

CHAROLLAIS

THE FARMER'S FUTURE



CHAROLLAIS
SHEEP
SOCIETY

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A BREED FOR ALL SYSTEMS

Welcome to the second edition of Charollais – The Farmer’s Future which showcases commercial farmers from all corners of the UK, all favouring Charollais in their sheep enterprises.

The first edition of this magazine was a resounding success and was picked up by many commercial farmers at the Society stands across shows and technical sheep events.

The theme for this magazine is simple, a cost-effective ewe with a Charollais ram, capable of producing quality, within specification lamb carcasses, with little or no concentrate.

Coupled with effective use of grass and forage crops, Charollais lambs thrive on these systems, with ease of lambing, fast growth and quick finishing all being reported amongst these producers.

The Charollais is undoubtedly a farmers’ ram, bred with functionality as a priority. Fit, functional rams are essential for the future of profitable sheep production across the UK in all types of farming systems.

As farming support payments shift across the devolved nations of the UK, the importance of efficient, lower input sheep systems capable of producing a premium product has never been higher.

Putting Charollais at the heart of your farming system is the first step to a sustainable, profitable future.

Best wishes,

Carroll Barber

and the Charollais Sheep Society



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TOP PERFORMANCE RECORDED CHAROLLAIS RAMS FIT THE BILL FOR JOHN MARTIN

Charollais rams are playing a central role in an award winning Northern Irish sheep enterprise, helping ensure prime lambs from the Martin family's Greyabbey-based flock meet the needs of its customers.



* John Martin and his flock.

John Martin, who farms just off the east shores of Strangford Lough, some 18 miles from Belfast, has been running Charollais tups within the 720-head flock for the last 15 years.

Farming 185 acres of both owned and rented ground, John has farmed alongside his father since December 1989 when he returned from college. Along with son Alexander and daughter Carys, John and family previously ran a suckler beef system, but switched to contract dairy heifer rearing alongside the sheep enterprise some five years ago.

In 2021 John attended a webinar about using performance recorded tups and was approached by Norman McMordie of the Riverdale flock. Following this John purchased a tup lamb from Norman and a further four tups in the last two seasons.

“My selection criteria includes good growth and muscle EBV's with the highest fat cover figure possible, however, this significantly narrows the choice of recorded tups in an already limited market.”

Selection criteria includes good growth and muscle EBV's with a high fat cover

Some 20 years ago the family introduced Lleyn genetics to the existing Suffolk x Cheviot ewes, this has since been followed with Highlander, Belclare, Aberfield and Charollais. Four Jacob teaser tups are run with all ewes and replacement ewe lambs for nine days before the tups are introduced.

About 160 ewes lamb to maternal tups in mid-January with the main block of lambing taking place from mid-March, to coincide with grass growth. A total of 350 ewes and 150 ewe lambs are put to the terminal sires, with the whole flock normally scanning at 205%, including the ewe lambs.

Ewes are on the Heptavac P Plus system and Footvax, while ewe lambs receive an abortion vaccination before running with the tups. All breeding sheep receive a four-in-one bolus pre-tupping and pre-lambing which John has found to be a new requirement after identifying a deficiency in selenium and iodine through blood sampling some of the flock. “We have also noticed less feet problems which we believe is due to the inclusion of zinc in the bolus,” adds John.

Melatonin implants are used in the January lambers with them typically scanning at 210-220%. “This has been a recent change from sponges, after having too many barren ewes at scanning,” John explains. Any January lambing ewes that are scanned empty to the maternal tups are then added to the March group of terminal sire tups.

Ewes are split after scanning with concentrates being introduced to the triplets and any poor ewes at four weeks pre-lambing. Feed is then introduced to the twins and singles a week later, but at a reduced rate. All feed is home mixed, based on barley with protein, mineral and molasses added along with extra protected fat for the pre-lambing rations.



Replacement ewe lambs are selected from ewes that have lambed without assistance.



Lambs are EID tagged from birth, with John having introduced this in 2010 to monitor lifetime performance of all the sheep including growth rates, calculating accurate dosage rates as well as highlighting poor performing ewes to cull. “The replacement ewe lambs are selected from multiple bearing ewes that have lambed without assistance and with plenty of milk.”

This research has given John and his family knowledge on how to understand what aspects affect not only sheep health, but the ground they graze too. “We have been faecal egg counting for 15 years, during the last three seasons we have had a G2 Fecpak unit as part of an Evidence and Innovation Project looking at targeted strategic treatment of internal parasites in sheep.

“As a result, we have cut out a couple of doses and reduced overall use of anthelmintics by about 40%,” John explains. He also has a better understanding when selecting replacement ewe lambs, as those that require fewer doses help with the flock resilience to worms in the long term.

After being awarded Grassland Farmer of the Year in 2019, the passion and dedication John

has not only for his livestock, but also his land is paramount. A rotational grazing system has operated on the farm since 2016 and during the growing season weekly plate metering is undertaken and recorded.

A home blend is fed to the January-born lambs once lambs are four weeks old and have been moved onto the, hybrid brassica seed, redstart. The only other lambs that receive creep feed are the pets or any replacement ewe lambs. From the end of September onwards, or in drought conditions, trough feeding will be introduced to weaned lambs that haven’t done as well direct off grass.

All lambs are sold deadweight through Strangford Down marketing group to Linden Foods aiming for a carcass weight as close to 21kg as possible. John notes how the Charollais sired lambs grade better for conformation compared to their other terminal competitors.

Looking forward John is always considering different options and ways to develop the farm further noting the three real dry summers he has seen in the last five years. “We have trialled multi-species swards, but with limited success regarding persistence,” says John.





CHAROLLAIS SPEEDS UP FINISHING TIME ON DEVON COMMERCIAL FARM

Charollais rams are proving a valuable addition to one Devon sheep enterprise, adding conformation and quicker finishing to the Maynard family's flock.

Running 200 Poll Dorset ewes, Roger and Sally Maynard have introduced Charollais rams over the last five years, having moved to Poll Dorsets as their ewe of choice after previously worked with a flock of Suffolk Mules.

The flock runs alongside a beef finishing enterprise, with the family finishing up to 180 cattle a year, while also running a number of holiday cottages and a children's garden toy business.

"We first looked at Charollais rams to add some length to the carcasses we were producing and they certainly did that," explains Roger.

"It was noticeable quite quickly that the carcasses were longer than those from our previous terminal sire. On top of that, lambs were quicker to finish and that's a big plus point for us. The faster we can get lambs away the better as it means there is more grass available for other stock."

Roger explains that the flock lambs in early November, with the aim of selling new season lambs from early February to catch the best of the trade.

Charollais carcasses are longer and the lambs are quicker to finish than previous terminal sires we have tried.

"Ewes are tupped on silage ground, with teasers run with the flock for a fortnight before tups are introduced. To keep a fresh bite in front of ewes during tupping we tend to split fields in half and move them back and forth between each block every 5-6 days.

"To help manage ewes during lambing we change the raddle colour every 9-10 days, giving a clear indication of when they'll lamb," he adds.



Ewes then remain on grass until scanning, with the flock achieving scanning percentages of 170-200% in recent years. “Post scanning ewes are split according to litter size, with single carrying ewes sent away to keep, while the twins and triplets remain at home, moving onto better grass about a month ahead of lambing.

“Concentrate is introduced to these ewes about six weeks ahead of lambing. Last year we introduced herbal leys to the farm and have found these to be extremely good for grazing the ewes on ahead of lambing. Ewes maintained condition ahead of lambing really well,” he says.

The Charollais cross lambs have great vigour at birth and are able to withstand whatever weather is thrown at them.



The flock is housed just a few days ahead of lambing and ewes and lambs then run out by day and in by night for a week or so before being out full-time. “They strip graze stubble turnips with a run-back to a herbal ley, helping keep feed costs down to a minimum and ensure ewes milk well to maximise lamb growth.

“What is really evident in the Charollais cross lambs is their vigour at birth and their ability to withstand whatever weather is thrown at them. This last winter was a challenge for any livestock, but the Charollais cross lambs thrived and we were able to sell prime lambs as early as we ever have done,” explains Roger.



Having historically sold all lambs deadweight, this year, due to exceptional trading conditions they have chosen to sell liveweight, with lambs sold through Exeter Livestock Market. “Lambs have met a fast trade this spring, averaging a little more than £193, repaying our faith in the Charollais as our terminal sire of choice.”

This year we’ve been able to sell prime lambs earlier than ever before.

On the female front all replacement ewes are sourced off-farm from regular sources and then vaccinated against both enzootic and toxoplasmosis abortion prior to joining the flock. “We also fluke and worm dose all ewes post-lambing and the whole flock is on the Heptavac P system, ensuring we maximise flock health and minimise losses wherever we can,” he adds.

Roger explains that he believes the natural fleshing of the Dorset ewes and the quality of conformation coming from the Charollais is a great combination. “The two breeds work together really well and deliver exceptional prime lambs. Both breeds flesh well off forage, so we avoid having to creep feed lambs despite lambing in the autumn and finishing lambs before many flocks have even started lambing.

“We’re careful with our ram selection and are always looking for rams with length, with a good bit of shape. They must also be good on their feet and legs to ensure they work well and last a few years.”



BREEDING CHAROLLAIS LAMBS THAT THRIVE AND SURVIVE

In the excitement of measuring growth rate and improving carcass conformation, we occasionally forget that our priority as terminal sire breeders is to ensure rams produce live lambs that survive to the point of sale.

Many factors effect lamb survival, some are influenced by the environment the lamb is born into, some are influenced by the ewe's maternal performance (whether she has enough milk and leads the lamb to shelter in wet weather). However, the lamb's own genes also have a marked impact on their future and commercial farmers need lambs that are born easily, are fast to their feet and thrive.

As part of the genetic evaluation service provided by Signet to the Charollais breed, we can identify the best breeding lines for lamb survival; highlighting those sires whose lambs thrive and survive.

PRODUCING BREEDING VALUES FOR LAMB SURVIVAL

Lamb survival is a binary trait. A lamb either survives (i.e. it has a weight later in life) or it doesn't, though in some cases the measurement may be set to "missing" where the trait hasn't been accurately recorded; for example a flock with 100% lamb survival.

Records are analysed in flock-year groups, comparing the survivability of lambs born in a given flock and year. Survival records for lambs in flock-year groups where the percentage of dead lambs is abnormally low or high (<5% or >50%) are excluded from our analysis.

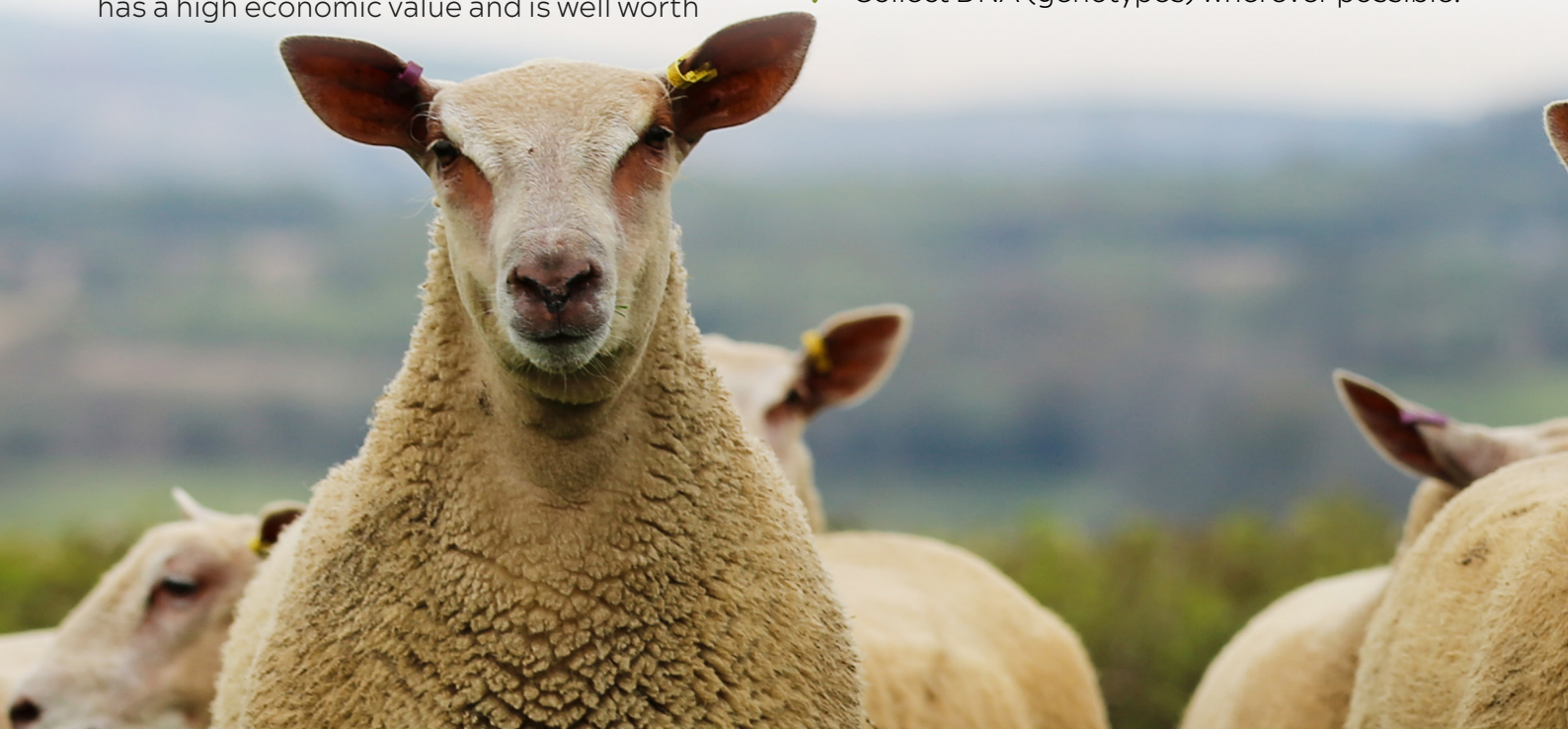
The heritability of lamb survival is lower than growth and carcass traits, which means less of the variation that we see in this trait is due to the animals' genetics compared to these other performance traits. However, lamb survival has a high economic value and is well worth

inclusion in our breeding programmes due to its impact on profitability – and, the carbon footprint of the national sheep flock.

The good news for Charollais breeders is that we are entering a genomic age where information collected when genotyping animals will be used to enhance our analysis. Genomic breeding values for lamb survival will be even more informative in the future.

WHAT SHOULD RAM BREEDERS DO TO ENHANCE THE RECORDING OF THIS TRAIT?

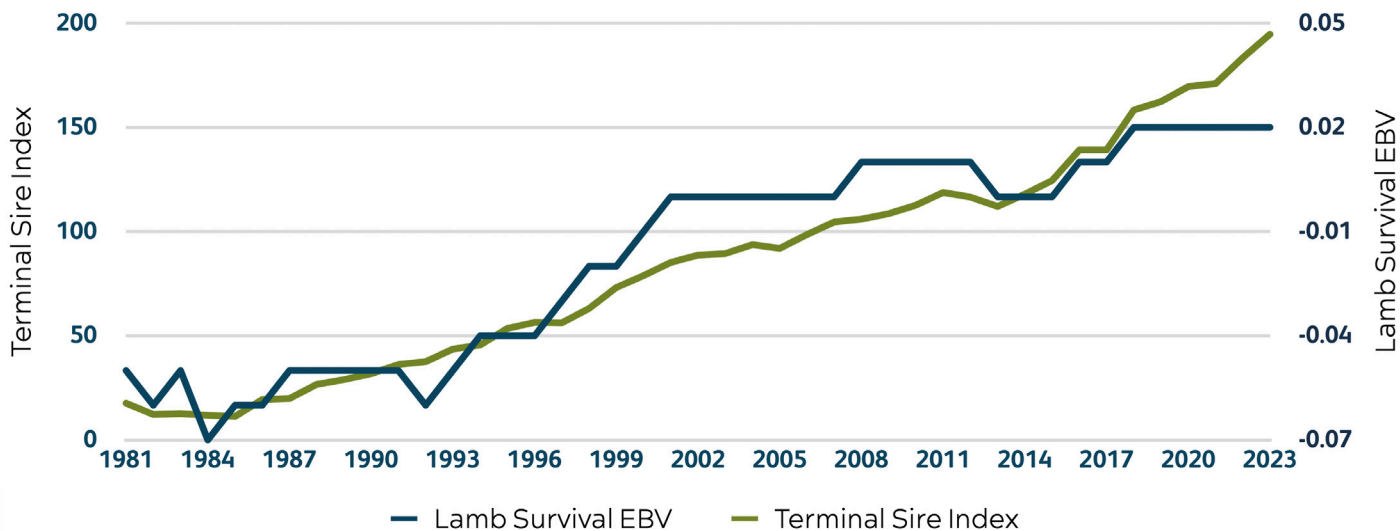
- * Those flocks that are performance recorded should capture as much data as possible to identify genetic differences in their flocks.
 - o All dead lambs should be recorded.
 - o All live lambs should be weighed.
- * Collect DNA (genotypes) wherever possible.



MORE GOOD NEWS FOR CHAROLLAIS BREEDERS

Although our approach to evaluating lamb survival is relatively new, we generate breeding values using both historic and current information. Trends for the Charollais breed show that this trait has improved over time, even without breeders having access to a breeding value.

GENETIC TRENDS FOR THE CHAROLLAIS BREED FOR TERMINAL SIRE INDEX AND LAMB SURVIVAL



Breeding lines with poor survival have clearly left the population as breeders start rearing lambs under increasingly commercial conditions. There may also have been some indirect benefits arising from an increase in birth weight when selecting for growth.

MESSAGES FOR COMMERCIAL PRODUCERS

- * Charollais rams tend to produce lambs with high survival rates.
- * Differences exist between sires and ram buyers can now select rams with superior genetics for lamb survival.
- * Buyers should also take note of breeding values for traits like lambing ease and birth weight as both will indirectly influence lamb survival.
- * Information on these traits can be found on the Signet website www.signetdata.com



WEIGHT PAYS WITH CHAROLLAIS RAMS ON WELSH EWES

An opportunity to take over a an additional stock farm just outside of Llanafan in Ceredigion, Wales, has seen Gareth and Meinir Thomas expand their sheep farming enterprise considerably and key to that is the perfect mix of Charollais rams on Welsh ewes.



Along with the home steading in Carmarthenshire, the couple, along with children Catrin, Ffion and Iestyn, have recently taken on this additional unit from Gareth's late Uncle and have soon grown sheep numbers to 600 ewes.

“Although there is a little distance between the home and second farm, it's given us a huge opportunity to expand the livestock business, which was previously running at 80 suckler cows and about 300 ewes,” explains Gareth.

Some 350 Welsh ewes and 50 Suffolk cross ewes go to Charollais or Charollais x Beltex ram with the remaining Welsh ewes going to pure Welsh tups to breed replacements. “Prior to my Uncle passing away he was sceptical about using the Charollais as he's always used Welsh rams and thought the Charollais could be a little soft, but when we drew the first lambs for slaughter and they continually weighed well he soon changed his mind,” adds Gareth.

“What you see is what you get with a Charollais cross; tight skins with thick, long carcasses. They can be a little deceptive on size due to being light of bone, but they weigh well and are often incredibly consistent.” Selling predominantly deadweight, tup lambs have averaged about 19kg and ewe lambs 18kg grading at R's and U's, which is remarkable off a medium sized Welsh ewe, he adds.

Because of climate and weather conditions, Gareth says he prefers to source the lighter headed Charollais with a little more wool around their heads just to give the lambs that





slight extra cover when born. “Sheep are moved back to the Carmarthenshire-based farm for lambing so the holding at Ceredigion gets about six weeks rest before ewes and lambs come back to graze. Most ewes lamb outside, in fact the Welsh ewe prefers to be outside and lambs are born with great vigour.

What you see is what you get with Charollais crosses - tight skins and a long, thick carcass

Lambing at the end of February and aiming for a lambing percentage of about 150%, most of the Charollais cross lambs hit the ground in a short lambing period of three weeks. “We use teaser rams first then I prefer not to raddle the rams and then we scan in December,” Gareth explains.

While lambing is usually a relatively stress-free experience, the last year has seen some struggles with more empty ewes than usual due to Scmallenburg. “We didn’t necessarily suffer at lambing time, but we had 30-40 empty ewes due to it,” he adds.

Some 8-9 Charollais or Charollais cross rams are currently being run and are sourced from local markets. “I’m buying shearling rams with length and a good gigot and obviously paying attention to feet and legs. They’re given concentrate through the winter, but are simply managed alongside the Welsh tups,” adds Meinir.



Ewes are on the Heptavac P programme and general management is all about prevention rather than cure, largely due to the time and fuel required moving between holdings. “The Welsh ewe is a hardy sheep with great longevity and is incredibly cost effective.” Gareth adds that he likes to keep ewe loss down to a minimum of 5% in a year, with lamb loss running at under 10% and then 120-130 head of ewe lambs retained each year as replacements with additional numbers bought in as and when required.

I’m buying Charollais rams with length and a good gigot and obviously paying close attention to feet and legs.

While most years see lambs being sold deadweight, the couple did capitalise on the store trade with the best hitting £158 a head and averaging at £140. “Trade was too good not to try and this year it paid off. I think going forward with a shortage of sheep on the ground due to farming and weather restraints and the hit many have taken from Schmallenburg, the Charollais cross lamb with its marketing

flexibility, ability to feed off grass and extra length, is ideally placed for the commercial marketplace and can suit a variety of ewe type,” he highlights.

Where possible lambs are finished off grass alone. “We only use a 16% protein concentrate if grass growth has been slow to get going at the start of spring, weather depending. On the whole, the Charollais cross lamb is perfectly placed to finish off grass alone.”



CHAROLLAIS RAMS INTEGRAL FOR ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY ON GRASS ONLY SCOTTISH SYSTEM

Ease of lambing coupled with the ability to finish off milk and grass alone make Charollais a prime choice of terminal sire for Duns, Berwickshire-based Stephen Patterson who farms in partnership with his father, Andrew.



“We run a mixed flock, starting with about 500 hill ewes, which traditionally have been Blackfaces, with these being phased out in favour of Shetlands, followed by 1000 Mules and Texel x Mules.

“Historically, we have run a stratified system within the farm, with the Blackface ewes put to Bluefaced Leicester tups and the resulting

Mules then put to Texels and the ewe lambs retained from this cross put to Charollais tups.

“We also used the Charollais across the Blackface ewes once they’ve had two cycles with the Bluefaced Leicesters,” he explains.

“However, we began moving away from Blackfaces a few years ago as Shetland ewes could be bought for less money and achieve a better return in our system. We now put these Shetland ewes to Bluefaced Leicesters to breed Shetland Mules, with the Texel and Charollais tups put with them later on and these lambs finished or sold as stores.

“There aren’t many ewes around that can easily wean their bodyweight, but the Shetland ewe can and she’s fertile and thrives on our harder ground. The Charollais x Shetland lambs can be finished at 17-20kg carcass weights, albeit they may not be finished until November or December. But they still do it off grass, without the need for any concentrate feed,” explains Stephen.





The family's main use of the Charollais rams is across their Texel cross ewes, with about 450 of these within the 1000-ewe lowland flock. "They're also used across all the hoggs and the Shetland gimmers, making use of their easy lambing traits to get a quality lamb out of these young sheep."

With lambing starting for the lowland flock in Mid-March, ewes are wintered on fodder beet and silage, with just 5.5t of a 19% concentrate used across the flock last winter. "I'm not keen on heavy concentrate feeding and the fodder beet is a great way to set the ewes up for lambing, also giving our grassland a good chance to rest over winter," he explains.

Finished lambs are sold as deadweight, aiming to get as close to 21kg, with most grading U's and R's.

Helping to keep a check on costs, the family run ewes outside by day during lambing, with just single bearing ewes remaining inside full time to aid with wet adoptions. "The aim is to have as few ewes as possible going away with one lamb, so we wet adopt as many as we can.

"We also leave all the tup lambs entire, aiming to get them away as soon as possible. More than 95% of the Charollais-sired lambs are sold as finished lambs, with just the odd stragglers sold as stores. The finished lambs are all sold deadweight, aiming to get as close to the 21kg top weight as we can, with most of the Charollais cross lambs grading as U's and R's.

“We generally start to draw the first of the singles in mid-June and will then be drawing lambs every fortnight from then on, aiming to sell 1.7 lambs a ewe, with the flock usually scanning in at about 180%,” he says.

The family reckon to have the last of the Charollais cross lambs from the lowland flock away by the end of September, then switching to lambs from the Blackface and Shetland ewes.

Suckler cows follow the ewes and lambs, aiming to make best use of available grass to suit both enterprises.

“Tup selection is an important part of flock management and the Charollais rams we want to buy must have good length, tight skins and have good head cover. We’re out on the east coast, so it can be quite exposed. Tups are often bought privately off farm from Robert Patterson at Upper Auchenlay. Good skins and head cover are essential for lamb survival, particularly as our land rises from 450-800ft and catch the worst of the easterly weather when it comes through,” adds Stephen.

Allied to this is good health management, with all ewes vaccinated for clostridial diseases as well as enzootic abortion and footrot. “Keeping the ewes healthy helps boost lambing percentage and minimise any health issues we might see throughout the year.”

Stephen says grassland management is equally important, with the flock grazed on what he describes as a ‘relaxed rotational system’. “Cows and calves from the suckler herd follow the ewes and lambs around the grazing, aiming to make the best use of available grass to suit both the cattle and sheep enterprises.”



SERCOMBE RECORDING RAMCOMPARE

‘You can’t manage what you don’t measure.’ That was the message from Charollais Sheep Society chairman at a joint Society and AHDB event looking at performance recording and genomics.



“It is becoming increasingly important to know how sheep are performing and being able to identify those with superior genetic traits across a range of factors is likely to be the determinant between profit and loss in future,” he explained.

Mr Sercombe said when it came to identifying trait leaders within his own flock, performance recording – including birth weights and eight week weights – was key and using technologies, such as ultrasound scanning and CT scanning was a central part of his recording programme.

“These technologies allow us to get inside the animal and identify those with better muscling and improved lean meat ratios. Short of killing the animal these are the best tools we have to assess their carcass traits and find those with the ability to leave more valuable progeny.

“But we are taking that next step too and are progeny testing via AHDB’s RamCompare project to see how progeny from our rams perform in a commercial environment.

“Being part of RamCompare is allowing us to showcase how our rams perform, with crossbred progeny followed from birth to slaughter and all carcass data fed back to AHDB and used in Signet’s Terminal Sire Index evaluations,” he explains.

Signet’s Sam Boon told visitors to the event that the correlation between data recorded by pedigree flocks and commercially important traits was clear and proven. “Strong correlations exist between scan weight and days to slaughter and muscle depth and conformation.

“Selecting for higher scan weight rams means lambs will be ready for slaughter sooner and selecting for increased muscle depth will lead to better conformation,” he said.

Mr Sercombe’s commitment to progeny testing through RamCompare has seen half of his 400-ewe commercial flock included within the project, with these put to both Charollais and Texel sires. “We used six rams across the flock, with five of these being Charollais and the other being a Texel which was used as a linkage ram across other flocks in the project.

Strong correlations exist between scan weight and days to slaughter and muscle depth and conformation, according to work carried out by AHDB’s RamCompare project.

“Using this linkage ram helps ensure true comparisons can be made across different systems,” he explained.

He believes that being part of RamCompare is an important component of ensuring his stock can perform in a commercial environment.

“Looking ahead, we’re also now using genomics and have tested 50 sheep already. The hope is that, going forward, we’ll be able to identify superior ram lambs through genomic testing rather than having to wait until we have lambs on the ground by them,” he added.

And while performance recording adds cost to his system, Mr Sercombe believes it is vital to ensuring his flock remains viable into the future. “Being able to make genetic progress and measure that progress on the core commercial traits is essential for both ourselves and the wider industry.

“Without the technologies and the data they provide we’d be fighting with one arm tied behind our back,” he said.

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A TUP FOR ALL EWES



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