

# Tales from Whyle House

## The home of Whyle House Lamb

### April 2010



At 2.30pm on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March one of our triplet ewes produced her first lamb. She had decided to make it interesting by trying to deliver it with its front legs back which involved some minor intervention from me. The second lamb delivered normally and the third came backwards – and so to lots of oohs and aaahs from the adults and ‘yuks’ from the children (and the odd wince from the Mums) our lambing afternoons got off to a flying start.



It’s been an immensely rewarding and successful exercise and over the three weeks there were only two days when we had no visitors. We had 33 people sign up for our newsletter and must have had well over 150 people to see us.

Lambing started early this year - two of our ewes produced jet black lambs about 10 days early. Now we don’t have black lambs (our tups tend not to father them) so we reckon some philandering went on and either a neighbour’s tup broke in or our ewes got out. Anyway, no harm done and it will be quite useful to have a few lambs ready a bit earlier.



We’ve now finished lambing and it’s been a difficult one. We lost 10 lambs which is well below commercial averages but much higher than we expect. We’ve had a dreadful winter which meant we had to feed the ewes concentrates to keep them in good condition. Unfortunately, extra feed tends also to increase the size of the lambs which is good in that they thrive once they’re born but bad in that you get more lambing problems. To avoid the risk from mal-presentations late at night we also stayed with them 24 hours a day – which we’ve never done before. That coupled with having limited help this year meant that Frances and I didn’t sleep in the same bed at the same time for over a fortnight!



Although the weather during lambing was cold and wet, it did improve markedly shortly afterwards and we’ve had some excellent dry weather to get the lambs out and off to a good start. It’s been cold and dry which is fine for lambs but not so good for the grass which hasn’t grown much and this has meant we’ve

needed to feed yet more expensive bought in feed. As I write this we're getting our first rain for 3 weeks and I'm hopeful that things will start to improve now. Still I'm told it's this unpredictability which makes farming so interesting.....!

The other little challenge we've had this year is Electronic Identification or 'EID'. The law now says that all sheep born from 2010 onwards must be electronically identified – with a tag in each ear. There are exceptions and there's been lots of debate about it but like many others we decided that we might as well do it properly and tag the lambs as they are born so we could track them through the year. This should help us improve our record keeping and enable us to manage the flock more effectively. So I duly ordered my £600 tag reader and a set of tags – only to find that Defra hadn't issued the approvals to the tag makers in time for them to produce them for lambing. So we had to mark all the lambs temporarily and then get them all back in to tag them when the tags arrived – 2 days extra, unnecessary work – thanks Defra!



We decided against fostering the triplet lambs this time as it's a lot of hassle and with a small flock like ours it's quite easy to keep an eye on them and supplementary feed them if necessary. We make sure the ewes get plenty of concentrates and provide a 'creep' (a separate pen which only the lambs can enter) for the lambs with some special lamb pellets available for them.

The big advantage of this is that the single lambs can grow away without a foster lamb competing with them which gives us some early lambs to sell in July and August. The twins then finish between September and January and the triplets come along later. This will help us achieve a steady flow of lambs through the year which we now have to provide for our catering customers and for the Farmers' Markets. Well that's the theory anyway – we'll let you know how we get on!



We kept the numbers the same as last year because the cost of new breeding stock was too high in the autumn. I had planned to buy another 40 to take us to our (current) maximum capacity of 120 ewes but with ewe prices at about double those in 2008, we decided to have a 'consolidating' year. With slightly higher losses we've actually ended up with fewer lambs than last year which is not the best way to grow a business but we'll sell all our lambs through the meat business this year instead of letting about a third of them go wholesale.

And we're expanding next year! We've agreed to buy another 40 ewes in August and at least one tup of our own. We're also having a change of breed and we're going to try some Lleyns. These come from North Wales (the Lleyn peninsular originally) so they're a bit more local than our Suffolk crosses. The

ewes are also smaller which should make them easier to handle and cheaper to feed through the winter. The other reason for the change is that as a pure breed, it will be possible for us to breed our own replacement ewes which will save a lot of money and give us an added interest. I'm assured by their breeder Ed Collins (whose picture this is) that we'll not regret the change. We'll let you know how we get on!



We've taken on another 15 acres of grass this year so we're now farming over 60 acres and we're also putting up a pole barn to use for storage and for over-wintering lambs. This will give us more room in the lambing shed for the extra ewes. We're making silage as well as hay this summer so that will be another first but should make life easier. We still need a bigger sheep trailer and a Landrover to pull it and.. and.. but those will have to wait.

Our promotional work with the WI talks, the School Visits and our open afternoons is raising our profile and we're selling a lot of lamb now through the Farmers' Markets. We've had some great press coverage including a brilliant article in Herefordshire Life which I attach to this email in case you didn't see it. The next big event is **Open Farm Sunday on 13<sup>th</sup> June** and you're all invited to come along and see what we do. Bring your friends and enjoy a great afternoon out.



Thanks to everyone who helped us this year – Tomos, Alice and Maddie who are now experienced enough to be a real help and our neighbours John and Dee who always seemed to time their arrival just as we were about to drop. They even fed us one night for which we are very grateful.

My daughter Hannah and Ben turned up on the final weekend with lots of food and produced a great meal for us which was also really brilliant. And of course grandson Ollie (now nearly 3) came along to help and supervise us while we looked after his ewe 'Bubbles' and her first lambs. He's now the proud owner of two lambs (as is his younger cousin Joshua) but neither seems particularly impressed!

So all in all things are going pretty well. We're selling more lamb, expanding the business and still learning fast. It's very hard work but we're having a lot of fun doing it.

Have a great Summer.

Andy and Frances