

Tales from Whyle House

The home of Whyle House Lamb

December 2009



I've decided I'm temperamentally unsuited to making hay..... We spent hours (days probably) consulting weather forecasts and managed to 'get' our hay in two lots – but the second batch was baled and stacked in the dark! We finished that evening at 1.00am and were out again at 5 the following morning to beat the next deluge.

Our first year doing it 'properly' has been an interesting one. My wife Frances is now a partner in the farm – so I've someone to share the overdraft with – and we're rapidly moving towards a food business where we have as much contact with people as we do with the sheep!

We've recently invested in a sheep dog called Geri who is a tremendous help – most of the time. He's supposed to be fully trained but he's only two and he gets a bit carried away – especially with the lambs which scatter rather than 'flock' together. Last week we brought a batch in to weigh and grade and the next morning found three waiting by the gate which he'd missed in his excitement!



We've had a good year overall – our much larger flock gave us 153 lambs – a mighty step up from the usual 40 or so. Thanks to our friends Ian and Jill and daughter-in-law Celine we got *some* sleep during lambing this year and the weather was kind. Grandson Ollie (below) also gave us some useful 'help'. Our three borrowed tups worked well but it's surprising how different their lambs are. We have one in particular who seems to produce lambs which fatten more easily than the others. If I'd been organised, I'd have known which one it was but as we put the whole flock together with three tups in December to catch any stragglers, we don't know which was which. This year it will be different – we know exactly what we're doing... Now where have I heard that before!



The other thing I've learned the hard way is that not all grass is the same. We had a batch of ewes and a group of lambs which lost condition and generally didn't 'do' as well as they should. After much time and expense we found a mineral problem which we've since put right with supplements. Previous users of that piece of grass

followed the traditional Herefordshire plan of putting out mineral buckets and so never noticed it. We don't do that – it's wasteful and expensive and a bit like humans who take mineral tablets – it's not necessary unless there is a definite problem to treat.

As I wrote last time, we've made some big bale hay this year – 60 or so bales which the ewes are munching their way through as we speak. This has been much easier on us but the bad summer weather made it a difficult job to organise and the late cutting delayed the re-growth (called aftermath) which we wanted to keep the lambs growing. So next year we're going to make big bale silage. This is not so weather dependent as hay and because we can cut it earlier will enable us to get the aftermath grazing back more quickly. The earlier cut material is also much better feed value which should save on bought in feed. The only down side is that it's a contractor job which will be more expensive and we'll need a different attachment for our tractor to be able to move the bales around – more 'toys' and more expense!



We're now farming about 50 acres and most of it is within a 20 minute tractor drive so life is a lot easier and we spend much less time driving round looking at the sheep. If we can get the quality of the grass improved a bit we should be able to graze another 40 ewes which will bring us up to our maximum capacity of 120. Any more than that and we'd need another barn – and Frances would say - some permanent help!!

One advantage of late hay making is that you get lots more! Our small bale hay although baled in the dark, has proved to be in demand and we've sold about 500 bales already. If we're not careful, we'll run out like last year – but it's so good to have some extra cash flow.

Our new 'flat eight' loader has been a godsend and meant that I can manage most of the making and carting by myself. We also used to it move 500 bales of straw so it's earning it's keep.



Our larger scale operation has involved some proper marketing this year including a promotion in the local pub for British Food Fortnight that involved me being there every night for two weeks. Well someone had to! We're selling lamb to two local pubs now which is going very well and is very good advertising as well as a useful regular direct sale.

We're putting a lot of effort into raising awareness of our product and we held open afternoons during lambing to encourage people to come and see what

we do. One of our key aims is to involve the next generation and I'm doing promotional talks to schools which is great fun and good advertising. The small children sit there with their hands up and when asked what their question is, want to tell me about their rabbit! The older ones ask very challenging questions and of course all of them take a leaflet home!

We also took part in the national Open Farm Sunday event in June which got us great press and radio coverage despite the most appalling weather. The lesson we learned there is to have more knowledgeable people around. The family are great (son Ross and son in law Alex seen here on the BBQ) and helped enormously but we need to free up Frances from catering and supervision to help me actually talk to the visitors. We'll do this again – so make a note of the date – the 13th June 2010.



I'm also doing talks about the business to other groups which is a great way of raising our profile and I've even passed my audition to go on the WI speakers list (my Mum would be so proud!) so we're getting our name out there.

The most recent initiative is selling at local farmer's markets (currently Leominster and Hereford) which is very hard work but great fun. You can see Frances and me below dressed up for the Victorian market this Christmas. The other stall holders are a great crowd and have been so helpful and it's lovely to get people coming back each time and telling us how good our lamb is. We need to build a following by regular attendance but it's an enjoyable and profitable way to spend three days a month. The challenge is to maintain continuity which involves growing the lambs at different rates so we have a regular supply. Our original plan was to attend markets between August and March (our main season) but I think if we do that we'll lose the momentum in the summer. So we're currently thinking about lambing some ewes early (around Christmas) so we have a year round supply. Two lambings in a year – lovely!!



We finally got rid of the old fridge box this Autumn – at a huge loss – but now have a nice new prefabricated cold room installed next to the cutting room in the garage. This was the original plan and since it cost about half what the fridge box did to sort out, we should have stuck with it! We live and (hopefully) learn.

So we're now properly equipped and fully inspected by all who need to know and it's nice to have everything working properly. Farmer's Markets have involved further investment in a chilled display cabinet which we managed to find second hand. This is not essential when the weather is as cold as it is currently but is vital when it warms up and provides a professional and attractive way of displaying the meat. We've also invested in new packaging to do mail order deliveries. It's made from wool which is appropriate and it might even increase the value of wool to more than the current 30p per fleece! At first sight mail order and 'local food' don't really go together but we've done it for customers who want to send lamb to relatives – usually as a present at Christmas or Easter.

So we come to the end of another year – more sheep, more grass and a much larger operation to manage. Promotion and marketing is the main challenge for next year as well as maintaining the flow of lambs coming forward – and of course not forgetting managing our way around the British weather! The main thing is we're still having fun!

Thanks to everyone who has helped again this year – especially Tomos and Alice at lambing, John and Dee with shearing, Ross with the hay and the rest of our long suffering family for everything else!

Have a great Christmas.

Andy and Frances

