

Tales from Whyle House

The home of Whyle House Lamb

December 2012



....and to think this time last year I was worried that it was too dry! It was getting quite serious, we'd had little rain that Autumn and we'd been feeding the ewes silage since September. The upside was we had a dry winter and the sheep stayed out longer than normal. We had plenty of silage and continued to feed all the ewes right up to lambing. In fact we had so much forage that we sold several loads to a neighbour which was great for his cattle and even better for our cashflow.

Yet another lesson in practical farming is that feeding better quality silage which is cut earlier and therefore wetter, means lots more sheep wee – and we ran out of straw this year for the first time.



Lambing went very well – most of the ewes and lambs went straight outside as it was dry although we were short of grass for a while. To show how lucky we were our neighbour lambed in early April, just as the rains came and had a dreadful time – losing 20 lambs in one morning during the worst of the deluge.

We had a few tiddler lambs on the bottle but only our own and avoided the challenges of last year when we bought so many in. Even our own lambs haven't really 'done' and we've a pen of 9 of them in the barn that are stubbornly refusing to put on weight.



The dry spring meant I could get the field work done early and we cut out first silage during the only really hot spell we had, at the end of May. It was really good stuff and well made but the low sunshine levels have pushed the energy and protein levels right down so we won't get much saving in concentrate use this year.

We had the chance to take on a block of adjacent land this year which would have revolutionised our business. All the land was within walking distance and the sheep could have been moved without endless trailer journeys. But it wasn't to be – a local businessman outbid us by a huge margin with a hopelessly uneconomic bid which he is funding from his other businesses. A desperately sad and bitter blow for us and one which nearly caused us to give up but we're made of sterner stuff and we've found other ways to grow our business.

Our first investment was a Landrover and very large sheep trailer – this means we can move our sheep around much more easily and quickly and are (largely) independent of the weather. This has proved an absolute godsend this Autumn with floods and mud in abundance. We've also bought another 50 mule ewes so we'll be lambing around 180 next March which should mean we can supply all our outlets for the year without buying in store lambs – and of course expand our sales.



Despite early promise, our experience with the Lleyn ewes has not been especially good. They produced decent lambs which were a bit slower to get up and suckle than the crossbreds but generally they grew well. From our perspective, the difficulty is that their smaller size makes them run to fat too quickly and their finished weight is too low for our requirements. If we could keep them separate and feed them differently they would provide a useful alternative to the bigger crossbred lambs but our small size would make that just too complicated. For this reason we'll focus on keeping it simple from now on with one crossbred ewe (the welsh mule) and texel tups.

Our sales took a dip in early spring when we lost a large catering customer (who ceased trading) and we started to feel the effect of the recession with people spending less and buying smaller cuts. This was worrying for a time but the food festival takings held up well and things have improved of late. Indeed this year's Hereford Food Festival was the best ever and we took more in a single day than we normally take in a month of markets. The main point is that we still sell everything we produce so we must be doing something right and hence we're still expanding the flock.



Perhaps our greatest success this year has been our Lamb Burgers. We started these to attract a different customer type and to enable us to turn over stock more quickly. The biggest challenge has been to make them quickly enough as we keep running out and we've found that we sell them to take away and as food 'to go' with equal success. We also take them to catering events which are very profitable and a great shop window for us.

Our plans for next year include extending the cutting room to make a packing area so we can butcher, make burgers and pack at the same time without getting in each other's way. It will also enable us to create a 'sales' counter as we're selling an increasing amount direct from the farm. These changes will make more room in the butchery so we can have a second butcher working when we're busy.

Talking of butchery, I've found a new diversification for our business – for those times when I've not got enough to do! A number of people have asked me to cut up lambs for them which I'll happily do and I've also done a bit of butchery teaching. I'd never claim to be an expert or even experienced

butcher but I do know how to cut up lambs for presentation at markets and festivals which is a skill many regular butchers don't have. They tend to cut for displaying on slabs in a shop which is not the same thing and are generally resistant to doing things differently as I've found out with my own part time helper.

So a new idea for next year is butchery training days. Come along and learn how to cut up a lamb – price to include your own lamb to cut up and take home.



We did our lambing afternoons again and these continue to be very successful. It's not always easy to retain a sense of humour when you've been up most of the night but it's great to see people engaging with what we do and I really don't mind being asked the same question over and over – honestly!

At a more strategic level, the disappointment of losing the land has forced us to re-think what we do. We must get our sheep numbers up if we're to make a reasonable return for the hard work we both put in and the limiting factor is being able to accommodate them in the winter. We can currently house about 170 but this means we have no room for ewes and their lambs after lambing if the weather turns wet. So we need more accommodation – either another pole barn or maybe a rented barn somewhere close by or perhaps a sheep poly tunnel? Anyway, we can cope for this year as long as the weather improves for lambing but we'll need to think about more space for next year.

Thanks to our long suffering family again this year. The grandchildren for their help – Ollie can now pressure wash the sheep trailer and Joshua helps me feed the sheep. Their little brothers Finn and Noah are both fixated by our sheep dog so maybe we'll make a shepherd out of one of them yet.

So that's another year gone – a tough one in business terms with some lousy weather thrown in although we did have one hot day while silaging when the dog fell asleep in the tractor! But we're getting better at doing this and we'll still be here next year.

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

