

Maximising the Value of Wether Lambs on an Upland Farm

PE Dixon, Kirkby Stephen, Cumbria Flock 2802



Paul Dixon farms with his wife Andrea and two boys Matthew and Oliver at Rakehead Farm, Nateby, near Kirkby Stephen in Cumbria. Rakehead covers 550 acres over a four-mile radius. Running from 600ft to 2400ft above sea level. The land varies from a drier medium loam soil up to wetter and peat type land. The average rainfall in the market town of Kirkby Stephen is 33 inches which can easily be translated into something a bit higher on the upper ground in the area. The farm is known to have been in the family since 1685.

Up until 2017 Paul was farming very traditionally the Swaledale and North of England Mule. The wether lambs (castrated males) were a very vital part of the profit margin so numbers reared, conformation and weight were under scrutiny and having looked at his business he felt the pure bred Lleyn could do a better job at this. Paul emphasises “for example the Swaledales wethers were getting to 32-34 kilos in August, September and October after been creep fed all summer whereas the Lleyn are getting to 42-44 kilos without creep feed in the same months! Obviously, we are delighted with this result and feel vindicated in our decision to change breeds.”



The Lleyn was also chosen for being easier managed without losing maternal ability. This led to a trip out to the Society Sale at Carlisle where the first 35 gimmer lambs were purchased followed by 22 privately. Subsequently since 2017 Paul has bought over 200 Lleyn gimmer lambs to add as replacements to his flock gradually phasing out the Swaledale and mule ewes. The flock is

currently made up of 450 Lleyn or Lleyn cross ewes, 50 Swaledale and 200 Lleyn Gimmer Lambs.

Paul has signed the farm up to the new Higher Level Stewardship agreement from 2019. With the ongoing developments in farm support following BREXIT, he believes the Lleyn puts him in a better position to maximise the value of his lambs off the fell. Paul quotes “I suppose I regarded the Lleyn as the BREXIT breed”. Some of the farm under the HLS scheme has been put aside to create and restore woodland, pasture, and parkland with cattle grazing. This side of the business is let out for others to graze their cattle.



Interestingly Paul chose to start with Lleyn gimmer lambs instead of ewes. Conscious that he needed the flock to be hefted to work on the fell and common ground. As an experiment the first gimmer lambs were kept inside for the winter alongside the homebred lambs that were already hefted. The hope being that when they were all turned to the fell in the spring they would stick together, thankfully it worked and the flock continues to work on the same ground.

Another tool to help maintain the hefted flock. Paul crossed the Lleyn rams over the remaining hefted Swaledale ewes to help the offspring retain the instinct. Any ewes classed as too old to put to the fell are crossed with a Charollais ram. “The Lleyn breed is proving easier to manage with less lameness and with a will to thrive despite the challenging upland climatic and environmental conditions”.



While now able to breed his own replacements, the wethers and the bottom 20% of the gimmer lambs are sold deadweight the majority hitting 20kg carcass weight.

To move forward Paul now concentrates on selection of the Lley stock rams he buys. He is buying a ram to work on the fell so teeth and mobility are priority whilst conformation (shoulder & loin) is then studied hard before adding a thick type and tight skin. Paul believes in performance figures and notes that of the last seven rams purchased, five were Signet Recorded with good growth and maternal figures.

The system Paul has adopted sees all the ewes dipped and then housed in early December “this helps to avoid mid pregnancy weight loss and a drawn-out lambing time”. They are housed on plastic slats to prevent the cost of straw. They can be fed by forage box and this takes as little as 30 minutes to feed them all. They are fed clamp silage produced on farm. Scanning takes place in early January allowing for singles, twins, and triplets to be sorted into groups and fed accordingly. The usual rate sits around 175-180%. Currently twins and triplets get a supplementary feed, but ways are being explored to limit this. Lambing takes place from mid-March through until mid-April to coincide with the grass growth with the aim to use as little hard feed as possible. Although keen to do on-farm recording Paul has found technology has let him down. Records are made in the lambing pens with good old pen and paper.

When Paul was asked how he sees things going in the future, he responded with “well a difficult question to answer in these extraordinary times”. He acknowledges that change is coming with BPS being phased out and the introduction of ELMS. “The current pandemic will leave a financial strain on the country hence this will put further pressure on politics to claim back funds from various areas including agriculture. But wishing to remain positive with the environment and the climate firmly in the spotlight, opportunities will arise for farmers as ‘custodians of the countryside’. Farmers need to be efficient, look at costs and make a better job of marketing their products.” Paul can see the stratified sheep system in the UK coming under increased pressure as lowland farmers look at replacement costs especially when breeds such as Lley can enable these flocks to breed their own replacements and keep control not only on the costs but other issues such as health. “The Lley

breed is ideally placed to benefit from this situation with its productive and maternal attributes”.