

Tales from Whyle House

The home of Whyle House Lamb

December 2010



We needed more sheep to spread the overheads and we needed to be able to house fattening lambs in the winter - and we didn't have enough room in the (present) barn – so we needed a new barn. Simple! And if I did it myself we could keep the costs down – and that's how the epic 'Pole Barn' project started. Pole barns by the way are not buildings designed and built by friends from Eastern Europe but are barns made from second hand timber - hop poles in our case.



The challenge of course was to find time for this job while running the farm and the retail business which is why the project which started in May is still not complete. My excuse is that it's a huge structure (130ft long by 15ft wide) and we've been beaten by the weather now.



As with most of our activities here, every job is dependent on completing something else and in this case we need the new barn to put straw and hay in so we can get the ewes in for scanning and we need accommodation for the winter fattening lambs which are currently occupying the ewes pens in the main barn!

We finally got the roof on in November and were part way through the walls when the snow hit us. As always our 'just too late' management style is alive and well....

We made our first silage this year – 100 bales of it - which has turned out reasonably well. The dry summer meant that we had to cut it too late, which means it's not as good as it should be and we got severe bird damage on one field which has allowed some bales to develop mouldy patches. I had no idea how much damage birds could do to wrapped silage – they pierce the wrapping by pecking it, allowing air in which produces the mould. We'll have to find a way of protecting the bales with nets next year – especially on that particular field. Having said all that the ewes and lambs love the silage and are eating it happily as I write.



After last year's success with Open Farm Sunday we decided to do a more professional job this year with more help, including the local church ladies to do the catering. My son Ross did the tractor and trailer rides and my daughter Hannah did the butchery tours and sold lamb. All went fine until about 2.00pm when the visitors stopped coming which was very disappointing. I think it's doubtful that we'll do it again which is a shame as it's absolutely what we're about – re-connecting people with their food and encouraging the younger generation to take an interest in food and farming.

By contrast, our lambing afternoons were amazingly successful and we'll definitely do those again. Opening every afternoon is a challenge for those working (especially if they've been up all night!) but it's very rewarding and we don't have to do any preparation. We're opening on Monday 21st March for 3 weeks so come and see us if you can.



Our new Lleyn sheep arrived in August – 40 ewe lambs and 13 yearlings plus a couple of tups – Fergus and Rocky. Frances always wanted a grandson called Fergus but neither of her children delivered on that so she's got a (very expensive) tup instead. We plan that these sheep will form the nucleus of a new flock – they're all pedigree and the tups have very high breeding values which means the performance of their offspring has been recorded and analysed. If this works OK it will mean we can gradually phase out our Suffolk cross ewes which are getting a bit big for us old 'uns to handle and also breed our own replacements which will mean we can control what we select for.

We thought we'd be clever this year and sort the lambs into weight groups so that we could manage the flow of lambs coming forward. We even got Ollie (3) to help. The heaviest would finish off grass while the medium weight lambs would grow through the Autumn and finish during the winter on cereals and the small ones could stay out on some outlying ground and be ready next April/May. Of course it doesn't actually work like that and we were very quickly 'drawing' lambs from the middle weight group while the 'heavies' sat and looked on with what I'm sure was a smug expression – as my neighbour says, "sheep will always have the last word!"



So next year it's going to be different....! We're going to lamb in three groups to try to get a more even flow of lambs coming forward. An early group in February, the main batch in March and the 40 new ewe lambs in April. So three lots of sleepless nights instead of one!

Fattening lambs in winter was another challenge we met this year for the first time. Bought-in lamb nuts cost a fortune and are not really ideal as they are designed to fatten lambs as quickly as possible. We need to bring groups on at a steady rate, gradually increasing the energy and protein as they near their target weight. So this year we're using a mix of cereals and sugar beet pulp with a little added protein so we can vary the mix for the different groups. The cereals come from our neighbour, are cheaper and we know their provenance and the sugar beet pulp is sourced locally as well so we're ticking the sustainability boxes as well as saving money – and we get a better product – so wins all round!

We've now had a year selling through Farmers' Markets and it's been very successful. The secret is to be consistent, turn up every time and work hard to remember your regular customers! The hardest bit is smiling when it's minus 10 and you've been up since 6.00am but it really is a very enjoyable way to spend a day and we get a great kick out of people coming back and telling us how much they enjoyed our lamb. Next year we're planning to move to a weekly market in Hereford which will be a major step up in production for us.



The other major development this year was our attendance at the Hereford Food Festival which was immensely successful and our entry into the associated 'Flavours of Herefordshire' competition. We were delighted to welcome Sir Ben Gill (ex NFU President) to Whyle House as judge - seen here with Jane Lewis from the tourist board. A lesson learned though is not to tell people you've made the finals in case you don't win and

definitely don't take friends along to the awards ceremony to cheer you on! Still we did make the finals which was pretty good for a first attempt and we'll probably have another go next year.

So we come to the end of another year – snowed in and frozen up - again! We'll need lots more lamb next year so let's hope we get a good lambing. Maybe we'll even get some warm weather and a nice 'normal' year for a change.

Thanks to everyone who has helped again this year – especially Maddie, Tomos and Alice at lambing, John and Dee for all that they do, Ross and Hannah for open Farm Sunday and the rest of our long suffering family for everything else!

Happy New Year
Andy and Frances