

Tales from Whyle House

The home of Whyle House Lamb

December 2011



When I had a proper job my boss used to have a wonderful expression to describe some of my less successful schemes – he'd say "Andy, that was a good idea you shouldn't have had". You'll maybe remember from last year's newsletter that I had lots of ideas – some of which were successful but some were definitely in the 'shouldn't have had' category!

Lambing in three separate groups wasn't a terribly bright idea. Although we only had a maximum of 70 in each group, they still needed a lot of supervision and doing this over 9 weeks instead of 3 proved to be exhausting. It didn't really achieve the desired outcome of a 'steady flow' of lambs thought the season either as the very dry summer slowed everything down and they all finished at about the time they would have normally. So next year we're lambing the lot in one go and we'll adjust the feeding to manage the growth rates instead.



Another less than brilliant idea was to buy in and bottle rear orphan (surplus) lambs from other farms as a way of getting our lamb numbers up quickly. This created far too much extra work when we were busy with our own lambs and cost us a fortune in milk powder and concentrate feeds. The wisdom (we now find) is that rearing so called 'tiddling' lambs is rarely worthwhile as they never really 'do' as well as lambs suckled by their mothers. We live and learn...and won't be doing that again!



We decided to mix our own feed last winter using cereals from a local farm so we could adjust the energy and protein levels for different groups of lambs and for the ewes. This did work well but by the time we'd bought the extra protein supplements and minerals it didn't really save us much money and the time needed to mix it every day could have been better spent on other things. So reluctantly, we're going back to bought in concentrates this winter but we have installed two bins so we can have it delivered in bulk which will save us a great deal of money. The first bin was completed in September to take the lamb nuts but the filling pipe wasn't finished so I had to hold the delivery pipe from the lorry over the side of the bin – and ended up looking like a brown snowman, absolutely covered in dust! We're just finishing the second bin as I write which has a nice secure filling pipe already installed.

Perhaps the most successful change we made last year was the addition of the new Lleyn ewes to our flock – one with her lambs shown below. They

need a bit more care than the Suffolks as they are not so assertive or robust but generally they've proved to be good mothers with no more lambing problems than the main flock. All the lambs have suffered from lack of grass this year so we can't really assess growth rates and in any case most of the



Lleyn lambs are out of ewe lambs so they tend to be smaller anyway. Lambs sired by the Lleyn rams from Suffolk ewes have done very well so that's a hopeful sign.

Silage was another new innovation this year. Better feed value than hay, easier to handle and store outside and less work to make. Generally it was a great success but like every new idea it has its downsides. The biggest problem

was the spoilage – mostly caused by bird damage in the field – which caused some of the bales to develop mouldy patches. This all had to be removed before feeding as it's a real health risk – especially to pregnant ewes as it can cause listeria infection. In the greater scheme of things we didn't lose that much but the time involved in removing the mould was considerable – and time is not something we had a lot of this year.

We got some silage a bit too dry and cut it too late to make really good feed but it was much better than even good hay. This year we've been very careful to move and cover the bales with net the day they're wrapped and have used an extra layer of wrap to protect them. This has proved very successful and we're now feeding some very good quality silage to lambs and ewes. We're also very lucky in that we had a lot more grazing than we needed as we intended to buy more ewes – before the price went crazy - so we've got plenty of silage and might even be able to sell some later in the winter.

The new 'pole barn' described in last Christmas's newsletter proved invaluable during the very hard winter. We used it to overwinter fattening lambs and as follow-on accommodation for ewes and lambs before they went outside. I'm currently putting in an 80 foot long feed fence and proper pen divisions so we can make even better use of it this winter. As ever we'll struggle to get it all done in time but should be OK if the weather holds and the ewes can stay out for a while yet.



We didn't do Open Farm Sunday this year as we were busy with silage making but we did our usual Lambing Afternoons which were again a great success. We had our usual visit from the local Rainbow group who loved feeding the lambs and this year all of them queued up to be weighed in the lamb weigher which was great fun! We also welcomed a ladies lunch club who combined a meal at the local pub with a trip to see (and feed) the lambs.

The very dry spring and summer (and autumn!) has been a trial for us this year with very little grass which has delayed lamb growth quite severely. This now means we have a lot of small lambs which although fat are not really big enough – especially for our catering customers. Still there's nothing we can do, you just have to be stoical in this business and hope for better time next year. And it's not all bad – the dry weather has meant far fewer foot troubles and we seem to have had much less need to dose for worms this year

The Farmers' Markets continue to be our most successful outlet and we're learning all the time how to make these work better and better. We've introduced new products like lamb burgers (as food on the go and to take away and cook) and a number of new cuts and innovative cooking ideas to keep our customers coming back. It never ceases to amaze me how many people ask me (yes me!) how to cook our lamb but it's lovely when they come back next time and tell us how good it was. The move to a weekly market in Hereford has been good for us and although we're feeling the recession like everyone else, our overall market takings are holding up well. Processing lambs every week for this market and for a new large catering customer is very good for the cashflow although it does mean I'm butchering and packing lamb every Wednesday now.

We've also attended more food festivals this year. These have been very profitable and have got us in front of real 'foodies' who want to know about our product and are happy to support smaller local producers. Perhaps the nicest one was a new one at Whitbourne Hall near Bromyard which was held on a lovely Sunday in August. We decided to try out our new lamb burgers and took 6 dozen – a few to cook as 'tasters' and the rest to sell. We ended up cooking all of them and had a queue all afternoon so we must have been doing something right. We also won the best stall competition at the Hereford Food festival - seen here being awarded the prize by guest chef Jean Cristoph Novelli



Thanks to our long suffering family again this year. We lost our grandson helper (Ollie) as he started school but his little brother Finn is now learning fast. Joshua and Noah visited this weekend and Joshua proved a dab hand at making burgers! Ross has been a great help with the web site and doing a couple of Farmers' Markets for us as well as delivering lamb by helicopter – which made a great Facebook story. Alex and Kate made the mistake of visiting while we were silaging and Hannah provided the sanctuary for us to get away for a few days rest!

So we come to the end of another year – not the 'normal' one we hoped for and indeed one that challenged us quite hard on occasions. But we've got through it more or less unscathed.

Have a great Christmas and a Happy New Year
Andy and Frances