

Tales from Whyle House

The home of Whyle House Lamb

April 2009



The theory is that it takes no more time to lamb 90 ewes than it does to lamb 25. Our experience this year is that this isn't entirely true..... It makes better use of your time and avoids a lot of sitting around but with more animals around, they need more supervision – especially through the night. So as we come to the end of our first 'serious' lambing, we're all a bit bleary eyed and I'm not sure how many of our helpers will come back next year!

We're just about finished now with only four to go and one on the way as I write. Seven sets of triplets, 59 sets of twins and loads of singles are already here. I've promised myself I'll stick to the folklore and not count the lambs just yet (it's supposed to be bad luck) but we've had a good season and we should have in excess of 150 lambs running around the various rented fields throughout the county.



We had a reasonable winter once we got the ewes inside but our 'just too late' (rather than 'Just in Time') management style meant that I was still trying to build the pens as we brought them in. We scanned at 184% which was pretty good given that we didn't get the extra sheep until late in the year – rather more singles than I'd have liked due to poor Autumn grass but only seven sets of triplets which was great news.

I hadn't realised how much trouble triplets are as we've never had them before but they really are a nuisance. We learned how to foster triplet lambs onto singles which works well except that singles lamb late and triplets lamb early so they don't often coincide. We also kept one alive by putting a jumper on him – see picture!

The final straw came late one night when I saw a single starting to lamb, dashed into the triplets pen and grabbed one to foster – which I did successfully. Only to find that the lamb I grabbed was actually a twin who had escaped from a neighbouring pen. So I managed to swap one single for another which didn't exactly improve my humour at that late hour!



We only had three problem deliveries this year, all of which I managed to deal with. Without being melodramatic, there is nothing quite like that feeling of being on your own, at 4.00am in a freezing cold barn with the life of a ewe and

twin lambs literally in your hands. The most amazing thing is how hard ewes can push when you are trying to re-arrange things so that you can deliver the right lamb with the correct legs and how tolerant the lambs are of being re-organised in the womb before they even see the light of day (or night). It's immensely rewarding when it works but can be very scary indeed.

We invested more time and money on our facilities through the winter and now have 15 decent lambing pens and properly constructed feeding barriers for the ewes. It's made life so much easier and avoided the usual muddle of home made pens and confused sheep (and shepherds...). We also had to make existing fences lamb proof on the new rented fields and I had to install a lamb compartment in the trailer so we could move ewes and lambs to the grassland without the lambs getting crushed. All this is 'capital work' which only has to be done once and I keep saying that next year everything will be simple and straightforward..... but it never is!



One thing I've learned is that 83 sheep eat lots more feed than you think they will – especially in a hard winter. We ran out of our own hay and straw despite buying in hay in the Autumn and were forced to buy more during April. We also used 3.5 tonnes of cake which is about in proportion to previous years but at £190 a tonne has left a big hole in the overdraft.

The other thing I learned (once our helpers had gone home!) is that filling the old feed bags with hay (as in the picture above) is very time consuming for 15 pens so I bought some hay racks at vast expense but it saves hours a day in time.

We've taken on more grass and are now farming about 45 acres in total which is great although it's proving a bit of a logistical challenge. The grass is growing like mad at present which is a nice problem to have but getting the right number of sheep in the right place is proving interesting. We should have more than enough grass this year though and will definitely make extra hay to sell. It makes better use of the equipment and gives us some useful cash flow before the main lamb sales start. I might even get some more sheep?!?

I just need one more toy – sorry piece of equipment.... We need a 'flat eight' grab to handle the bales so I can load and unload the trailers without help – and if we're going to have some big bales, maybe a bale 'spike' to make moving them easier – and we could do with a bigger sheep trailer (and maybe a Landrover to pull it) – and a dog.... And so it goes on. The tax man says I have to make a profit this year though so we'll have to be careful how much we spend for the time being.

Our biggest innovation this season is that we're using a marketing professional to help us promote the business. The idea is to build more

awareness of the 'Whyle House Lamb' brand to see just how many of the 100 or so extra lambs we can sell retail rather than wholesale. We now have the facilities to hang and process as many lambs as we can sell and we want really to develop our name in the local area. My son Ross has helped me develop and maintain the web site which has been a great help and our first new marketing initiative was to invite the public in for 'lambing afternoons' which went really well and got us lots of news coverage including a 4 minute slot on prime time local radio. The highlight was a visit from the local Rainbows (baby brownies) and a ewe dutifully delivered a set of twins just as they arrived.



A really rewarding outcome from my point of view was the interest shown by other farmers – not customers perhaps but representatives of the local community and a measure of their acceptance of us as a serious business.

We had two excellent young helpers this year in Alice and Tomos who helped us with the chores, bottle fed some of the triplets and were able to keep an eye on the animals while we had a break to eat. Frances' son Ian and Celine and our younger grandson Joshua came over the Easter weekend which was useful as Celine can lamb the ewes herself leaving me to get on with other things and our friends Ian and Jill came down for the middle week which gave us some invaluable opportunities to sleep! We did try very hard to take them to the pub one evening to thank them for their help but the ewes were having none of it and we had a 3.00am finish that night.



Our older grandson Oliver joined us on several occasions and had a great time helping feed the ewes and lambs as well as appearing in the publicity photographs. Finally my daughter Hannah and Ben came over last weekend which enabled me to complete some fencing and get a big batch of ewes and lambs moved which was a great help.

So we've got through our first serious lambing unscathed. The grass is growing and the lambs are racing around the fields as they do. The weather's pretty good and we're looking forward to summer. Hope we get a good one!

Don't forget to get your orders in for lamb as soon as you can.

Have a great Summer.

Andy and Frances