

Texel Primestock

A Texel Sheep Society publication



Issue 1 – Spring 2011

Texels assisting producers to a
greener future

Producers choose Texel for
**consistency &
reliability**



Improvement
in Growth rates
payoff

Best practice
in grassland
management
brings out the
best in breeds
genetic potential

Muscling
accompanies
growth in Texel

BRITISH
TEXEL
SHEEP SOCIETY

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Society Club Sales 2011 – England, Scotland & Wales

1 August
BUILTH WELLS – NSA
 Clee, Tompkinson &
 Francis
 Tel: 01874 622 488

13 August
CHELFORD
 Frank Marshall & Co
 Tel: 01625 861 122

17 August
EXETER
 NSA Stags of Tiverton
 Tel: 01884 255 533

20 August
GAERWEN
 Morgan & Evans
 Tel: 01248 723 303

1 September
SEDGEMOOR
 Greenslade, Taylor
 & Hunt
 Tel: 01278 410 250

1 – 2 September
CARLISLE
 Harrison &
 Hetherington
 Tel: 01228 406 230

2 September
LLANDOVERY
 Clee, Tompkinson &
 Francis
 Tel: 01874 622 488

3 September
SHREWSBURY
 Halls
 Tel: 01743 462 620

8 September
WILTON
 Southern Counties
 Auctioneers
 Tel: 01722 321 215

9 September
KELSO RAM SALE
 For Auctioneer details
 Tel: 02476 696 629

9 September
**MARKET
 HARBOROUGH**
 Market Harborough
 Auctions
 Tel: 01858 464 850

9 September
**DUTCH TEXEL SALE
 RUTHIN**
 Ruthin Farmers
 Tel: 01824 702 025

11 – 12 September
RUTHIN
 Ruthin Farmers
 Tel: 01824 702 025

15 September
LANARK
 Lawrie & Symington
 Tel: 01555 662 281

15 – 16 September
SKIPTON
 Craven Cattle Mart
 Tel: 01756 792 375

19 September
BUILTH WELLS NSA
 Wales & Border Clee,
 Tompkinson & Francis
 Tel: 01874 622 488

20 September
THAINSTONE
 Aberdeen & Northern
 Marts
 Tel: 01467 623 700

21 September
BAKEWELL
 Bagshaws
 Tel: 01629 812 777

22 September
CLITHEROE
 Lawrie & Symington Tel:
 01555 662 281

24 September
CARLISLE Harrison &
 Hetherington
 Tel: 01228 406 230

29 September
WELSHPOOL
 Welshpool Livestock
 Sales
 Tel: 01938 553 438

17 October
WELSHPOOL
 Supplementary
 Welshpool
 Livestock Sales
 Tel: 01938 553 438

28 – 29 November
THAINSTONE
 Aberdeen &
 Northern Marts
 Tel: 01467 623 700

2 December
WELSHPOOL
 In-Lamb Welshpool
 Livestock Sales
 Tel: 01467 553 438

3 December
SKIPTON
 Craven Cattle Mart
 Tel: 01756 792 375

3 December
WORCESTER
 In-Lamb McCartneys
 Tel: 01905 769 770

9 December
CARLISLE
 Harrison &
 Hetherington
 Tel: 01228 406 230

16 December
LLANDOVERY
 Clee, Tompkinson &
 Francis
 Tel: 01874 622 488

Society Club Sales – Northern Ireland

29 August
RATHFRILAND
 Rathfriland Farmers
 Co-Op
 Tel: 028 4063 8493

10 September
ENNISKILLEN
 Export Eligible Ulster
 Farmers Mart
 Tel: 028 6632 2218

15 September
ARMOY
 D McAllister
 Tel: 028 2177 1227

16 September
SWATRAGH
 Sperrin & Bann
 Valley Mart
 Tel: 028 7940 1335

19 September
HILLTOWN
 Hilltown Mart
 Tel: 028 4063 0287

21 September
CO ANTRIM JA
 McClelland
 Tel: 028 2563 3470

22 September
LISAHALLY Richard Beattie
 Tel: 028 8164 7105

29 September
CLOUGHER
 D McAllister
 Tel: 028 2177 1227

6 October
GORTIN
 Richard Beattie
 Tel: 028 8164 7105

17 October
BALLYMENA HARVEST
 JA McClelland
 Tel: 028 2563 3470

6 December
HILLTOWN In-Lamb
 Hilltown Mart
 Tel: 028 4063 0287



Editorial

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this new publication by the Texel Sheep Society, titled "Texel Primestock". The aim of which is to build on the continued success and strength of the breed and its positive contribution to the sheep industry. It will also assist further in the promotion of best practice and knowledge transfer to the commercial sector.

The sheep industry is currently in a sustained period of prosperity and many producers are taking the advantage of the additional premiums being achieved by using Texel. All producers will be looking at reducing waste and improving production efficiency and Texel is a major solution in that aim, helping to raise the bar.

Many challenges are ahead for the industry, with many producers awaiting the outcome of the CAP reform discussions currently taking place at the EU level. It's expected that the emphasis will be placed on "green legislation" although to what extent it will infringe on pillar 1 is the most concerning issue, perhaps shifting the scales further towards environmental support which may conflict with many production systems if made mandatory.

However the reform of the sheep industry continues with market forces playing their part, with weak supply helping to sustain record prices for those that have chosen to stay in production. Producers will be mindful of the importance of benchmarking and increasing margins at every level if they are to sustain their business in the long term. Those that have chosen Texel have done so for that reason alone, recognising just one of the major improvements the breed has achieved with regard to growth rates.

With the breed versatility and consistency helping to further improve the end product and maximise the production of lean meat yield per hectare. It is the commercial producers demands that are helping to shape the breed for the future, sourcing big, strong lengthy Shearlings, that offer plenty of scope to pass on conformation, leanness and growth to their cross bred lambs.

I hope you enjoy this commercial prime stock focus and we welcome feedback and new producer features for future editions, I look forward to hearing from you.

John Yates
 Chief Executive
 British Texel Sheep Society

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While every effort is made to ensure accuracy of information contained within the Texel Sheep Society publication 2011 no responsibility can be accepted for any errors or omissions or any reliance on use of the information to readers. All prices and information is correct at time of going to press.



“We are looking for ewes which milk well off grass. The first lambs will be finished by July at 41kg having had no concentrates at all and we sell them through Acklington market where they seem to do very well.”

John and Helen Renner

Bellshill Farm, Belford, Northumberland

When John and Helen Renner took on the tenancy of Bellshill Farm at Belford, Northumberland in 1997 the land was almost entirely arable, but John was keen to introduce livestock to the business. The first sheep arrived in 2000 and now he is proud to say that the sheep enterprise now returns the highest gross margin on the farm, something he puts down entirely to the Texel influence.

John’s family have farmed in the area for nearly 500 years and after taking a HND in Agriculture at Harper Adams, where he met Helen, he returned to work in the family business. In 1997 John was offered the tenancy of Bellshill Farm, which sits just inland from the Northumberland coast. It was an opportunity he couldn’t refuse, but was also a major challenge. He says: “We had no money, no stock and no tackle, so we really were starting from scratch.

“The 338 acre farm was six arable fields, about 30 acres of grass, buildings and an old farmhouse. I had always been interested in sheep and did my dissertation on factors effecting ewe prolificacy, so I was keen to turn it back into a more traditional mixed farm.” Initially, arable work was undertaken with help from family and neighbours and gradually some second hand machinery was bought. Cattle were taken in over winter on a bed and breakfast basis.

The first sheep arrived in 2000 in the form of 10 Scottish Blackface ewes which were bought out of Wooller auction, as culls, for £3.50 a head and an aged Texel ram was also bought, for £35. They were joined by 10 Mule pet lambs. John says: “This was the cheapest way to start and the only way we could do it at the time. We did consider using a Blue Faced Leicester on the Blackies, but then we would be left with the males at little value.”

In 2006 six Texel cast ewes were bought from a nearby breeder, John Campbell and this was the start of the Renner’s pure bred Texel flock. The Scotch Blackfaces are put to the Texel ram and the female offspring are then kept and put back to a Texel, which then produces an excellent commercial lamb.





John explains: "We have found that the Texel Mule works extremely well. The Blackies are very good mothers and pass that on to the offspring and we are producing a hardy lamb. We have tried other breeds of rams, but they can't cope as well with the conditions here as the Texels. We are 170 metres above sea level and can get some extreme weather, so we need tups that can cope with that without melting."

Numbers have grown steadily and ewe numbers stand at 300 which include a small flock of pure bred Texels.

An additional 80 Scottish Blackface ewes were bought last year to boost numbers. "They are four crop ewes which we bought privately as I am careful about bringing sheep in and like to know where they have come from. But I aim to build ewe numbers up to about 400. "We keep about 30 pure bred Texel ewes and keep the best gimmers out of these as replacements, but cull hard to keep improving the quality of the ewes. We manually record, taking particular notice of weight gain. We are also trying to buy better tups aiming for a long type of sheep with a better carcass."

As sheep numbers have risen the grassland has been increased to 150 acres, which

includes 60 acres of new leys. John has used different grasses which have proved a great success, including a Westerwolds mix which is drilled in April and can be grazed within six weeks or cut for silage, producing a protein level of up to 13.5 per cent.

Ewes are scanned and housed from 10th January, when they are split for singles, twins and multiples and fed accordingly. Vet students are usually drafted in to help with lambing and the Renner children, Alice, Sarah and Charlie, also do their share. Ewes and lambs are turned out within four or five days of lambing and all ewes are treated with Dectomax at turnout. Ewes are on a vaccination programme and all lambs are vaccinated at six to eight weeks of age.

John says: "We are looking for ewes which milk well off grass. The first lambs will be finished by July at 41 kg having had no concentrates at all and we sell them through Acklington market where they seem to do very well."

A few years ago the Renners were given the opportunity to buy the farm, which they did, and sold the original farmhouse, enabling them to build a new house on the hillside next to the farm with spectacular views looking out to the Farne Islands. In addition

to the sheep the Renner's have also started a suckler cow herd based on traditional breeds including Highlands, Welsh Blacks and Galloways, mainly for their mothering abilities and hardiness and plan to build numbers up to about 30 cows. They have also started a pig enterprise with three Large Black sows and have just started marketing their own pork direct to customers.

The Renners have always farmed very much with the environment in mind and are now a LEAF demonstration farm and in the Higher Level Scheme. This involves a number of school parties and other groups visiting the farm. Both John and Helen are very keen on sharing their knowledge of farming and the countryside and see the education of the public as an important role for farmers. There are also plans underway to build an educational facility on farm.

So in just a few short years John and Helen and their family have achieved a tremendous amount, going from tenant farmers to owning their own farm and creating a sustainable mixed farming enterprise. John says: "It has been tremendously hard work for all of us and we have still a long way to go, but I think we are getting somewhere now."

Red Clover & Fertility

Dr Liz Genever,
Sheep Scientist, EBLEX



“Important to remember that red clover needs to make up more than 20% of the dry matter of a ewes diet to have an input on fertility”



Red clover is a short-lived perennial legume that typically lasts for two to four years. In contrast to white clover, it has an upright growth habit and a strong deep taproot. An increasing amount of red clover is being grown, generally for high protein silage production with some aftermath grazing for finishing lambs or cattle. Its benefits include nitrogen fixation (200-300 kg N per ha per year), yields (10-15t of dry matter per ha per year) and feed value (silage of 10-11 MJ of ME and 14-19% crude protein). It is also a useful break crop within an arable rotation.

However, red clover has a PR problem, as most sheep producers think it causes infertility and therefore avoid it like the plague. This is partially true - it can affect ewe fertility at certain times of the year - but work from Australia shows that it has no impact on ram fertility. It is also important to remember that the red clover needs to make up more than 20% of the dry matter of a ewe's diet to have an impact.

The reason this occurs is that red clover (and diseased white clover) contains phyto-oestrogens, which interfere with the normal hormone balance in the ewe. If ewes are fed red clover (fresh or ensiled) around tugging, the phyto-oestrogens seem to affect egg transportation from the ovaries, which appears to be why lambing percentage can be reduced by 35-50%. Once the ewes have been removed from the red clover, normal function will resume within a month. The consumption of fresh or ensiled red clover around lambing appears to have no impact on lamb losses. If ewes are exposed to red clover for more than four months of the year, it can start to

have other effects. Changes can happen to the cervix and its mucus, which can affect the amount of sperm allowed to pass to the eggs. The ovaries appear to be unaffected, but conception rates will be reduced, and these changes may become permanent.

However, in most UK systems, long term grazing of red clover is unlikely. Ewes may be weaned onto it in the spring and graze it with their lambs for a couple of months, or fed it as silage during late pregnancy. Red clover is too rich to put ewes on it during their dry period, they shouldn't be put on it during the late autumn due to the tugging risk and it doesn't grow in the winter.

It is important to consider any ewe lambs that are being kept as replacements, and limit their exposure to red clover to less than four months. However, the ability of a ewe to be fertile on oestrogenic pastures is extremely heritable (estimated h^2 of 0.73), so it can be bred into a flock.

In summary, red clover can work very well within a sheep system, as it produces very good silage for late pregnancy feeding with reduced needs for supplementation, and provides aftermath grazing for finishing lambs. But as with all good things, it isn't without its downsides – just manage your pre-tugging ewes and possible ewe replacements carefully.

Further information:
EBLEX manual - Managing clover for Better Returns (brp@eblex.org.uk or 0870 251 8829 for a copy)

Genetic Gains in Texel Growth Pay Off

When the Texel was introduced to the UK it was admired by many for its carcass conformation, but some of its critics had concerns about its growth rate.

“This article shows just how far the breed has come in improving this economically important trait.”

The across flock analyses undertaken in 1992 established the basis for the recording scheme that operates today. There have been several developments since 1992 including the introduction of Computed Tomography (CT scanning), new index weightings to penalise ultra-lean sheep and the launch of new EBVs for lambing ease, worm resistance and gigot shape. The ability to share pedigree and genetic data via BASCO has been a major advance for Texel breeders and Texel ram buyers.

“Over this time the breed has grown beyond recognition. During any expansion there is always the danger that standards fall as bloodlines are multiplied and in genetic terms the breed stands still. This is clearly not the case with the Texel breed.”

Data taken from the most recent Texel evaluations shows that although there are vastly more lambs in the 2010 analysis compared to 1992, the average breeding value for growth to 21 weeks of age is over 5kg higher. This is a massive shift in the genetic potential of a population – in a relatively short period of time. Sheep that would have comfortably sat in the Top 10% of the breed in 1992 are now well below average.

Muscling accompanies growth

“While lamb growth rate is important – it must be accompanied by high levels of muscling. In the Texel breed selection for growth rate has improved muscling across the loin, indicating an increase in total carcass muscling.”

As a general rule rams with high Scan Weight EBVs tend to have high Muscle Depth EBVs, selecting for growth has enhanced muscling – but there is also a massive variation between rams.

Amongst these widely used rams there is an 8kg difference in the growth potential of Top 10% and Bottom 10% sires – this equates to a massive 4kg difference in the weight of their progeny to 21 weeks of age.

Interestingly whilst there are some stock rams being used with high growth rates and relatively average muscling across the loin, the converse doesn't appear to be true. There are very few sires with poor genes for growth, but exceptional genes for muscling across the loin – emphasising again the need for sheep with acceptable growth rates.

“It is predicted that in the last 20 years the breeding potential for weight of muscle in the carcass has risen by over 1.5kg, with a small associated rise in carcass fat. At an industry level this is worth millions of pounds.”



In Summary

- Changes in the growth potential of Texel sheep have been immense
- Performance recording has had an important role in this improvement and will have an even more important role in the future
- Selecting for growth rate has not been to the detriment of muscling
- The demand for performance data is increasing as breeders search for sheep with the right balance of genetics to take their flock forward

Performance records don't replace the stockman's art – but they are the most accurate assessment of the economically important traits for which the Texel breed is now renowned.



Whinfell Park, large scale lamb production A W Jenkinson



Nick Scholefield
Estate Manager

Located in the lush landscape of the Upper Eden Valley near Penrith, Cumbria, Messrs Jenkinson farms build benchmark standards in lamb production. Run by Estate Manager Nick Scholefield and Farm Manager Iain Scott. Whinfell Park sold over 5,000 head of Texel lambs in 2010. Whinfell Park sell through local auctioneers at Carlisle and Penrith.

Nick explains that Texel add a lot of value to the business, lambs are sold off grass with only a limited supply of concentrate feeding during the last two weeks of finishing.

Lambs are sold from mid June to end of January consistently achieving prices within the top 10% of all lambs marketed on the day.

Nick added "Breeding and finishing commercial lambs is what we do best, and we are confident for the future when using Texel".



Nick says “Prolificacy and growth rate are extremely important to us at Whinfell. The ewe flock is based on a three quarter Texel (retaining some North of England Mule mothering) and consistently produce 185 lambing %. The Texel tup produces an excellent prime lamb, something we have come to rely on!”

Size of farm	1650 acres
No. of Ewes	3000
Type of Ewes	Three quarter Texel x Mule
No of Texel Stock Sires	60
No. of lambs finished per year	5000+
Average finishing weight per lamb	42

Commercial Producers influence breed type

William & Carole Ingram - North of Scotland



In the 12 years since the Ingram family established their Logie Durno Texel flock, at Pitcaple, Inverurie, their preferred type of sheep has gradually changed – with the focus now primarily on breeding big, lengthy shearlings for the commercial market. “Our aim is to breed what the commercial man wants – big, long tups which are built to last, with good skins. The idea is to produce lambs which are easily lambed and then go on and grow – it’s weight that pays with fat lambs.” The Ingrams aim for bigger framed, long and milky ewes and Signet recording plays a big part in their breeding programme. “The sheep have to look the part, but performance is also important, especially growth rate. Texels already have the quality, but in order to compete with the Suffolks and Charollais, they have to keep up growth rates,” said Willie. The shearlings are lambed in April, and run with their mothers all summer on grass, before being fed from the following January to April. “With grain prices so high, I think the commercial route will become more popular in the future, with more sheep reared on a grass system. It’s certainly working well for us and we’re enjoying producing sheep for both markets, using performance figures as a management tool to improve the quality of the flock.

“As sheep farmers strive to become more efficient and make lamb more profitable, tools such as EID, despite being a big cost initially, could be really beneficial if used properly, allowing us to produce a more consistent, less wasteful product.”

Nesbitt Family - County Durham



Performance recording comes high on the agenda for the Nesbitt family who run the Alwent and Deneside flocks at Winston near Darlington.

Doug Nesbitt says “The commercial customers are now realising the undoubted benefits gained by buying rams with good figures and are prepared to pay for them. Recording flocks are now producing good looking sheep with good figures behind them”. Doug farms the 200 acres at Alwent Hall with sons David and Steven. “Figures are important, but you must not forget the sheep, we are looking to breed good strong sheep, with some length. The most important traits are carcase and growth”. Doug and David are convinced that selling stock with figures has boosted sales and is proving financially worthwhile.

Martin Greenfield - Midlands



The switch to using Texel across his commercial sheep flock is paying off. He runs almost 1000 Mule/Texel cross ewes which are all put to pedigree Texel rams. Martin says: “I want to be able to sell lambs every week of the year and I’m aiming for the top end of the market. As far as possible I like to finish everything off forage and keep management as simple as possible, but need to be able to produce a top quality carcase, with some size, particularly in the loin and legs, so conformation is very important. I aim for carcasses to grade around U3L and the three quarter Texel cross lambs are delivering what I want, whatever their weight. The aim is to sell 1.75 lambs per ewe, with the intention of keeping losses to an absolute minimum, maximising the potential of forage and ensuring lambs are finished at the right specification for their chosen market.

John & Helen Renner - Northumberland



The first sheep arrived in 2000 and now he is proud to say that the sheep enterprise now returns the highest gross margin on the farm, something he puts down entirely to the Texel influence.

The Scotch Blackfaces are put to the Texel ram and the female offspring are then kept and put back to a Texel, which then produces an excellent commercial lamb. “We have found that the Texel Mule works extremely well. We are 170 metres above sea level and can get some extreme weather, so we need tups that can cope with that without melting.” John says: “We are looking for ewes which milk well off grass. The first lambs will be finished by July at 41 kg having had no concentrates at all and we sell them through Acklington market where they seem to do very well.”

Producers requirements satisfied at Society Sales

The Society Clubs run regional sales, the Society is responsible for its four National sales. Held in high recognition, the showcase of production from a cross section of the membership are held in August. Ballymena – Northern Ireland, Lanark – Scotland – Welshpool – Wales and Worcester – England. Although a significant amount of stock is also sold privately direct from farm or through collective sales.

Texels are the popular choice of commercial producers indicated by the success and popularity of the breed at two of the largest commercial ram sales held in Europe in mid September. The Border Union Agricultural Society Ram Sale, at Kelso Scottish Borders and National Sheep Association (NSA) Ram Sale at Builth Wells Mid Wales (see table).

Sales held under the Society Auspices, including the Society Club and National sales, collectively grossed in excess of £4.02M (not including Kelso) during 2010 adding further evidence to the increasing popularity and influence to the UK Sheep Industry. A 5% increase in sales revenue on 2009 performance.



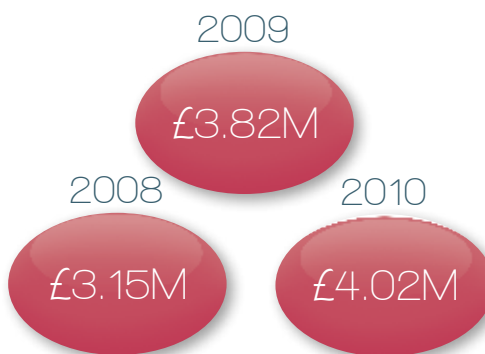
Texel Breed sales Performance at the largest Commercial rams sales held in Europe.

	Shearling Ram & Older Sale Entries	Clearance Rate (%)	Sale Average (£)	Sale Gross Income (All Classes) (£)	
NSA Main sale (Builth Wells)	849	93%	£626	£633,000	"An increase of £58,000 10% more than 09"
Border Union - (Kelso)	1416	84%	£686	£814,000	"An increase of £94,000 13% more than 09"

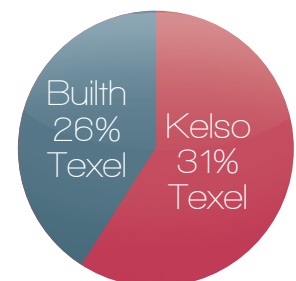
Texel Breed sales performance at the Societies four UK Premier National sale events.

	Gimmers		Ram Lambs		Shearling Rams	
	Clearance Rate (%)	Sale Avg (£)	Clearance Rate (%)	Sale Avg (£)	Clearance Rate (%)	Sale Avg (£)
Northern Ireland	82%	£536	70%	£792	86%	£585
Scottish	78%	£834	78%	£2,445	69%	£782
English	78%	£418	68%	£643	79%	£694
Welsh	81%	£578	79%	£800	69%	£577

The successful Society National Sales totalled 1577 entries of supreme quality breeder's stock from across the 2000 strong membership in the UK. Gimmers averaged 80% clearance rate, £575 average, Ram Lambs 75% clearance rate, £1541 sale average and Shearling Rams 79% clearance rate with £615 sale average.



Sales held under the Society Auspices, including the Society Club and National Sales, collectively grossed in excess of £4.02M (not including Kelso) during 2010



NSA & KELSO Sales 2010		NSA	Kelso
Total Texel Rams entered	1272	1416	
Total Rams entered	4617	4801	



Not satisfied with selling the whole carcase Martin also has sheepskins specially cured and dyed and these are also sold at farmer's markets.

Greenfield Lamb

The switch to using Texel across his commercial sheep flock is certainly paying off for Martin Greenfield who farms at Twycross, near Atherstone. He runs almost 1000 Mule/Texel cross ewes which are all put to pedigree Texel rams.

The sheep enterprise is the core of the family business, although when Martin took over the tenancy of the farm from his father, Peter, in 1996, it was run as a mixed unit with just 200 Suffolk cross and Scotch half bred ewes. But he saw sheep as a way of expanding the business given that arable land was difficult to acquire in the area, whereas it was possible to rent grass and land to grow forage crops for sheep.

Martin says: "I want to be able to sell lambs every week of the year and I'm aiming for the top end of the market. As far as possible I like to finish everything off forage and keep management as simple as possible, but need to be able to produce a top quality carcass, with some size, particularly in the loin and legs, so conformation is very important. "Butchers want lambs at 22-24kg deadweight, but for direct sales I like to have a bit of variety for different customers, so am looking for some carcasses up to 30kg. I aim for carcasses to grade around U3L and the three quarter Texel cross lambs are delivering what I want, whatever their weight.

"I don't breed any replacements, so buy in everything as theaves, either off farm or through local markets and this year am trying some Cheviot Mule/Texel crosses, to see how they do. I buy pedigree Texel tups from the Lawrence family at Market Bosworth and they are doing a good job for me. We run about 20 rams, so buy four or five every year and they wear very well. However, we are in the process of establishing a small pedigree flock ourselves and it would be nice to think that eventually we will be able to breed our own rams."

The ewes lamb in two batches – the first 250 in January and they are kept inside, usually until March, and the lambs creep fed. The bulk of the flock lambs inside in April and is out again as soon as possible. The earlier lambs are sold from May onwards and the second batch are managed so that they provide a steady stream of finished lambs throughout the year, with the later ones finished on stubble turnips over winter and early spring.



The aim is to sell 1.75 lambs per ewe, with the intention of keeping losses to an absolute minimum. This means attention to detail at every stage from ensuring ewes are in the right condition at lambing, careful monitoring at lambing, a proactive approach to flock health, maximising the potential of forage and ensuring lambs are finished at the right specification for their chosen market.

In 2008 Martin introduced three year grazing leys containing perennial chicory and clover, which have proved to be very successful. The leys were sown in May with a pneumatic seed drill into a cultivated seed bed, were top dressed with nitrogen in June and were ready for grazing in July. One contained red clover, white clover, and Puna II perennial chicory and the second was a mixture of Aber HGS high sugar perennial ryegrasses, white clover and Puna II.

Martin says: "I've been extremely pleased with the leys and they have brought financial benefits as we have been able to turn lambs out earlier in the spring, thus using far less supplementary feed and the lambs have grown quicker and finished at a fat class less on them. We've also found that lambs grazed on chicory have a very good flavour.

"Because it has a long tap root the chicory continues to grow well even in dry weather. Initially, one of the problems was keeping on top of it, but we have now established a rotational block grazing system, with each block providing about two to three weeks grazing at a time."

Martin sells about 15 lambs a week to a local butcher and also sells through Newark market, but is increasingly looking to sell more direct to the consumer, either off the farm or through farmer's markets. He explains: "I have always been happy with the price I get from the butcher and we have a good relationship, but need to maximise profits as much as possible and open up new markets.

"Initially, we had the lambs slaughtered and butchered and packed for us, but we decided if we were to expand this side of the business we needed to have more control. We take the lambs ourselves to a local abattoir on the morning they are to be slaughtered, so there is less stress than if they went the night before. We collect the carcasses and can then hang them for as long as required. A fridge and cutting room have been installed on farm and two young butchers are employed on a part-time basis to prepare the meat. A wide range is on offer including burgers, cushions, racks and Barnsley chops, as well as the more usual cuts.

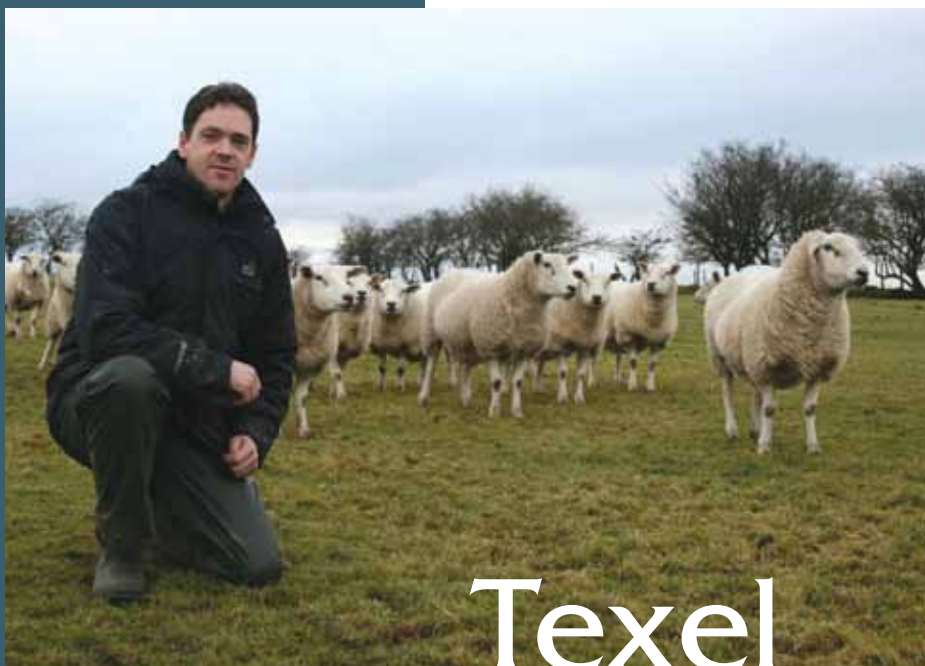
Martin, his wife Mary, and often children, Ben and Rebecca, then stand at Ashby and Market Bosworth farmer's markets once a month and a number of lambs are also sold direct from the farm. Martin says: "I enjoy the opportunity to talk to customers and we have built up a following of regulars. I am not sure we would sell more if the markets were more frequent, as customers tend to come and buy a month's supply in one go. We talk to customers and make suggestions as to how

they can use some of the cheaper cuts. There is never a problem selling the whole carcase. In fact, often we sell out of the cheaper cuts, such as shoulder, breast and neck first and the thing about the Texel carcase is that it is very meaty and, for example, we get big wide cutlets."

Martin says he thinks TV chefs and cookery programmes have had an impact on sales as consumers are keen to try dishes at home and if a particular cut has been used in a TV recipe it is always in demand just afterwards. He says: "I am optimistic for the future because the demand for Texel lamb is rising, so I hope we are going to see continuing good prices. Consumers are beginning to appreciate its versatility. We are not asked as often for spring lamb and that is because they are realising that a more mature meat has more flavour. So much so that we have been using some of our younger cull ewes for mutton and I think this is an area where there is a lot of growth and is one we intend to explore."

Not satisfied with selling the whole carcase Martin also has sheepskins specially cured and dyed and these are also sold at farmer's markets.

Martin constantly looks for ways of moving the business forward and there are plans to take on more land and possibly add cattle to the enterprise. A new website is in the offing and a farm shop has not been ruled out. But in the meantime keeping costs as low as possible and obtaining as high a price as possible for every lamb continues as the aim.



Texel Crosses

By Jeremy Hunt

“We get less mastitis and udder problems with Texel-crosses than with Mules,”

The key to successfully managing Texel-cross ewes in late pregnancy - and meeting their nutritional needs without risking lambing problems - is about running a flock of big, “roomy” ewes with the body capacity to cope with a heavy lamb crop and to feed them accordingly.

That’s the breeding policy underpinning Lancashire farmer Richard Morphet’s flock of 550 Texel-cross ewes at Far Highfield, Aughton, near Lancaster - a flock that has just achieved a January scanning result of 202%.

This wet, upland farm - which also carries 220 North of England Mules - runs Texel x Mules, Texel x Suffolk and Texel x Whitefaced Woodland. A batch of shearlings of the latter two crosses were bought last autumn to be evaluated. They were scanned separately and achieved 208% and 211%.

“These scanning results show what Texel-crosses are capable of - and they’re lasting for five or six crops if you farm these bigger-types properly,” says Richard.

An upgrading of the flock last year led to the purchase of 270 shearlings costing £140 from one farm - that was about £10-£20 more than the cost of Mule shearlings.

“Texel-crosses are marginally more expensive than Mules but it’s a misconception that they don’t produce enough lambs and that Mules are better value because of a higher lambing percentage. In my experience Texel-crosses can match the Mule on numbers of lambs produced- and threequarter-bred prime lambs are earning a premium,” says Richard.

His March-lambing flock houses triplet-carrying ewes for around eight weeks prior to lambing. Ewes scanned for singles and twins are housed for a shorter period closer to lambing time, but despite the concerns of sceptics over meeting the dietary needs of in-lamb Texel ewes, Richard Morphet says providing the Texel-cross ewe is of the right “type” she isn’t difficult to manage.

“I’ve always aimed for bigger, rangier ewes with plenty of body capacity. In my experience it’s this type of ewe that’s less likely to put on too much condition compared with the smaller, thicker types of Texel-crosses.

“With a high lambing percentage I need a ewe that I can feed properly without the risk of her putting on excess condition prior to lambing.”

Triplet-carrying ewes - usually housed in late January - are fed 0.25kg of 18% concentrate per day with access to molasses and ad-lib haylage. The feed rate is gradually increased up to a 0.5kg and to a maximum of 0.75kg by lambing. Other ewes are fed a flat rate - 0.25kg for ewes carrying singles and 0.5kg for those carrying twins.

“I’ve had Texel-crosses for 14 years and while conformation is important, provided you’ve got big ewes you can safely feed them without the risk of them blowing-up. Getting up to six-crops out of these ewes proves they wear well - and they certainly match a Mule on milk yield.

“We get less mastitis and udder problems with Texel-crosses than with Mules,” says Richard who adds further hybrid vigour to his prime-lamb mix by using Beltex x Texel tups from Cheshire ram breeder Paul Slater.

Lambs receive no creep feed. Most are sold from July to October through Penrith Auction Mart at 40-42kg liveweight and last year’s prices (for lambs out of Texel crosses and Mules) averaged £72.50. Threequarter-bred Texel lambs reached a top price of 223p a kilo.

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