

Tales from Whyle House

The home of Whyle House Lamb

December 2015



An odd year this one – but then as my friend Roger says, “you always say that”. The fact is that these challenges are what makes farming fun – most of the time.

The weather has been difficult this year, very cold and dry in the spring which slowed the grass growth followed by a changeable summer with just enough rain to make field work difficult but not enough to make the grass grow. On the plus side the dry weather at lambing made life easy and we were able to turn out ewes and lambs as they lambled and the lambs got away well as the ewes stayed in good condition through the winter. The silage was poor after the wet spring of 2014 and we made up the difference with concentrates which cost us dearly. It also gave us more lambing problems than we like but generally we had a good (if not great) lambing and our losses between scanning and sale were reasonable at around 12%. Although this is low compared to the national average of 20%, with the numbers we have now that's still 40 lambs that didn't make it which is quite sobering when you think about it.



The slow spring grass growth meant we had to move groups of ewes and lambs endlessly as they kept running out of grass. On a 'proper' farm this is fairly easy but with our dispersed grazing it involves gathering the sheep into temporary pens and then moving them by trailer. We decided to take a light first cut of silage at the right time in the hope of getting a better second cut but the dry summer put paid to that. We now have some really good forage but nowhere near enough so we're buying in hay to try to augment our reduced stocks.

Despite this slow start, things have gone well this year and we've had a decent season with lots of good lambs and very few losses at grass. A very nice batch of yearling ewes seen here in our new handling system. For the first time ever we'll have more than enough lambs to see us through until the new season (2016) ones are ready in July. We might even sell some on the hoof if the prices improve to take the pressure off our grassland in the spring.



We've also had a fairly firm cull this year and have plenty of mutton ewes in the system – and we're about to start supplying some wholesale outlets with mutton for the first time.

Other challenges this year have mostly been associated with machinery breakdowns. Our equipment is not in the first flush of youth but we do seem to have had a frustrating number of problems – mostly at critical times when we desperately need the machine and have no time to fix it. A broken stock trailer tailgate hinge caused endless fun as did a seized wheel bearing while we were moving ewes home for scanning. It got so hot it welded itself to the axle and had to be cut out with a gas cutter.

The most spectacular failure though was the new tractor. My 60th birthday present to myself was a decent tractor – with intact windows all round, a comfortable seat and a radio. I spend a lot of time on my tractor and I decided I would justify it based on my health – my physio said it would be good for my back!

It cost a great deal of money (although it will re-sell eventually for close to what I paid for it) and lasted about a week before it broke down. Not just a minor glitch you understand but a failure that meant it had to be taken away. The upside was that I got a bigger, better machine as a replacement – although



that got a flat tyre within hours of arriving which lost me another day. Anyway it took several weeks to fix mine (and replace the loader which was the wrong model) but it's fine now – in fact it's lovely to drive and a real pleasure to work with. The best thing about it is that it's bigger and heavier and can handle silage bales safely and quickly and I can listen to the archers while I'm doing it! The grandchildren love it as it has a passenger seat for them but the dog doesn't as he has to sit on the floor rather than up with me.

I described our plan to increase the number of ewe lambs lambled in the last Newsletter and this went well. Most of them lambled, with very few twins (we only let them rear one lamb) and we had few lambing problems. A good example here – expecting a single. The one problem we did have was later in the year – these lambs are born later and are therefore weaned later and they succumbed to a serious infestation of worms. This was partly the weather which came wet suddenly and partly because the lambs are smaller and less robust but mainly because this time coincided with the busy festival season and I just didn't have time to get to them and dose them fast enough. They are fine now but it knocked them back a bit.



This highlights one of the challenges of farming and retailing – farming tasks tend to be time critical but the retailing has to take priority as this is where we earn our money.



The other change I trailed last year was our management of orphan or 'tiddler' lambs. We bought another milk feeder – having said we'd never, ever do this again. Its great innovation is that it stores the milk cold and only warms it as the lambs drink. This reduces bacterial growth in the milk and avoids the digestive upsets so common with warm milk feeders. It was a great success and we reared 30 or so lambs with few problems and substantially less work than with bottles. These lambs grew very well and most were gone by the end of August. This was great for the festival trade and compared very favourably with previous years when tiddlers were often still with us at a year old and never really grew properly.

A change we're making this year is to 'flat rate' feed the ewes. We've generally followed traditional practice and fed an increasing amount of concentrates in the 6 weeks leading up to lambing. This is to ensure the growing lamb foetus gets sufficient nutrients but it means that the ewe herself doesn't benefit and it can lead to lambing problems with big lambs. Feeding the same quantity overall but at the same daily rate throughout the last 6-8 weeks means that the ewe gets the benefit in the early stages so that she lambs in better condition and has more milk and is less prone to diseases like mastitis. We've split the flock into 'fit' and thinner ewes so the flat rate can be varied – the thinner ewes getting 0.8kg a day and the fit ones 0.5kg.

I sold my small baler as discussed last year and avoided both hay and straw baling as a result. Our plans to have our straw baled into 'small big bales' worked really well and they were surprisingly easy to handle – although they take a bit more effort to move now we're starting to use them. The only problem was the weather (yet again) which made timing the baling very difficult and we didn't get all we needed. So we're short of straw as well as silage this year! Luckily there seems to be plenty of straw about at sensible prices so we'll have to buy some later in the winter.

The most fascinating part of this year has been working with the BBC. We agreed to let BBC Hereford and Worcester follow some lambs from birth to the butchery or 'from Field to Fork' as they put it. They visited us one cold March afternoon and a ewe duly produced a set of twins (one seen here with student Abbie) while they were recording. They then followed this up with visits and live telephone interviews throughout the season, including a trip to the abattoir, culminating in a session in the butchery and then eating some of the final product in our kitchen.



The show was Malcolm Boyden's weekday morning show and he and his producer Stewart Kingscott did a fantastic job. Lots of really basic questions which was fine and some very positive reaction from listeners.

Some of the material is at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02lr88t/p02lrjpi> Have a look at the clip as well as the pictures and they've promised a full set of all the radio pieces which we'll put on the website and let you know when they're available.

Our move to more and larger festivals and fewer Farmers' Markets was a good one and enabled us to sell more high margin produce like lamb burgers. We're planning to add a few more next year and reduce the markets we attend as they simply can't deliver the footfall any more. Lots of reasons have been suggested for this decline including the recession and the rise of the 'local food' elements in some of the supermarkets but I think its more fundamental than that. People's food buying habits have changed convenience is more important than provenance and the novelty of buying from the markets has worn off. The upside is that we have a great and loyal band of customers who are happy to buy direct which is good for us and we're currently looking at a delivery service and at increasing our direct sales on-line.

We're also doing a few small catering jobs next year at local shows where we only sell lamb burgers as 'food to go'. These are generally highly profitable but they are very weather dependent. Talking of the weather, our last show of the season was the Ludlow Medieval Fayre at the end of November. We've been trying for years to get in there and finally succeeded for the wettest, windiest and muddiest weekend we've ever had. The view from our stall at 4.30pm says it all. The gazebo had to be lashed down and we were up to our ankles in straw trying to deal with the mud but still the punters



came! It was a good weekend financially – about a third down according to the regulars – if our takings in a better year were up by that amount we'd have been very pleased indeed! So we'll do it again but twist Ross and Lewis' arms to come and help next time.

More strategically we're now at capacity – we'll be lambing 200 ewes next year for the first time and that's as many as we can handle without more grass and more winter accommodation. We have 2 very good students booked already for next year's lambing and our butcher Barry provides much valued help at busy times. As ever the family are great and we must thank Ross and Lewis for their help again this year – especially for selling out at Cosford!

Our plan to ease up a bit hasn't really worked although I have managed to keep Frances away from the worst of the physical farming stuff and we have managed a few days away this year. And of course we had my big birthday weekend in May which took a lot of planning and organising – including our own band Bandangle seen here.



So another year gone – pretty good overall with the usual challenges which make life interesting. We've just had the best scanning we've ever had with the main flock over 200% for the first time and the yearlings at 177% which is great. If it would just stop raining so we can get some of them back outside for a few weeks we'd be very pleased but we'll cope – we always do.

Have a Happy New Year - Andy and Frances