 'exotic' in colour.

Goats of Swiss type are variable in colour, but most usually white, fawn or black. Swiss markings, meaning white legs to the hocks, white rump and broad white facial stripes connecting white muzzle and white ears, are typical. The latter is inherited as a 'bundle', meaning that the facial stripes do not occur on their own. Although the Native Goat may have white facial stripes, it never has these Swiss facial markings.



## 9. General points of the British Native Goat

1. Ears small, pricked and rounded.
2. Forehead wide, head long, face dished, muzzle fine.
3. Neck short to medium, strong and muscular.
4. Breast wide with prominent bone.
5. Legs short and strong.
6. Body deep and square, strong shoulders, large belly.
7. Hocks set wide apart.
8. Rump short and steep.
9. Back of variable length, but straight.
10. Withers prominent.



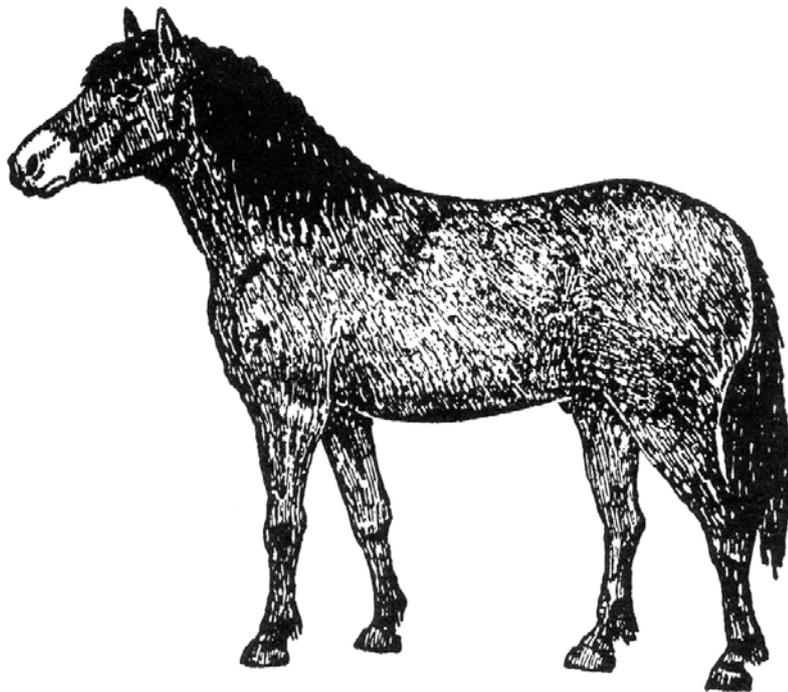
## The breed points of the British Native Goat in context

All British native stock, be it the Exmoor pony, Highland cattle and so on, has a thick, long and waterproof coat in winter, often with fringes which protect the warm underfluff, and keep the animal dry.

They have small, frost-proof ears, short legs and large frames to house an ample belly, the latter allowing enough forage to be consumed to keep them warm in the coldest of British weather conditions.

Animals not expected to cope with the rigours of the British climate are finer-boned, longer-limbed, thinner-coated and so generally less hardy.

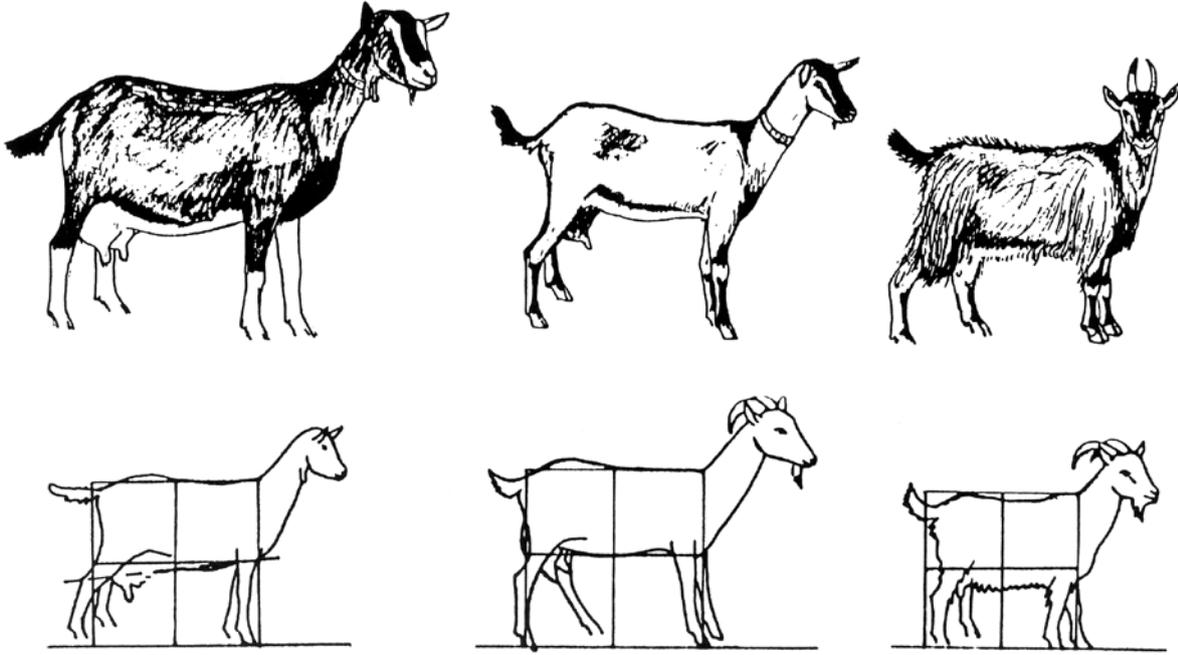
Attempts to 'improve' the Exmoor pony, by the use of Arab sires, ended in failure. Although the results looked pleasing, they were not winter hardy and could not survive the rigours of the moor. There are parallels here with the British Native Goat. Walter Paget, the inspiration behind the English Goat Movement of 1918 and the English Goat Revival of 1920, wrote that to cross our Native goats with foreign stock in an attempt to improve it made about as much sense as crossing West Highland cattle with Jerseys in an attempt to produce a high-yielding breed that could cope with the harsh conditions that the West Highlands were used to. Fitting comment, and perhaps Paget deserves the last word on the matter.



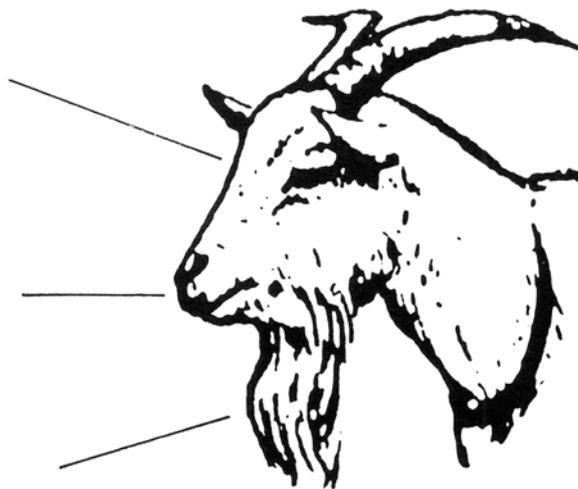
Exmoor Pony

## Summary and checklist

The British Native Goat belongs to the Northern Breed Group, and is quite distinct from the Improved Swiss Dairy Type and breeds of Scrubland Type.



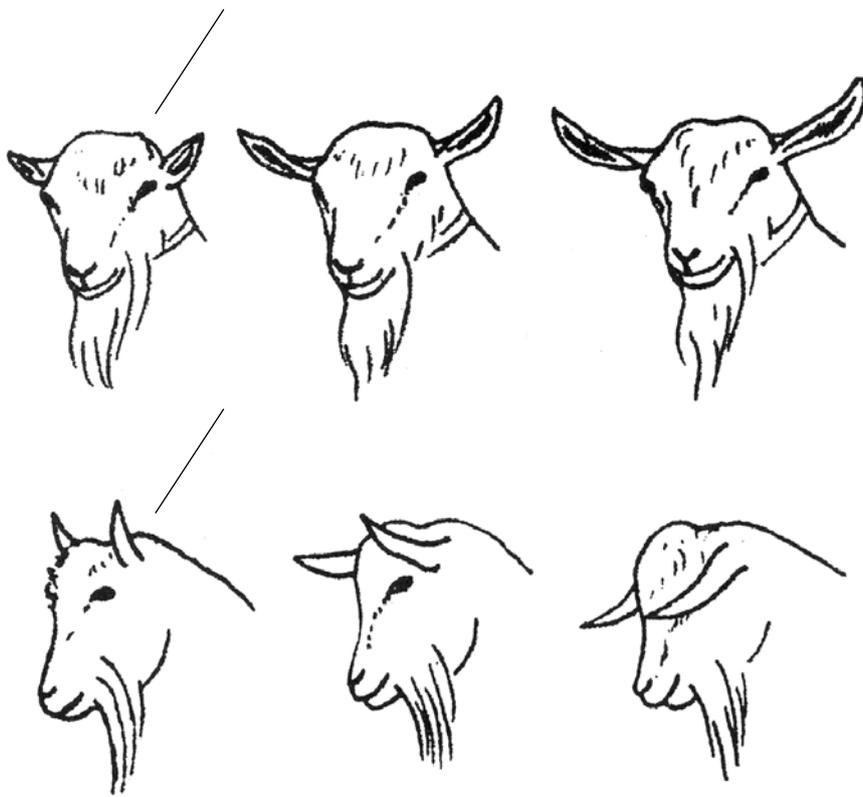
The Head is broad and long, the muzzle fine, and there is always a prominent beard. Most characteristically, the face is dished.



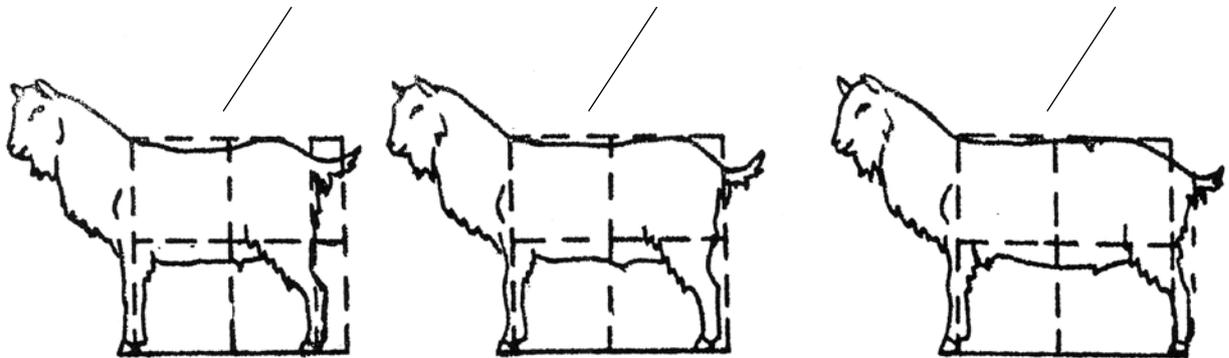
Native goats are neither polled nor tassled.



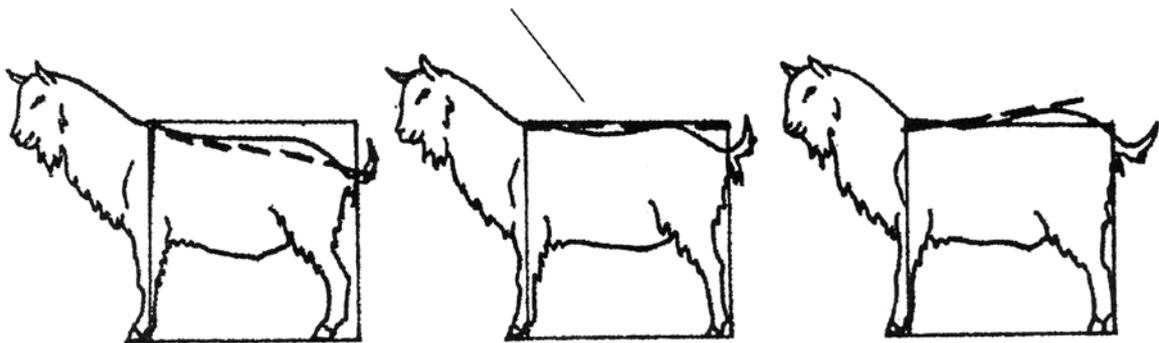
The ears are small, rounded and narrow. They are not large, wide or directed distinctly forwards or downwards.



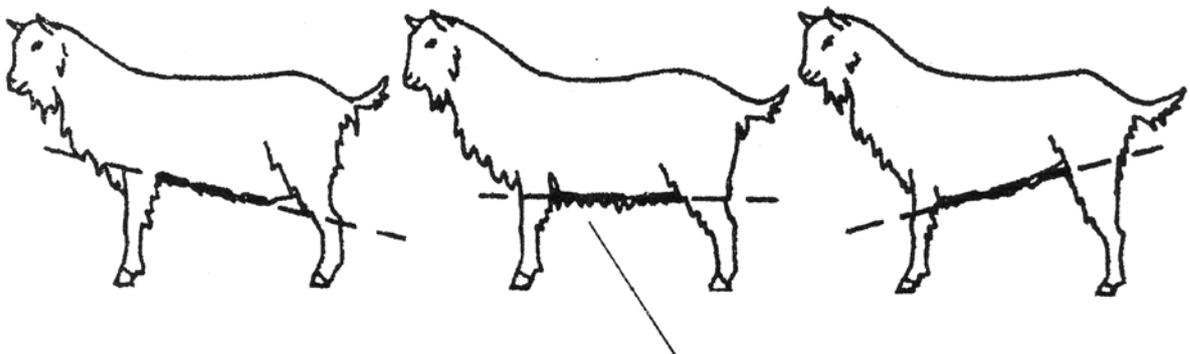
The body length varies between short and long.



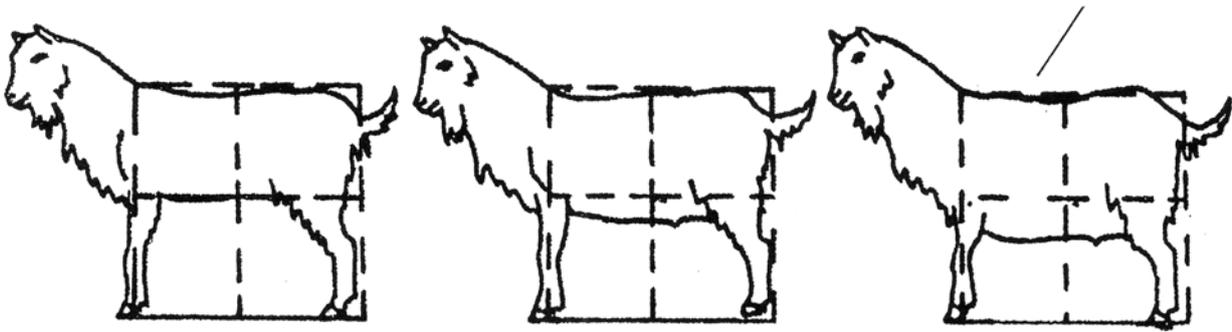
The top line is straight...



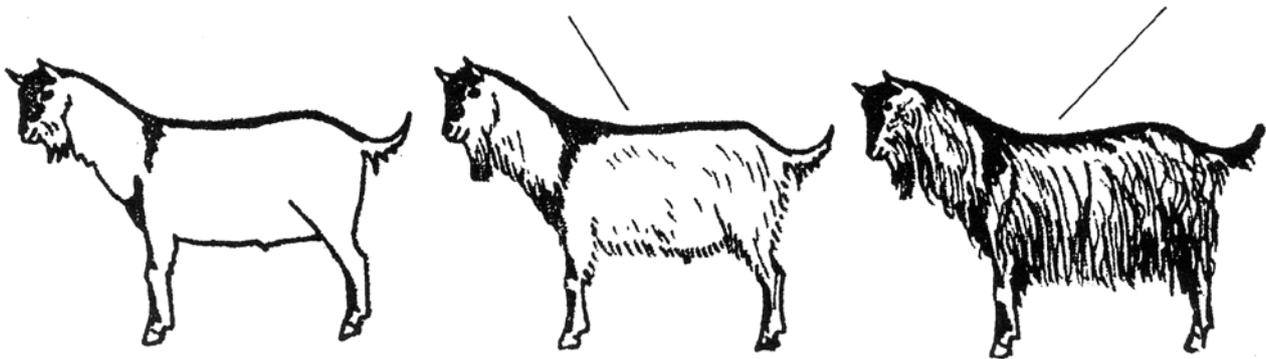
...as is the belly line.



The body is deep and the legs short.



The coat is either short but dense and thick, medium or long. Its is never close or fine.



The tail is set high on a short and steep rump.



In general, the British Native Goat presents as a small, sturdy and compact animal, standing firm and square on short, sturdy legs. This compact build is heightened by small, pricked ears, a wide and projecting breastbone and a thick to long coat.

Everything about it speaks of the ability to survive, even thrive, in harsh conditions and on a meagre fare. It is the All-weather British Native Goat.

