

# Tales from Whyle House

## The home of Whyle House Lamb

### December 2017



'Sheep-less in Pudleston' is the headline I've been working on all year – hope you think it was worth it but it's not even strictly true. We still have four ewes left although everything else has gone now. For those of you who haven't kept up, we've decided to retire. We've sold the retail business, sold the sheep and let the land and buildings to our friend John and at the time of writing we've just two more markets to go plus the Christmas orders and then that's it. Finished.

It's been an interesting final year, we made the decision to stop in December 2015 but we couldn't say anything while we were trying to sell the business. Stopping a farm is not easy, the biology, the seasonality and the traditional approach of the industry means that you can lose a lot of money very quickly if you get the timing and/or the offer wrong. But more of that later.

You'll remember that we went into last winter with huge stocks of silage, fewer sheep to lamb as we had decided not to lamb ewe lambs and with ewes in much better condition than in previous years. We did vaccinate against foot rot as discussed last year and the vet arrived just before Christmas to help me. I say help – but it wasn't quite like that, she decided it would be easier to inject them if I caught them in a pen rather than allowing them to walk through the 'race'. After catching 160 or more 80kg ewes I was pretty well finished – I'm not as young as I used to be - but she did comment that the ewes were looking the best they ever had which was comforting.

We had a reasonably dry winter and managed to keep the ewes outside for a while, which is always better for them. We made some inroad into our huge stock of silage and our neighbour took the rest which was helpful and useful extra cashflow. We returned to a more traditional feeding regime this year which reduced the prolapse problem substantially and still gave us decent sized lambs. I had hoped to get the losses right down in our final year but we ended up about the same as last year, this is the last lamb to be born at Whyle House Lamb.

We got all the ewes and lambs outside straight away as the weather was pretty good and unlike last year the grass grew away quite strongly. Lambing a week later certainly helped there and the reduced numbers made it much easier. We managed without a student but had invaluable help from my



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daughter Hannah and from neighbours Roger and Linda and Colin and Patricia – thanks to all of them.

We were a little understocked this year and I spent a lot of time topping grass fields to keep the grass from getting away from the animals – a time consuming but pleasant activity and a nice problem to have. In a normal season, we'd have made extra hay or silage from the surplus but there was no point this year.

We made some silage as the plan was to sell the ewes scanned in lamb in February (so they would need feeding for at least 3 months) and I managed to choose the one wet weekend of the season to do it. It's quite good quality despite the rain but I had a struggle to move it through wet and slippery gateways and made quite a mess of the grass in the process. Our plans have changed (see below) so we now have 100 bales of silage which we don't need but John will take some and the rest will go to the neighbour as last year.



The fine spring turned into a wet and changeable harvest and we really struggled to get straw baled and home in the dry. On one memorable Sunday afternoon, I got the trailers and tractor to the field ready to move it as it was baled but the contractor got delayed and it rained that evening and we lost the lot. Luckily, we were able to use another field later in the week and got it baled and moved in a couple of hours – the benefits of big, modern kit and fast tractors! As with the silage, we now don't need it but John will buy it from us as he uses it.

The retailing side of the business has flourished this year and we've had a good summer. The markets have held their own and we've had a couple of good new wholesale customers including Friar Street Kitchen in Worcester who are our biggest customer for Lamb Burgers and even have them on Deliveroo! The Ludlow Spring Festival was the best we've ever had with two days of decent weather and good crowds. Shobdon was also very good – helped by grandson Ollie taking plates of burger samples round the show and encouraging punters to 'try his Grandad's lamb'! This was his initiative and I was amazed and delighted at how well he did.

Cosford was another stunner – although, unusually we did most of the business on the Sunday.



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Shrewsbury and Telford were OK although hampered by poor stall position at Shrewsbury and bad weather at Telford and then the best Ludlow Festival ever followed by a really good Applefest in Tenbury and a great Ludlow Medieval Fayre. Thanks to Ellie for all her help during the year, to Anna and Celine for Ludlow Spring, to Ross and Lewis for Ludlow and to Celine (again!) for the Medieval Fayre. Ellie seen here vaccinating lambs – her back bends better than mine.



Our Festival finale was supposed to be Shrewsbury Winter. I know I said last year that we wouldn't do it again but the costs were all spent, it was inside, it's a lovely festive event and any revenue would be ours to keep when we stopped so we decided to have one last go. And it snowed – goodness how it snowed! Saturday was a reasonable day but the forecast was so bad that a lot of traders left on Saturday night. We made it in on Sunday (just) mainly because we had to collect the stall, to find collapsed gutters between the marquees, snow everywhere and stalls being moved but mercifully we were OK. The organisers pulled out all the stops and got social media and local radio to announce half price admission for those who could walk there and we all did our best to be cheerful and positive and in the end, we had a decent day and covered our costs. Getting home again was a real struggle but we made it – despite the 14 inches of snow in our lane which almost defeated us in the last 200 yards or so. A very memorable finale!



Selling up the farm was a carefully organised campaign, planned with the help of our local auctioneer. We had various groups of lambs and ewes to go as well as the equipment and machinery – all to be prepared for specific sales to achieve the best possible prices. Ram lambs were fattened to go at the end of August to catch the special festival trade, ewe lambs for breeding and a fine batch of yearling ewes went in September along with some store lambs which we didn't need. We had a large batch of lambs which I had intended to sell as stores (for someone else to fatten) but they did so well that we sold half of them fat ourselves and topped the market which was nice.

The big change of plan was with the breeding ewes which (as I said above) we intended to sell in February. We brought them home in September as usual to sort

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them into groups to tup and the vet came to check the rams. She commented that the ewes were looking really good (again!) and that it was unlikely that they'd be any better in February – especially if we had a hard winter. I'd been thinking this myself and so, after a quick conversation with the auctioneer we decided on a rapid change of plan to sell them all in October.

Having booked them into the sale 2 weeks hence, the price started to drop alarmingly. I went to the preceding sale and saw decent quality sheep punished with rock bottom prices or even no sale and I panicked! This was 12 years' worth of work to build this flock and I could see it being given away on a poor trade. Thinking rationally, the good ones were still selling well so I had another change of plan and split the ewes into the best quality ones and the rest.

Thanks due to brother in law Steve who came for a short visit and spent most of the time in the barn helping me sort sheep! The new tenant, John was looking for some 'decent sensibly priced' sheep and he took the majority of the older ewes and the tups at a very fair price. We then took the best ones to market (seen here) and topped the price that day which was very satisfying and a huge relief.



The remaining mutton ewes and lambs were sorted into those we needed until we stopped trading and those the new owner of the retail business would need next year. This left us with the four surplus ones mentioned above which are going tomorrow – they've been bought by someone who wanted to give them a decent 'retirement' and are going to a farm animal sanctuary. I'm delighted with this outcome as it's been our proud boast that we've never sold old ewes into the cull trade (where they'll end up in the Halal markets in Birmingham) – they work hard for us and we owe them a duty of care.

I now have until 24<sup>th</sup> February to prepare the equipment (what farmers call deadstock) for a sale – again planned last year so that it coincides with buyers thinking about lambing and their needs for all the paraphernalia of a sheep farm. The machinery including my beloved tractor will be sold privately during the summer.

The sale of the retail operation is the final part of the jigsaw and we're delighted that it's being taken over by a local farmer's son Ed Rollings and his partner Sheena. Ed has returned to the family farm and is keen to add value to his produce, just as we did all those years ago. He'll run it from here initially using our cold room and butchery and pretty much everything will stay the same while he finds his feet. I'll help him get going and teach him the necessary butchery skills and the plan is that during the year he will move the operation to his farm and re-brand it under his name. We wish Ed and Sheena every success and are pleased that the business

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we've worked so hard to build over the last 11 years will continue. From a selfish point of view, it's also very rewarding to be able to give a 'leg up' to someone starting out and we will watch with interest (but from afar!) as they develop and grow the business.

One last thankyou – a personal one from me to Frances my lovely and long-suffering wife. This was my gig – it was my dream and you helped me make it happen. Thankyou.



So that's it, we stop with mixed feelings. We won't miss the mud and the cold, the pressure of preparing for the big festivals, the very early mornings and late nights (and even no nights) and the relentless routine of the retailing. We will miss bringing new life into the world, the challenges of running a farm, being part of a very supportive and encouraging farming community, the market and festival traders who are now our friends and most of all our lovely customers without whom none of this would be possible.

- Have there been times when we wondered why on earth we did this? – Yes
- Have we made any money? – No not really
- Could we have spent the capital involved on other things? – Of course
- Would we do it all again – You bet!

Happy Christmas from Andy and Frances.