

# THE SHEPHERDS' YEAR 1950s & 1960s

On the 45,000 acres of Ardkinglas Estate, owned by John and Michael Noble, there were twelve hirsels. There were about ten shepherds, so some tended more than one hinsel. The size of the flock on a hinsel depended on the extent of the hillside and the type of terrain. At that time there were between 8 and 9 thousand sheep on the estate.

Fanks, the dry stone pens used for working with sheep, had been built at locations where the sheep could be easily gathered into from the hill.

Roddy MacDiarmid, Alistair MacCallum and Ernie MacPherson (sadly now passed away) have provided first-hand information for this project. They became shepherds as soon as they left school at fifteen. Alistair's uncle and brothers were shepherds here, as were Roddy and Ernie's fathers.

Roddy said- "I worked alongside my father, I learnt a lot from him. He was very strict, if he showed me how to do something once he expected me to pick it up there and then. I learned pretty quick, I had to, I watched and listened."



▲ Roddy MacDiarmid, Butterbridge 1959



▲ Alistair MacCallum in 1969 and 2016

## SUMMER

The June gathering was to clip the hoggs and the yeld ewes; to mark all the lambs (the hirsels had different 'lug marks' (for Ben lme and Ben Chorrnach it was a crop of on the left and four half on the right); to castrate the male lambs (with a rubber ring around the testicles or with the burdezzo, a hand tool that cut the cord in the testicles); and all the sheep were dipped against flies and maggots.

The milk clip would be July into August, this was the busiest time of the year. "Our day started at four or before, there would be eight or nine of us gathering. If it was misty it was a wee bit dodgy because you didn't know whether to stay at home or to go. When we had the phones it was fine you could phone up one another and find out. Some people would be driving the Landrovers. Everyone had good gathering dogs with them, snarling and fighting on top of us in the back of the Landrover. So you would start off gathering, then sometimes the mist might come in when you were half way through the hill. You would try and halt everybody to wait, to see if it would clear because you could n't see the sheep at that point.

The bigger hills took five to six hours to gather. Alistair - "I always had a breakfast before we were leaving in the morning. The likes of my mother and Mrs MacDiarmid, Butterbridge and Mrs Morrison over at Rowantree they did the 'handlings' - the food for the gathering. Once we got down off the hill we went to that house and you got your breakfast, porridge, bacon, eggs, scones, whatever was going. Then there would be a full bowl of soup, meat, tatties at midday and then if you were going on clipping into the evening, you would get what was called high tea, maybe salad and bread or scones or loaf." The estate supplied the raw materials and the shepherd's wife got a small sum for her trouble.

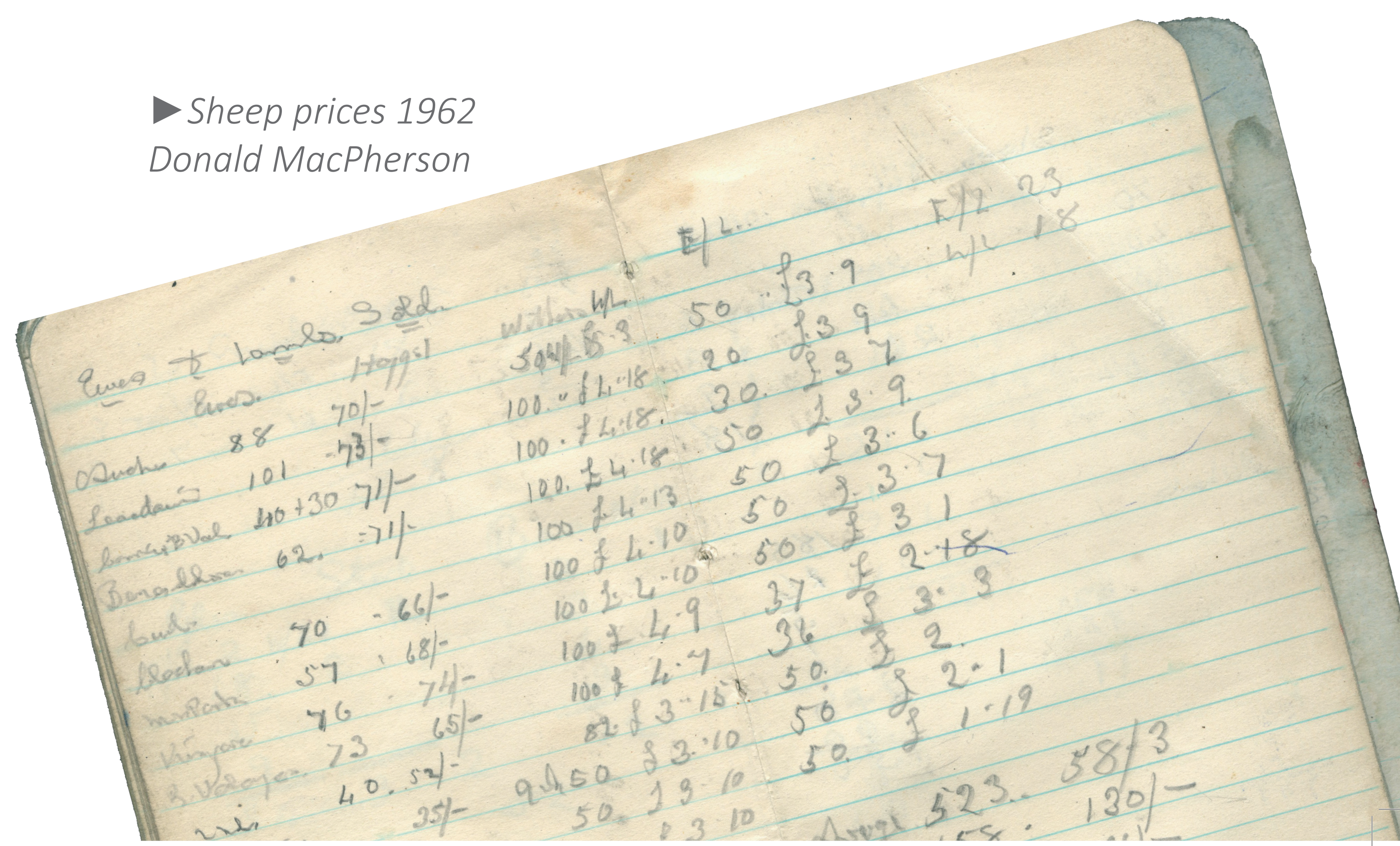
## SPRING

In early spring we gathered sheep down to the fank to put them through the dipper, through a disinfectant to keep them clear of lice and ticks. Most of the fanks had dipping tanks.

At the same time we checked each ewe's udder to see if she was in lamb. If she was we gently "coped her and sat her on her backside to take the wool away from her udder so there would be better access for the lamb to get to the teat"

Lambing started about the 24 - 25th April and lasted about a month. You were out on the hill all the time. Out on a huge hill like Ben Chorrnach if you were lucky you came on a ewe that was in trouble and needed a hand, if you were unlucky you could miss her and find her lying dead next day.

► Sheep prices 1962  
Donald MacPherson



There could be up to 30 men clipping sometimes, because your neighbours came along to give you a hand. People clipped mostly on stools in those days. (Machine shearing came in in the late 1960 – 70s). The young boys' job was to 'crog', to catch the sheep and take it to the stool. You could be kept going pretty hard, it was quite a hard job for a young boy. But it was enjoyable, the 'craik' was good, plenty winding up and banter.

The wool went to Scottish Wool Growers in Paisley, they supplied the long wool bags. You rolled the wool tightly, graded it and packed it into the bags. The bags were hung from a hook and somebody worked inside, packing the fleeces down. By the 1960s blackface wool prices had begun to fall, man-made textiles took over.



▲ Jim having a well deserved drink

## EARLY AUTUMN

Coming up to September you would start gathering again for 'speaning' the lambs and for the sales. Most of the wedder lambs were sold, we would keep 25 % of ewe lambs for stock, and the 6 year old cast ewes would be sold on to low ground farmers to take cross lambs out of them.

Roddy - "The first pair of leather boots I bought, were horse hide, they were really great boots, they cost six pounds out of Johnny Dewars in Inveraray, and I remember thinking you could get two lambs for the price of them, that was in 1959."

We had some hirsels where kept some wedders, we would keep 50 or 60 wedder lambs, and send the 3 year olds to the market, maybe making £15 in the 1960s. There was a big demand at the time, the butchers liked the 3 year old wedders for the meat.

There was quite a bit of good natured competitiveness between us. Who got the best price for his lambs or for his cast ewes. Whoever got the best price we would bring it up over a dram – he'd maybe have to stand a round. And who got the best lambing percentage, was competitive too.

Roddy - "Donald MacPherson on Leachdain had a marvellous crop one year, approaching 100%, in those day that was really good. The best I ever did on Cuil was 89% and I had 6% killed on the road. The road was unfenced and because down lower, especially along the loch side, the grass was always greener, it was difficult to keep the ewes from going down."

In autumn we dosed all the sheep against worm and liver fluke. At that time we 'keel' marked them. Red keel marks or blue keel on the back of the head, keel on the kidney, or keel on the shoulder, and you knew which hirsle she was from. The

red top of the tail hirsle was Corriecrachan, while Leachdain had a red kidney and Achadunan had a red shoulder.

In October the ewe lambs would go away for the winter. They went to farms that had better grass, to Fife, to Ayrshire, or low ground in Argyll even. Later they were in-wintered in sheds here.

## WINTER

We gathered again for the winter dipping, in early November. Alistair - "The black winter dip was full of DDT and poisonous stuff, which wasn't much good for you but you were covered in it anyway. It was banned in the 70s I think it was, they brought in other stuff".

Roddy "If you missed a ewe out in the hill that never got winter dipped, you could tell the difference a mile away, her condition was never as good, and her wool was never the same because of the lice, which can be a killer."

The 80 – 90 tups were kept all together on the low ground from spring til autumn. We started feeding them a month before they went out to the hill on the 24th-25th November. There would be three tups to 100 ewes, so on Ben Chorrnach you would need 22-23 tups. Ben Coutts brought in a wee incentive scheme - if you had all your tups back in before Hogmany you got say £20, if you were missing 1 it was less, if missing 2 less, if you were missing half a dozen you wouldn't get anything. You always kept to your own hirsle, taking your tups in. Roddy "When you were meeting you would be asking 'have you all your tups in?' then you would 'crow' if you had yours in and others had n't, it was just good fun."

## SPRING AGAIN

Time to gather and dip and check the ewes and the hogs which would be back from wintering before 1st April. We branded the hogs on the horn, a red hot branding iron with a distinctive mark for each hirsle. Then they were put back onto the hirsle they had come off in September.

After Ardinglas Estate and Strone Estate split in 1966 Alistair MacCallum was head shepherd on the Ardinglas side.

Roddy - "Ali did a good job, we had great fun although we worked hard. In the summertime, at the shearing time we would leave at half past three to go gathering, we would all be joking even at that time in the morning, the 'craik' was good. Then at half past three in the afternoon, Ali, he would still be the same, never changed, he had a great sunny nature, he still has!"

◀ Roddy MacDiarmid stock book 1966

