

Tales from Whyle House

The home of Whyle House Lamb

December 2016



At the end of our last Newsletter I said 'if it would just stop raining' – which of course it didn't. We had a very wet winter and had to keep most of the animals inside until March. It wasn't a great winter to try to manage on reduced stocks of forage either and we ended up buying several trailer loads of hay and silage to keep us going. Buying forage is never a good idea as we've no idea of its feed value but we managed.



Our plan to 'flat rate' feed the ewes wasn't a great success either as the ewes came in in good condition after a wet Autumn on lots of lush grass. Feeding more concentrates early in gestation to benefit the ewes rather than their growing lambs is a great idea when the ewes are lean but if they are 'fit' as ours were then they are more prone to prolapse which is a horrible event, often fatal to both ewe and lambs. We lost 4 ewes and their 8 lambs within a couple of weeks and just when we thought we were through that, we had a bout of premature lambing when about a third of the flock lambed a week ahead of plan. The likely cause of the early lambing was an infection which we have now dealt with but it really gave us a scare at the time.

Miraculously the rain stopped after that first week and we had a reasonably easy lambing overall with modest losses, well within our targets. Each year is different, with unforeseen challenges and for this one it was the mud. The wet ground and muddy gateways coupled with a cold dry spring and very little grass meant we had to move ewes and lambs frequently to avoid soil borne infections as the lack of grass meant the lambs were inesting too much soil.

We took on an extra 30 acres of grass this year which was a godsend given the late spring. It's just up the road so we can walk sheep to and from these fields which saves us hours. We only really needed 15 acres but we got the whole lot for the agreed price for half of it and were able to make a lot of extra silage. Even with the new tractor it was quite a daunting job to move 200 bales under nets on the day it was baled (to keep the birds off) and then to cart it all home on my own. We plan on 150 bales of silage for a normal winter – this year we've got almost twice that. We've sold some but it's a nice feeling going into the winter knowing we've got more than enough feed, whatever the weather throws at us!



Once the ground dried up, we had a decent year weatherwise (and you don't often hear a farmer say that!). We even made some really good hay where some grass got away from the sheep and I persuaded our contractor to come and bale it into big bales for me which I'm currently selling to local horse owners. We'll also keep a few bales for the lambs next summer. We've had another good Autumn with plenty of grass and I've just finished bringing in the ewes today and they look really well – so no flat rate feeding this year!



We've made 3 changes this year – we're not lambing ewe lambs – it extends lambing for another 3 weeks, it requires more accommodation that we have available and it results in a group of lambs which are smaller and younger than the main flock which have to be dealt with separately all year. We're also going to try to vaccinate against footrot in the ewes – despite heavy culling for foot troubles we still have more that we should so the vet is coming next week to help me inject them all. Thirdly, we've delayed lambing by a week – so we can hopefully turn out onto growing grass and so we don't have to scan until after the busy Christmas period.

With a good lambing last year and this and reduced demand from our meat business (see below), we have been able to sell lambs on the hoof this autumn. A local farmer took 40 to finish on some spare grass and we sold 40 through the local market – another first. This has been a great help with the cash flow and we're entering the winter in a reasonably healthy financial state for once.

The tractor saga continued with a huge repair bill – just out of warranty of course. We spent more on that single repair than we spent in total on the old machine it replaced in the 10 years we had it. Not bad when you think that part of the justification for buying it was to reduce our repair costs! Anyway it's fixed now (I know I said that last year) and it has easily earned its keep this summer with all the extra silage and field work to handle. The lesson is that modern sophisticated kit comes with expensive repair costs which usually involve computers and can't be done by the local guy with a box of spanners.

We continued to move away from Farmers' Markets and attended more festivals this year which gives us a higher margin and reduces the number of lambs needed. We've also seen an increase in direct sales which is great news as it's the lowest cost sales channel we have. We now attend just 5 regular markets a month – less than half our previous number and we don't double up any more (attending two markets on



the same day) which was always a challenge logistically with both of us off the farm for a day.

Festivals are very hard work but they bring in a lot of revenue. The real challenge is to organise the preparation properly as much of it can't be done too far in advance. We now use what we call a festival 'budget' which works backwards from what we think (in our wildest dreams) we might take in a weekend. This stops me getting carried away and trying to make too many lamb burgers – 'just in case'.

The medieval fayre in Ludlow was a great success this year as the weather was kind to us and our 'medieval mutton' went down very well. Our final festival for 2016 was at Shrewsbury – a new one for us, on the same day as the Leominster Victorian Market. The logistical challenges of staffing 2 festivals, a long way apart, in the winter, both requiring a lot of preparation meant that the takings needed to be really good to make it worthwhile. Sadly they weren't – I'm not sure our lamb offer really works at Christmas time – so we'll probably not do the Shrewsbury one again.



The family have been brilliant again this year and it was great to welcome the next generation (9 year old Ollie) to the festival team at Shobdon. His Mum Kate did a great job at the Sheep Event at Malvern and Celine and Ian helped us at Ludlow Medieval Fayre. We must also thank Ross and his mates Steve and Lewis for their help again this year.

More strategically we've reduced our lambing workload by not lambing ewe lambs this time and we're going to try to handle it on our own with family help. Students don't work very well here as we're too small to attract the really good ones. We had a relationship with Durham Agricultural college and had had some very useful students from them but the one we had signed up for 2016 was prevented from coming at the last minute by his placement tutor who decided it was 'too far away'. Given that our motivation was largely about giving youngsters the opportunity to learn, if they don't want to come or can't then we'll manage on our own.

The highlight of our year was being nominated for the 'Sheep Innovator' category of the British Farming Awards. We made the finals which was a huge achievement and especially pleasing as it was a nomination from our fellow sheep farmers within the industry. We had a fantastic evening out – shared with Ross and Hannah although sadly we didn't win.



2016 has been a good year. We had a shaky start with the lambing problems and the wet but overall it's been good. Financially we're in a better position than we've ever been so that's a good omen for 2017! Just hope the scanning is OK...

Have a Happy New Year - Andy and Frances