

Change of Terminal Sire . . .

CHAROLLAIS CHOICE ON WELSH MULES

Carroll Barber and Dougie Ferguson report on Charollais's role at Bicknor Court Farm.



Donna Bowen is farm manager of the picturesque Bicknor Court Farm near the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire. The 350 acre lowland, predominately grassland farm runs to 500 ft at its highest point and is home to 1600 ewes and 100 sucker cows, including the Bicknor Aberdeen Angus herd.

After the devastation of FMD the farm was restocked in 2002 and now the ewe flock is completely self-contained and only rams are purchased. There are 1000 Welsh Mule ewes and 600 Welsh ewes. The mules are all put to Charollais tups and the Welsh ewes to either Blue Faced Leicester tups to breed home-bred replacement mule or Welsh tups. Prior to restocking the terminal sire on the farm had been the Suffolk.

"We bought a Charollais ram to go on some ewe lambs and were so impressed at how easily they lambed and how quick the lambs were up on their feet and suckling," explains Donna. Gradually the farm changed over to all Charollais tups and they have seen the benefit of decreased workload at lambing time. Tups are purchased locally from a farmer who does not feed much concentrate, which suits their system well.

The mule flock is split into two groups; one lambs in January and the remainder in March. All are lambed indoors; but singles are not put into individual pens unless there is a problem. At 24 hours old they move into groups of 10 – 12 ewes with their lambs and at 48 hours they are turned outside. "We are keen to cull out any ewes that do not perform well. Anything that suffers from a prolapse or is a poor mother is tagged and culled out at weaning." This policy is also applied to ewes that are persistently lame.

The early lambs are creep fed concentrates from day one and the first lambs to go are away at 10 weeks of age. These are either sold through Ross Market or direct to St Merryn Meat at Merthyr Tydfil. "We aim to sell lambs between 40 – 42 kgs live weight. The Charollais lambs do well in the market with their good conformation, tight coats and they certainly weigh very well. They don't tend to go over-fat easily either."

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The March born lambs are farmed in a different way; some come fit off their mothers at grass, mainly singles as they are run on permanent pasture that has only seen sheep for a number of years. The rest of the lambs are weaned mid July and go onto forage rape or silage aftermaths. The farm grows around 30 acres of fodder beet and 20 acres of forage rape plus around 20 / 30 acres of cereals grown for own use.

All lambs are finished on the farm and some concentrates are bought when necessary. Most of the lambs are sold by the end of the year. "Prices can be lower in the autumn, but in 2009 the prices held up well. With the lambs coming fit off the rape and aftermaths we have kept costs low."

The present herd of Aberdeen Angus was started in 2002 when the farm re-stocked after the Foot and Mouth epidemic. It currently consists of 50 breeding females. Like the ewe flock, the herd is a closed herd run along commercial lines, being mainly grass fed.

They calve outside in the spring and autumn, so cows must be easy calving and have a good temperament. Their aim is to breed cattle that are low maintenance and can perform off grass, but also have good [More >>>](#)



conformation, growth rate and temperament. Heifers calve at two years and are only fed grass and silage. AI is used to bring in new bloodlines.

Donna feels that the farm will continue with a similar number of ewes. She is fairly optimistic for the sheep industry, "if you look around the world sheep numbers are declining everywhere. On the other side the demand for food from a growing human population is increasing; so we have an important and hopefully profitable role to play as food producers."

But Donna is very realistic about the cost of lamb, "there is a limit to what shoppers will pay for lamb meat, it is the dearest meat in the butchers shop".

For this reason at Bickton Court they continually strive to find ways to keep a lid on production costs. "The sheep must be able to thrive on grassland and require less management; with a shortage of skilled labour it is imperative they do the job more by themselves and the Charollais cross lambs certainly fit the bill."

