

# The Breed Characteristics Of The British Primitive Goat

Raymond Werner, March 2010

## Introduction

The British Primitive Goat was known formerly, and historically, as the '*British Native goat*' and the '*Old British goat*'. At a time when it was believed that each country had its own distinct breed, and the British Isles was thought of in terms of 'kingdoms', the British Primitive goat was assumed to have been divided into four distinct breeds or varieties: the *Old Welsh*, *Old Irish*, *Old Scotch* and *Old English*. Even so, the breed characteristics of all four were virtually the same.

The key to understanding the significance of the breed characteristics of the British Primitive goat lies in its origin. Four main types of domestic goat have been identified to date by the present writer, these being the *Gracile Grassland goat*, the *Steppe-Desert/Desert goat*, the *Mountain goat* and the *Cold Weather goat*. All four reflect the topographical and climatical changes that have occurred between the last phase of the Ice Age and the Bronze Age.

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**The Gracile Grassland goat** is the generalized and basic domestic goat type, little altered from the wild form, and characterized by moderate ears, leg length and general conformation. Its rather antelope conformation is characteristic of a grassland/steppe species. Today, it is the Standard goat type of Europe, having adapted to be a herding and farm goat.

**The Mountain goat** is robust, sturdy and heavy set, with shorter legs and a constitution suitable for rough montane landscapes.

**The Steppe-Desert/Desert goat** developed in grassland regions that became increasingly hot, dry and arid, with pasture giving way to scrub. It is notably long-legged, and later developed a characteristic conformation in that the body line rose towards the hindquarters.

The fourth type is a cold weather adaptation—the **Cold Weather goat**—that developed rapidly during a period of intense cold and poor nutrition. Basically, it is what people think of as the 'cashmere' goat. In Asia, it is represented by the Central Asian Pashmina Down goat, in Europe it is the Northern Breed Group (the British Primitive goat, the Nordic breeds, including the Icelandic goat, and the Old Dutch goat).

As an exemplar breed of the Northern Breed Group, the characteristics of the British Primitive goat reflect its cold weather origins: compact conformation, short legs, long face to cool air in the nasal passages and thick coat with underwool (reflecting extreme cold), small ears (protection against frostbite), and large belly (to accommodate large quantities of nutritionally poor forage). A cold weather species would normally be large, although its small size is reflective of husbandry and nutrition during its developmental phase.

## Breed characteristics

**Head.** The head is neat and tapering towards a fine muzzle. The forehead is broad with a prominent frontal bone. The facial outline is dished or concave, or appears to be so due to there being a dip or stop at the point at which the forehead meets the face.

**Ears.** Small, generally rounded, and habitually held upright or pricked. May be aligned forwards when the goat is curious or anxious, but this is not the characteristic carriage. The ears of males are smaller (overall length and width measured at the mid-point) than those of females, appearing to be very pricked, small and rounded. They may, however, be directed more forwards by maturing horn growth.



**Tassels.** Absent.

**Beard.** Always present, and a significant feature of the breed in both sexes.

**Forehead tuft.** Males notably have a forehead tuft that gives a somewhat rakish appearance to the head. Older males may lack this due to head rubbing.

**Conformation.** Usually described as 'square', meaning very deep-bodied, broad in the shoulders and back, and cobby (legs shorter than body depth). Body length variable, although more often long than short. Neck length also variable, but frequently 'ewe-necked' or thick-set and relatively short. Belly rounded, with good capacity. Loins broad and deep. Breast bone projects forwards, which has been considered a defining characteristic of the breed.

**Legs.** Short to very short, with plenty of bone. Strong and straight has been used as a descriptor.

**Size.** Notably small. Males stand between 24 and 27 inches at the shoulder, and weight between 100 and 120 pounds. Females stand between 22 and 24 inches, and weigh between 100 and 120 pounds. There may have been some regional variation in size, the figures quoted being applicable to the old English goat during the early part of the last century.

**Coat.** The British primitive goat is a long-haired breed, meaning that the males always have a uniformly long coat, whereas that of the females may range between thick and dense, never smooth and glossy, to long. In short-haired breeds, the coat will be short and smooth in both sexes, or a little longer in males, particularly about the chest and quarters, but never long in both sexes.

More specifically, the coat in males is long to very long, merging with the significant beard and forming a fringe that is in line with the hocks and below.

The coat of females is more variable, ranging from thick and dense to very thick- sometimes with longer fringes of hair down the spine and round the flanks- to long. The winter coat is always much thicker and denser than that of the summer, and due to the development of a

compact underwool or cashmere. This underwool will tend to push the outer coat upwards and outwards, giving the goat a very bulky appearance.

**Horns.** Varies between scimitar and a dorcas twist. The angle of emergence is always high, and in line with the line of the forehead. Horns generally broad and thick at the base, the setting being variable, but often quoted as 'set wide apart'.

Scimitar horns may be a simple recurve or almost vertically upright with the ends turning backwards or a little outwards. Dorcas horns grow upwards and then twist horizontally outwards at right angles to the line of the body, the tips facing upwards. The degree of twisting is never sufficient for the tips to be horizontal. Scimitar and dorcas horns are closely related- it being impossible to distinguish the types by horn core- and are more or less on a continuum with scimitar and dorcas being at the extremes of a cline. Thus, more moderate twisting may present as semi-circular with the latter growth directed outwards, then through varying degrees of upwards twisting to the horizontal twist that characterizes the dorcas horn.

The horns of females range from scimitar to twisted, more often the former, and are generally smaller and thinner.

**Hornlessness.** The breed is occasionally polled, although this is not a characteristic.

**Colour.** Very variable. Common colour patterns are white/tan; wild patterning; badger-face; light-belly; blue; grey; black; red cheek; mahogany and face mask. Reverse stripes may occur but has yet to be established. It is certainly characteristic of the Icelandic goat, which is closely related. Spotting (pied) is quite common, as is belted. Two other alleles result in a white forehead patch and a grey muzzle and ears. Swiss colour pattern never occurs.

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## Summary

Breed points in goats are often hard to define, as definitions may be either subjective or comparative, or generally make no real sense at all. However, the British Primitive goat, as representative of the Northern Breed Group, is unique in being very small, small in comparison with its bulk, notably short-legged, definitively small-eared, and with a coat that is significantly designed to keep the animal warm. It is thus the breed points in combination, rather than taken individually, that defines the breed.