

When Middle Aston exported Cotswold sheep to America

*"Mr Garne's Cotswold Sheep, Northleach",
oil painting by Richard Whitford 1866
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William Cother was the principal farmer in Middle Aston from 1830 to 1871, and a figure of some importance. In the 1840s his Cotswold sheep even found their way across the Atlantic, at a time when leading American breeders were keen to improve their flocks. This is from Henry S Randall's *Practical Shepherd*, published in Philadelphia in 1863: "The first considerable importation was made in 1840 by Hon. Erastus Corning and William H Sotham whose sheep were bred by Mr Hewer of Northleach, Gloucestershire. The same gentlemen purchased later in 1840 fifty ewes in lamb from Mr Hewer and twenty from Mr William Cother of Middle Aston". Randall says many valuable flocks widely scattered throughout the U.S. originated from Corning's and Sotham's stocks.

Two years later, Sotham was back. The *Farmer's Magazine* reported in 1842 that he had just boarded the Hendrick Hudson, bound for New York from Portsmouth, taking with him a wide range of prime cattle and sheep, including Wm Hewer's Hereford bull 'Major', twenty Cotswold ewes from Wm Hewer's stock.. "and seven of the same sort from Mr Cother's flock". It would be interesting to know how Cother got his stock to Portsmouth - this was before the railway through the Cherwell Valley was even built. Could the canal have played a part?

For some reason our local historians don't mention William's exports, though they knew he was prominent in markets over here. William Wing, who knew him personally, writes: "He was noted as a breeder of high class Cotswold sheep throughout the southern and midland counties, and was a frequent winner of prizes". C. C. Brooks describes Cother as a "celebrated breeder of Cotswold rams and Hereford cattle. He also discovered from a gazetteer of 1852 that Cother had bred the heaviest sheep ever slaughtered in England, with a dead weight of 336lbs [a little over 152kg!].

William Cother (1802-1871) came from the Bredon area of Worcestershire, just north of Tewkesbury. His grandfather, another William, had been a prosperous grazier there - his death in 1825 commemorated by a large slab in the floor of Tewkesbury Abbey. James Cother, a younger son, farmed at Broadwell, near Stow, but was living at Bloxham by the time he died in 1851. James's son - our William - came to Middle Aston in 1830, succeeding William Faithorne as tenant of both Great House and Town Farms - roughly two-thirds of Middle Aston's farmland. William and his wife Elizabeth (from Aldsworth, near Northleach) had no children.

By 1861 Cother had taken over the tenancy of Grange Farm as well, describing himself as "farmer of 805 acres employing 34 men and nine boys". He also seems to have attracted a new ally, 35-year-old John Garne, who described himself as a "bailiff" and occupied the vacant Grange Farmhouse. The Garnes were another key family in the story of Cotswold sheep, and John was a younger cousin of the William Garne pictured above. In the 20th century, the massive sheep raised by the Hewers, Garnes and Cother - sometimes called "Cotswold lions" - fell out of favour on both sides of the Atlantic, dwindling to the status of a rare breed. When the remaining Garne flock at Aldsworth was finally dispersed in the 1960s, the late Joe Henson bought some of the animals for his daughter Libby to look after, following a riding accident. Today their progeny may be seen at the Cotswold Farm Park founded by Joe in 1971, and now in the care of his son Adam Henson - so helping to ensure the survival of this ancient breed.