



TENANTS INNOVATE TO ACCUMULATE

You'd think that tenant farming a parkland estate with inherent grazing restrictions would make many shy away from sheep production, but not Gavin and Abby Atterton. Far from it, by putting innovation at the heart of their business they have boosted flock productivity and built a profitable lowland sheep enterprise.

The Attertons of Vicarage Barn Farm, Tisbury in Wiltshire manage 400 acres of permanent pasture for Fonthill Estates – a 10,000 acre holding to the west of Salisbury. As Gavin is quick to point out, it's not the most productive grassland for lowland sheep, but grass availability has not stopped them lambing three times a year to produce a year round supply of high quality finished lambs.

"We may be restricted on what we can grow – the estate clearly has to look good and for that reason we're never likely to sow any chicory or brassicas here – but that doesn't mean we can't be productive. Most of our grazing is old permanent pasture, but we do have around 11 acres of productive red clover that allows us to take a silage cut and finish around 300-400 lambs with some supplementary feeding. The rest of the lambs are finished in the shed," Gavin says.

There are 1000 ewes at Vicarage Barn Farm with plans to increase to 1300. Despite the challenging grass situation, lambing percentage averages 165% thanks to supplementary pre-tupping feeding. Last year, only 11 older ewes were barren from the 1000 put to the ram. Around half the flock are Berrichon Du Cher cross Beulahs with the rest predominantly Mules. The Attertons lamb in March and May, but have also recently introduced a small flock of Dorset/Dorset crosses to start a third lambing in October.

In another example of unusual innovation, the Attertons shear all their March lambing ewes in January and their May lambing flock in early April; a practice which reaps a number of significant dividends, according to Abby.

"The main benefits are that it promotes higher lamb birth weights and easier teat sucking because there is no wool in the way, but we've found winter shearing works well on a number of levels. We lamb the March flock indoors in old cow kennels and if the ewes had a full fleece they would definitely get heat stressed in this accommodation. Minus fleeces we can also stock the shed more densely, yet at the same time see exactly what is going on. And a ewe with no fleece on after birth is also far less likely to get struck outside soon after lambing," she points out.

Other positives include fewer mastitis cases and less mis-mothering in bad weather conditions when the sheep do go outside, simply because both ewe and lambs have the same fleece cover.

Abby acknowledges that the sheared ewes eat more feed in the run up to lambing than on a conventional system, but argues the animals utilise the feed more effectively – diverting it into healthy foetal growth, as well as putting on a condition score themselves in many cases. “Both the ewes and lambs really benefit from winter shearing – so do we too; it’s far easier to get the fleece off and you can always get the shearers when you want them!” Abby says.

Maximising the nutritional value of what grass is available to them has been something of a crusade for Gavin and Abby. “We do have to use a fair amount of supplementary feed on our system and have spent some time refining the approach to maximise productivity and profitability. It’s a challenge, but the system is well honed now for the labour levels we can afford, which are essentially Abby part time and me,” Gavin says.

At housing, Rumevite High Energy & Protein blocks are introduced for ewes carrying twins. Those with triplets also get some cake. Six weeks from lambing ewes with singles gain access to the blocks and four weeks from lambing all ewes move onto Lifeline blocks fed via wall gate feeders to keep intakes at the right level.

“We switched from a predominantly cake-based supplementary feed system in 2007 because it was too labour intensive. Using the blocks saves me two hours a day in feeding time and they are also slightly cheaper. And we prefer the block to the tubs because there is less packaging,” Gavin points out.

“The system is working well. You can always tell the mark of a good supplementary feed by the way your replacements do on it over their first lambing. After all they are still growing as well producing another sheep and this year our ewe replacements produced some cracking lambs after being on Lifeline.”

Lambs are sold to Real Meat in Warminster. “We start selling the lambs at 12-14 weeks old, but our grass is not up to pushing all of them so we finish the majority slowly. The recent uplift in prices has been very welcome and is helping us maintain a very viable enterprise despite our inherent restrictions,” Gavin concludes.

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