



*Producing top quality females is the best way to make money from our poorer grazing, says Richard Evans.*

# Quality output key to profit

## *Producing high quality breeding sheep on lower quality pasture is a familiar pattern on the uplands, now it's the ethos of one Norfolk producer too.*

Added value has underlined everything Richard Evans has done in his sheep farming career, from butchery to export and now it's the ethos behind his sheep enterprise run on ground around Thetford.

For Mr Evans, who farms in partnership with his wife Sue, producing high value breeding sheep in the form of Lleyns is the best way of maximising the value of the sheep they produce on some of the poorest land in the country.

Based at Bridgham, Thetford, the couple have continually adapted their farming system to work within the environmental limitations of the area and now run 1000 breeding sheep and 150 suckler cows all put to Stabiliser bulls run across more than 2500 acres of organic land.

"Two higher level stewardship agreements cover the majority of the land, with a third agreement in place on another

block too. This means just 50 acres is not in some form of environmental agreement," explains Mr Evans.

"The key to our operation, which operates on some of the poorest ground in Norfolk, is to add value to the sheep and cattle we produce."

For Mr Evans that means producing top quality, high value breeding females which are sold on to other producers. "This is the best means possible of extracting the maximum value we can from the stock we raise on these poorer pastures."

The sheep flock on the unit consists of 400 Lleyn mature ewes, a further 200 Lleyn ewe lambs which are all tupped and 300 other ewes made up of a range of crosses.

"The Lleyns are the basis of the sheep enterprise and we're aiming to produce top quality breeding females for sale to other flocks and for retention ourselves."

Lleyns were introduced 10 years ago and having previously run a flying flock of Mules Mr Evans enjoys the challenge of continuing to improve the flock. "I have always been keen to identify sheep with high genetic merit and wanted to eliminate the issue of bought in disease which so often accompanies flying flocks."

This is why Mr Evans believes in tupping all the ewe lambs and using Signet recording to identify the best breeding sheep in the flock. "Tupping the ewe lambs means we can get genetic improvement a year sooner than if we left them to run dry until they were shearlings. And Signet recording allows us to identify those animals with superior EBVs which also speeds up the genetic progress."

"But operating a recording system in an outdoor lambing flock takes a bit of extra management. After several years of working with the flock we've developed a system which allows us to do it and employing Sue Horner to undertake the office work while we get on with the farming has made it possible too."

"We mark all the ewes with their tag number ahead of lambing and then shepherd

the lambing groups three times a day to mark lambs as they're born. We're able to catch the lambs relatively easily and because we don't have to catch the ewe we minimise disruption as much as possible."

And the ease of management associated with outdoor lambing has been central to the management ethos of the flock, with Mr Evans believing in minimal handling wherever possible. "Handling sheep is hard on the sheep and hard on the man. As sheep farmers we need to question why we're handling sheep and if there's really a need for it."

To make handling the flock easier the Evans' have been working on developing a more docile flock. "We score every ewe at lambing and have seen a marked improvement since we've been more particular about breeding for more docile sheep."

This has been one of a number of conscious breeding decisions since the Evans bought their original Lleyn flock which came as a complete outfit from an Aberdeenshire hill farm. "We wanted to ensure we only kept replacements from the best, so anything that didn't thrive under our

easier care, organic system has been culled and now we have a sound breeding flock which produces sheep capable of living on the poorer grassland we manage."

It's a policy which has stood the flock in good stead with the older portion of the flock regularly scanning in excess of 200%. "The shearlings, which until last year had been maiden would have been scanning at 184%, but this is increasing now they're lambed as lambs."

### **Relationship with the environment**

Lambing of the Lleyn flock is done on ground close to the main farm steading, with ewes lambed on fields which can only be grazed until 15 March to allow lapwing to nest, meaning ewes lamb there for 16 days before they are moved to fresh ground.

And it is this type of relationship with the environmental aspects of the farm which drove the couple to Lleyns in the first place. "Historically we had been running 1000 Mules lambed inside and grazed on fenland farms through the summer, but the costs of that system were getting too high and we were looking for another option."

"As chance would have it we were approached by Natural England which wanted someone to graze some of the poorer ground under environmental agreements. So, we sold the Mules and moved to the Lleyns. It's a move we've never regretted and the Lleyns are every bit as productive as the Mules, but with much lower inputs."

All ram lambs are left entire with the aim being to have every ram lamb slaughtered by late August to early September. "We're targeting a 45kg ram lamb by the first week of September and are now achieving it, with every ram lamb, apart from the elite lambs we want to breed with, sold by then."

Not that many tups have yet been retained from the flock as the Evans' have sought to buy in better genetics from Herefordshire-based breeder Marcus Bullock. "We've been buying tups in the top 1% of performance wherever possible and this has undoubtedly helped lift our own performance and while these have been more expensive than the average tup we've used them across about 100 ewes every year, making most use of the advanced genetics they have."

Pre-lambing feeding is based on an organic concentrate, with triplets receiving up to 0.5kg, twins 0.25kg and singles just a taste, explains Mr Evans. "If we could lamb everything on better grass we'd be able to do without feeding at all, but at the moment we don't have the improved grassland to do it."

However, there is a part of the 1000 ewe flock which goes without feeding and that is the 300 crossbred ewes which graze a block of heathland on the northern side of the A11. "We inherited a mixed flock of ewes on this ground which were based on Soays. Initially we weren't sure what to do with them as they'd become a nearly feral flock over the years."

"But we put them to an Easy Care tup in the first year and have found it to be an exceptional cross which does well on that ground. They have an ability to thrive on this poor ground and leave a saleable commodity in the shape of a 30kg + store lamb."

It may not be everyone's choice of breeding system, but Mr Evans says he's had to adapt the sheep to suit the ground and the environmental constraints he has to work within on the heathland. "For us it's all about getting a high value product from a low input system so we can extract some profit from our sheep enterprise." ◀



*Tupping ewe lambs helps speed up genetic gain in the Lleyn flock.*