

# “The History of Sheep Farming in the Highlands”



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# Early Farming System

## (Middle Ages to mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century)



- Subsistence farming with little bought or sold
- Traditional, transhumance farming system of seasonal grazing of hill pastures by livestock, plus some arable cultivation in the glens
- Small, lean sheep (9-11 kg carcass weight) kept mainly for their good quality fine wool
- Three main types
  - Northern type - Short tailed, with black, grey or piebald colouration, similar to current Shetland breed
  - Western type - tan-faced, probably related to current Welsh Mountain breed
  - Caithness & Sutherland - the Kerry, slow growing breed, with black face and small, short, narrow frame
- Animals taken to the hill pastures in summer





Shieling, Gleann a'Chlachain





Shieling, Gleann a'Chlachain





Blackhouse, Kirkton





**Meadowsweet** - yellow, green, black, red



**Lady's Bedstraw** - red, yellow



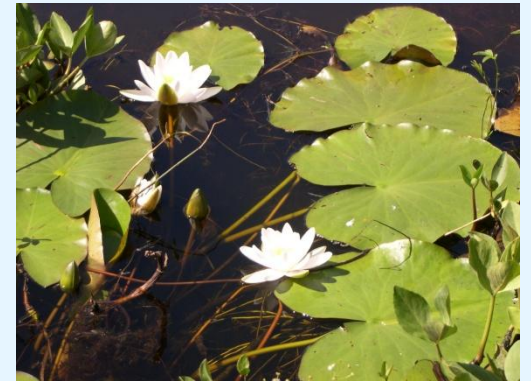
**Thyme** - purple



**Bog Myrtle** - yellow, green, brown, orange



**Ling** - yellow, orange, brown



**White Water Lily** - black, blue, brown



**Tormentil** - red



**Wild Angelica** - yellow, black



**Broom** - yellow, green



# The Clearances and the Sheep Invasion

- Commercial sheep farming arrived in Argyll in about 1750 reaching Caithness and Sutherland by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century
- Pioneer lowland farmers brought flocks from the south
- Blackface sheep dominated the early sheep industry in the West Highlands, Perthshire and Inverness-shire



**Scottish  
Blackface**



# Statistical Accounts for the Parish of Killin in Highland Perthshire



- **1791-1799** - “Stocking with sheep has now become so prevalent, that all the extensive grazings in this country are laid under them. The number of sheep supposed to be in the parish, at present, is from 26,000 to 27,000, and all of them of the Linton breed”



# **‘The Song of the Foxes’ (Oran nam Balgarean)** *by Duncan Ban Macintyre (1790-1804)*



*‘My blessing be upon the foxes, because that they hunt the sheep.  
The sheep with the brockit faces that have made confusion in all the world,  
Turning our country to desert and putting up the rents of our lands.  
Now is no place left for the farmer – his livelihood is gone;  
Hard necessity drives him to forsake the home of his fathers.  
The townships and the shielings, where once hospitality dwelt,  
They are now nought but ruins, and there is no cultivation in the fields.*

*There is no filly, nor mare with foal by her side.  
Gone too are the heifers that suckled their calves.  
No need is there of dairymaids, for every fold is broken and scattered.  
No lad can earn a wage save only the shepherd of the sheep.  
The good useful goats, they too are gone.....’*



# The Clearances and the Sheep Invasion



- During the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the high price of fine wool led to an increase in the numbers of Cheviot sheep



# The Clearances and the Sheep Invasion



- After 1860 the replacement of Blackface sheep with Cheviots was reversed
- At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the number of wether sheep (castrated males) began to decline rapidly
- Hill land that had been grazed by Cheviot wethers was not suitable for Cheviot ewes, therefore graziers changed to Blackface ewe flocks
- 1860 – 40-50% of hill sheep Cheviots
- 1932 – 13% of hill sheep Cheviots with the rest mainly Blackface
- The carcass weight and fleece weight of the Blackface breed showed considerable improvement during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century
- Leicester Rams introduced for crossing in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century



# Smearing & Dipping

- Smearing or salving was not practised by the Highlanders with their old native sheep, but was introduced into the north by the immigrant sheep farmers
- Tobacco juice used for dipping in summer
- In autumn the sheep were salved
- Salve - Wood-tar and butter
- Smearing began to give way to dipping after 1860



# Deterioration of Hill Grazings



- Decline in the carrying capacity of the hill grazings
- Loss of arable patches and grassy cattle folds
- Disappearance of cattle from many grazings
- Spread of Bracken and Mat Grass (*Nardus stricta*) at the expense of more palatable grasses
- Reduction in heather cover
- Continuous removal of nutrients



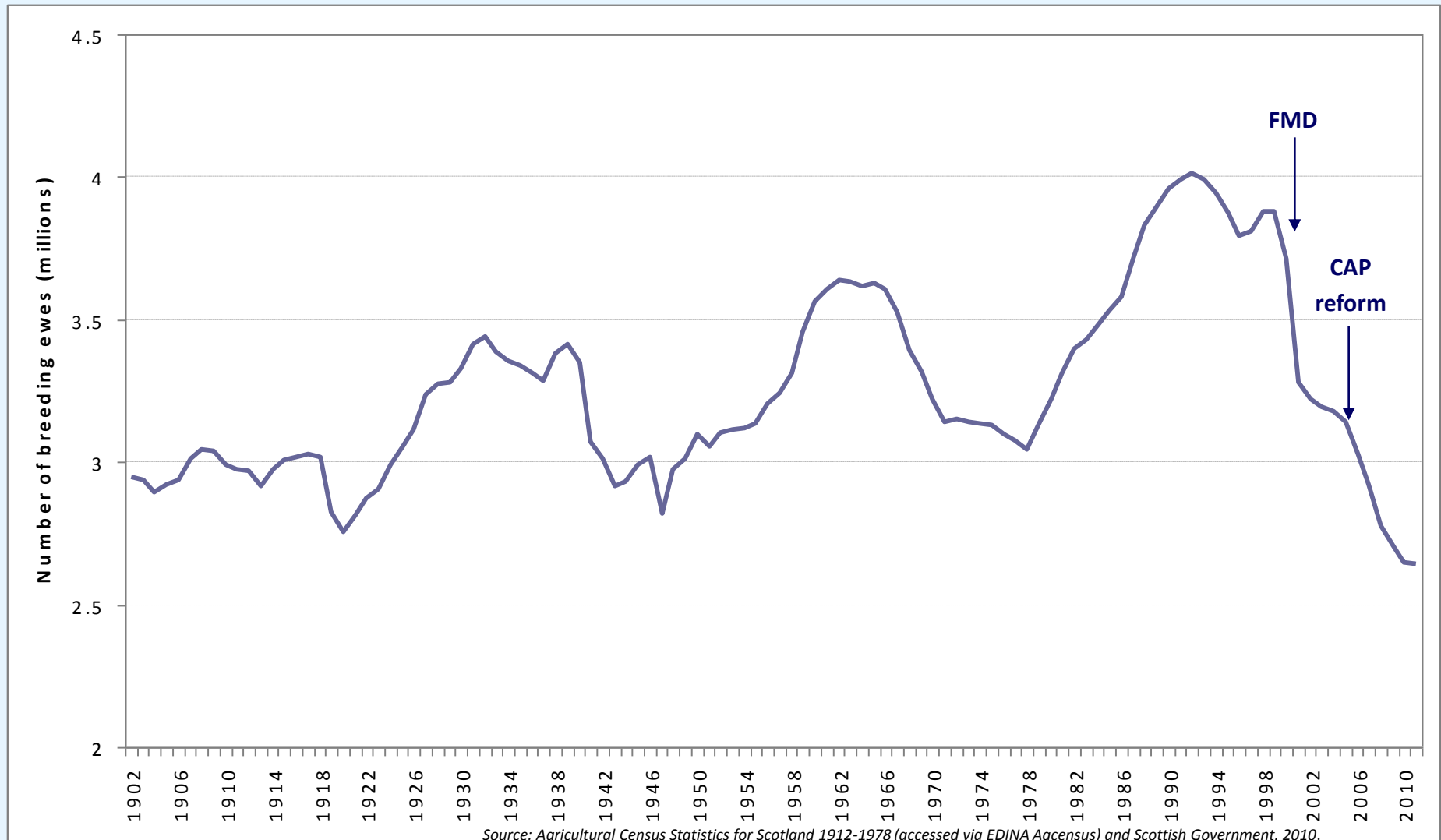
# Changes in Sheep Numbers from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century



- Sheep numbers in the Highlands and north of Scotland increased by approximately 20% between 1855 and 1880, and then stabilised
- From 1895 until the start of the First World War, gradual decline in sheep numbers in the mountains, however in the northern lowlands numbers continued to increase
- In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there were approximately 3 million breeding ewes in Scotland
- Hill sheep numbers have fluctuated in response to economic factors, disease epidemics and severe weather events
- After the Second World War, government policies have increasingly influenced sheep numbers
- Sheep numbers have declined in the Scottish hills since the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy in 2005

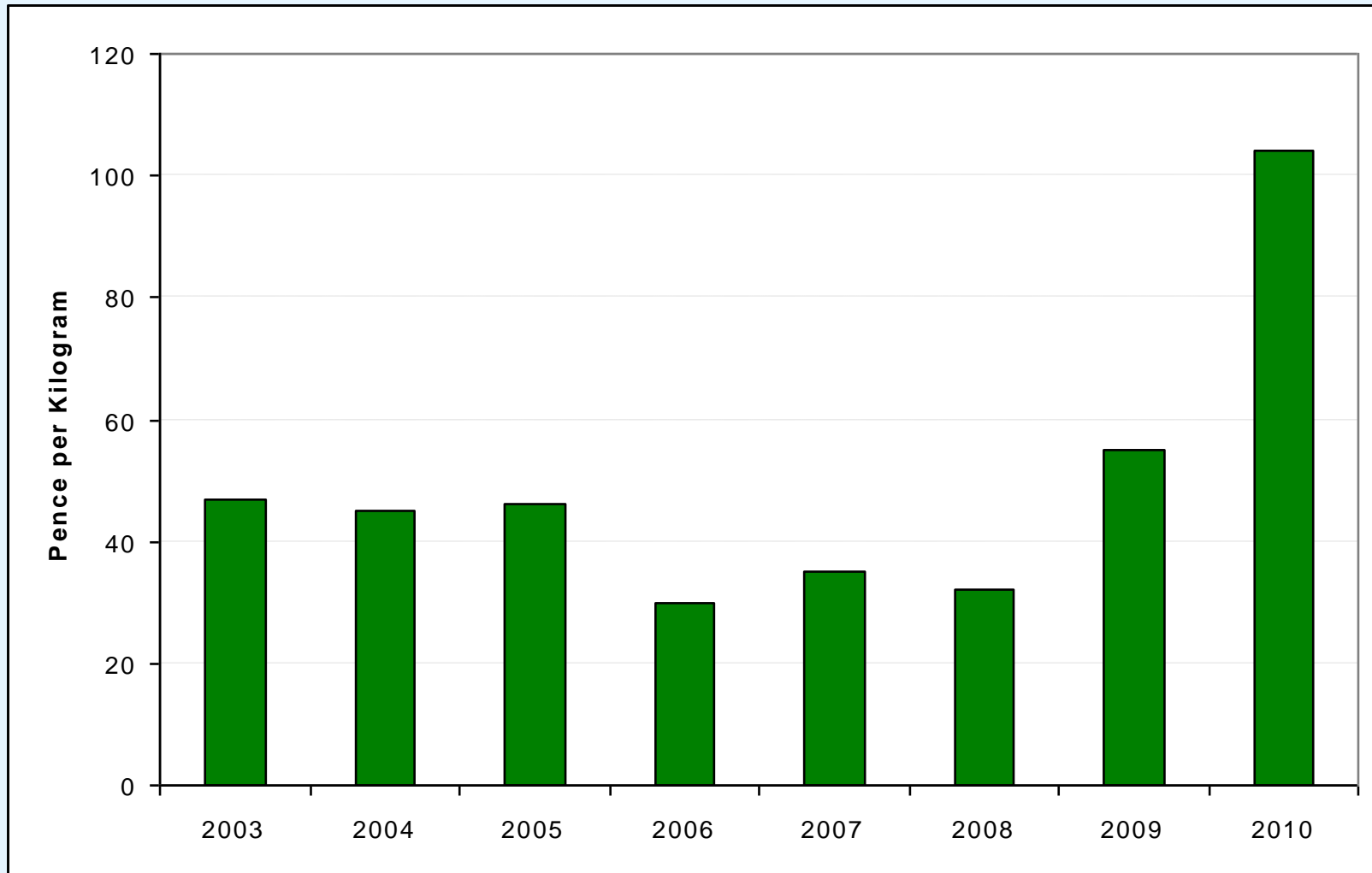


# The Change in Breeding Ewe Numbers in Scotland 1902-2011

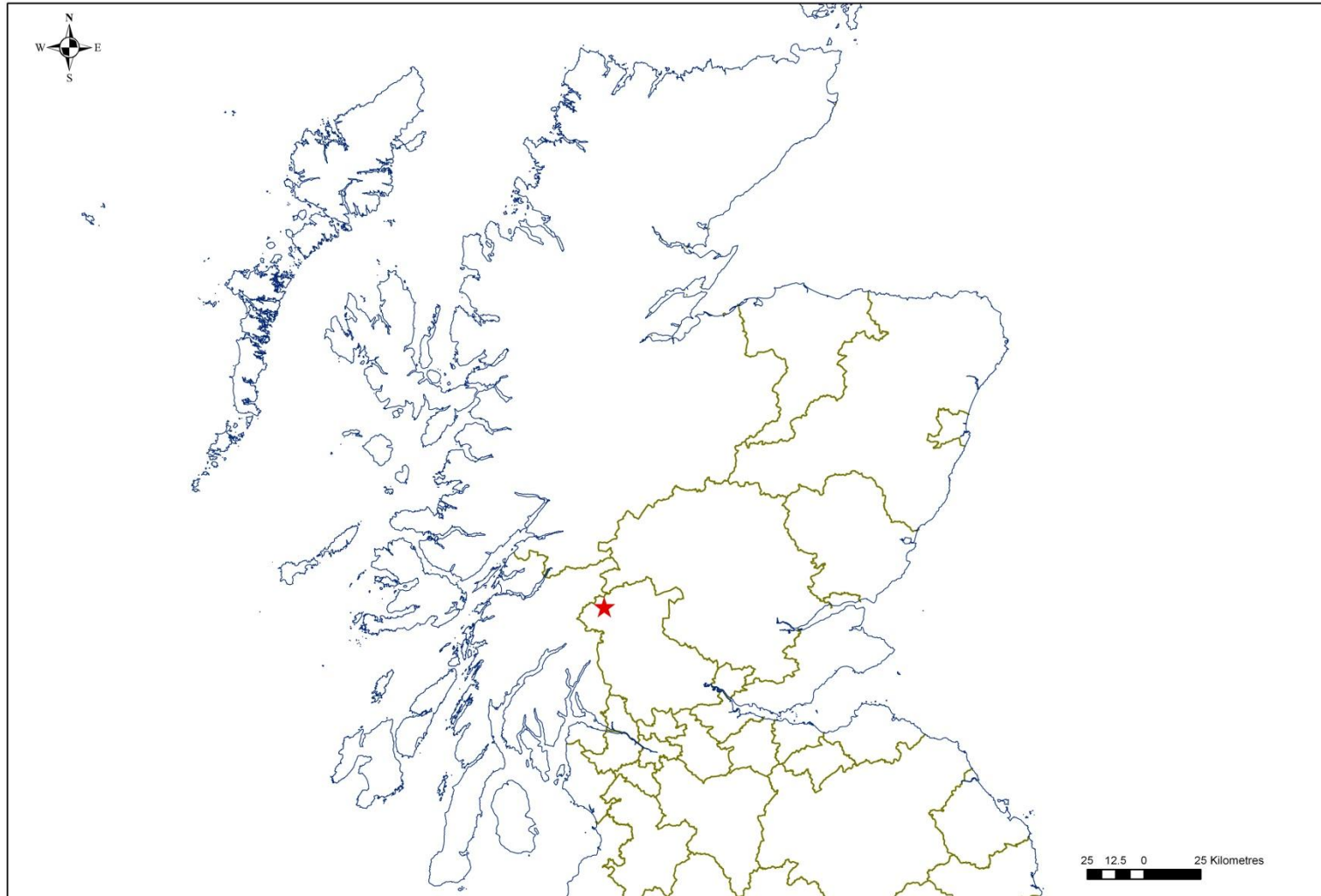




# Wool Price – Kirkton Farm

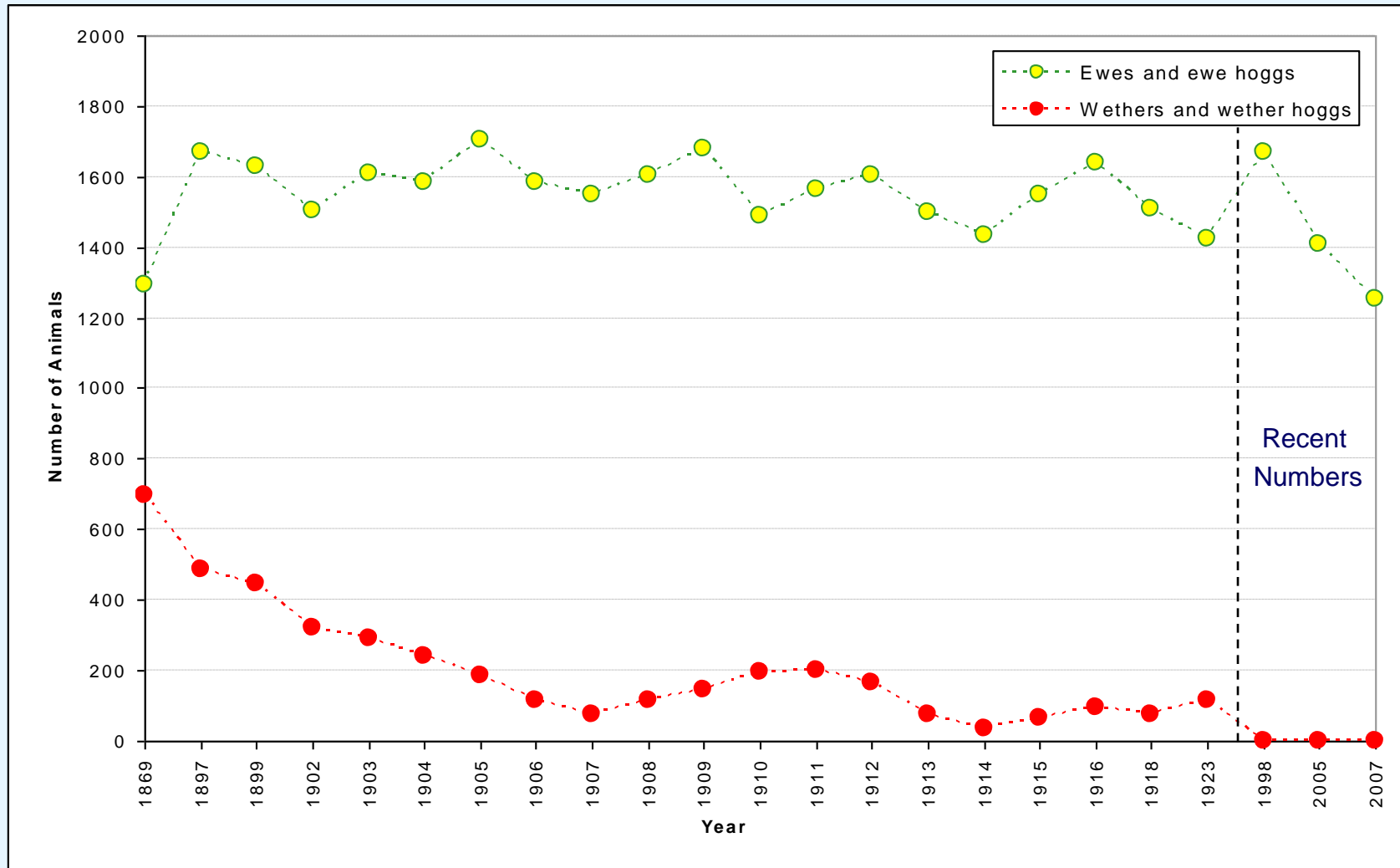


# Kirkton Farm, Crianlarich





# Sheep Numbers at Kirkton Farm, near Crianlarich, Perthshire



# Memoranda.

[illegible]

7 Fallm. No. 3946, 1, 2, 8

Wood weighed McEwan  
and mol. 15209. 1, 3, 6

ave road 5204 1, 3, 6  
 5205 1, 3, 14  
 5202 2  
 Hog 5204 2, 0, 10  
 ave 5216 1, 3, 21  
 bog 5206 2, 0, 10  
 ave 5215 1, 3, 14  
 " 5212 1, 3, 11  
 " 5213 1, 3, 25  
 Hog 5203 2, 0, 11  
 Yp bog 5218 2, 2, 16  
 ave 5219 1, 3, 11  
 5211 2, 0, 5  
 Hog 5202 1, 3, 26  
 29 3 15 ave 5214 1, 3, 3  
 road 5799 1, 3, 15  
 ave 5208 1, 2, 22  
 5210 1, 3, 1  
 middle 5204 1, 3, 20  
 5200 1, 3, 10  
 5201 1, 3, 18  
 40 - 0, 19



# Looking Towards the Crianlarich Hills from Kirkton Farm (circa 1880)



**Shearing  
outside the  
Blackhouse at  
Kirkton Farm  
(Circa 1880)**





# Scottish Blackface Tups in front of Saint Fillan's Priory, Kirkton Farm (circa 1880)





# Scottish Blackface Ewes in front of Saint Fillan's Priory, Kirkton Farm (2010)





# Scottish Blackface Tups, Kirkton Farm (circa 1880)





## References

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