

# Tales from Whyle House

## The home of Whyle House Lamb

### December 2014



What a difference a year makes.... After one of the worst around here for years in 2013, this year has been great – yes honestly – really good. A really mild winter (if a bit wet) and good silage gave us a great start. The ewes came in in very good condition and stayed that way and for the first time ever, we had to restrict the best quality silage to stop them overeating. We had a very good scan result in December with the main flock at 195% and the ewe lambs at 135% and our losses from scanning to weaning were around 10% which is very good compared to the national target of 15% and our 2013 performance at 25%. The net result of this was 248 little lambs running around in the sunshine – a far cry from last year!



As we had to cull so hard last year, we've lambed ewe lambs this year to try and recover our ewe numbers as quickly as we can. This is not for the faint hearted and needs very careful management but it's been a great success with just 20 this year so we've now got another 50 coming forward for 2015.



We weigh the ewe lambs in September and only breed those which have reached 2/3 their adult body weight (40kg). The rams go in in November so they lamb after the main flock, in April when the weather is warmer, hopefully there is grass to graze and we've got time to give them a bit more attention. We feed them concentrates from September and bring them inside at Christmas so it's not a cheap option but it does help us get our numbers up quickly. Ewe lambs are great mums and we only let them rear one lamb so

they can continue to grow themselves. Four year old Finn seen here helping Grandad straw down this year's ewe lambs.

Our excellent lambing was followed by a good summer for grass with little disease pressure and the lambs got away well.

A big change we're making for next year is our management of the bottle fed lambs or 'tiddlers' as they call them round here. We're going to have more of them as we are getting stricter about stopping ewes rear triplets – it pulls them down too much and the extra ewe lambs means we'll have twin lambs from some of them as well.

Apart from being a lot of work, tiddlers never really develop properly as grazing animals and they struggle to cope with bad weather later in the year.



So next year we're going to feed them more intensively and get them away in the summer. This will be good for the festival trade and hence our cash flow and will avoid the problems we have this year with poor 'doing' lambs having to be brought inside to protect them from the wet and cold.

The only casualty of the mild wet winter was our silage. Sadly it was well into June before the equipment could travel and we could find a few dry days and we ended up with masses of poor quality silage with limited feed value. By contrast we got some great second cut forage which is the best we've ever made – but there's just not enough of it. I've already sold some of the first cut as we won't need it all – we've just got to balance our use of the two lots carefully so we maximise the value of the good stuff!. At least the low cereal prices this year mean our sheep nuts are a lot cheaper so we can feed a bit more to balance the poor silage without breaking the bank.

We've got a new contractor who has done a great job with the silage and with some extra re-seeding we've been doing. The silage team is in the picture below – guess which tractor is mine!



We'll also be using contractors for hay and straw next year as I've made the momentous decision to stop making small bales. I've had enough – I'm getting too old to struggle with them and it takes too much of my time during the summer. The picture below shows the last bit of hay I'll ever bale! We're going to use half size big bales which will make handling and moving them much quicker but still enable us to move them around in the lambing shed by hand. Sadly this means we won't be selling hay for horses which is useful extra cash but I'll be able to idle away the summer with nothing to do – I wish!

We've also given up a big block of grass which was proving too difficult to manage – it was too far away and in one huge block which we couldn't graze effectively. We've replaced it with a smaller block much closer to home and comprising separate fields which can be grazed more efficiently. We'll have to see how it goes but I suspect this change will stop us making hay anyway as we'll need the grazing.



The other major change this year has been our 're-brand'. Our existing image was becoming a bit out dated and 'homespun' and we wanted something fresher, cleaner and more professional. We are after all a very professional outfit these days. So we now have new branding, information boards and banners and we're very pleased with it.



As hinted at last December, we decided to try the larger festivals this year to compensate for the declining farmers' market revenues. This met with some success after a shaky start at a cold Ludlow Spring Festival (where Ross and his mate Lewis almost frog marched passers by to the stall to drum up trade) with much better days at Cosford and Hereford and culminating in an

extraordinary Ludlow main festival in September.

Ludlow September really was a real family affair with Frances on her own on Friday while I did the prep for the weekend, Ross and Lewis working themselves to a standstill on the Saturday, Hannah making burgers and rushing around delivering extra supplies and then Frances and me on the Sunday on our own. We are extremely grateful to all three of them who enabled us to get through the weekend unscathed – just.

Our best event ever with takings equivalent to 10% of our annual turnover and 1000 burgers sold in just 3 days.



The lesson is that big festivals can deliver big revenues but they are very, very hard work and a huge risk if the weather goes against you.

This is our queue at Ludlow – pretty much continuous on Saturday and Sunday!

The other challenge at the big festivals is keeping your pitch. It's very competitive and we need to be different and innovative if we are to keep our place. We've worked very hard to become part of the local food community which helps but the real challenge is to remain innovative and hence the other big change for next year will be an extended range of 'lamb from our griddle'. We have persuaded our friend Linda who is a food technologist to help us develop some new ideas so that we can extend our 'food to go' offer beyond our hugely successful lamb and mutton burgers.

Talking of competitive festivals - we've finally got into the Ludlow Medieval Fayre for November 2015 but it's taken us 2 years and we've displaced someone else. The only challenge there will be getting Ross and Lewis to dress in medieval costume! Let's hope it's as good as this year.

More strategically – sheep farming is still a numbers game and we need more ewes. We'll be lambing about 180 in 2015 and hopefully the year after we'll reach our target of 200. On the retail side, the farmers markets continue to decline and we're going to do fewer of them which will release time to focus on direct sales and more festivals – we're hoping to add Shrewsbury to the list next year.



The other strategic aim is to try to reduce the workload a bit. I reach my big birthday in May 2015 and it would be nice if the extra revenue from the festivals could fund a bit of help occasionally. Maybe we could get to sit back and enjoy the life more often and remember why we do it.

So that's another year gone – much better than 2013 and with a mild winter so far, things are looking good for the coming year.

Have a Happy New Year - Andy and Frances