

John Maxwell, who farms near Ely, Cambridgeshire, has won the EBLEX Most Progressive Flock Award for the Charollais breed, based on Signet records for the Fordham Flock for 2010.

Organised through the Sheep Better Returns Programme, this award is presented to the performance recorded flock that has shown the most impressive improvement in genetic merit over a 12-month period, within the breed.

The 70-ewe flock is one of two pedigree flocks at Moor Farm; the other is owned by Mr Maxwell's daughter Gemma. The family has rented the 100ha farm for twenty years which is currently half down to grassland and half to combinable crops. An original flock of 300



Eblex Award for New Recorded Flock

Eblex Award goes to John Maxwell's Flock in Cambridgeshire.

commercial ewes has been phased out and replaced as pedigree numbers have built up.

Based on sandy soils, the grass tends to burn up so chicory has been introduced into the swards which,

because it is deep rooted, keeps going through the summer and provides a good pre-flushing feed.

Stock rams follow a teaser and stay with the ewes for three weeks. Usually 95% hold to first service.

Mr Maxwell's flock lambs in January – two months before his daughter's.

Lambs are offered creep and weaned at four months of age when the sexes are separated. Mr Maxwell prefers to sell them as shearlings as he believes they benefit from a store period.

Around 100 rams are sold to commercial producers each year and, as chairman for the NSA Eastern Region Ram Sale at Melton Mowbray, Mr Maxwell strongly supports marketing progeny through markets and sales.

"I do what I can to support the auction system," he says. "Producers from other parts of the country may come and look at the rams on my farm, but then I take the ones they

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like the look of to their local market and they buy them through the ring. My regulars around Melton Mowbray buy at the Melton sale.

"I firmly believe it is in all our long term interests to support our local auction marts. But it is also very important for commercial producers to get to know who they are buying from, and to build a relationship of trust with their supplier."

Mr Maxwell has been performance recording for two years. He says it is too early to reap any benefits from selling recorded animals yet. But if the feedback he receives on individual performance proves useful in his selection process, and there are clear signals from customers that they are looking for figures to support their purchases, he and his daughter will consider recording both flocks.

"Having figures is starting to creep up customers' 'wish lists' – in particular individual Estimated Breeding Values for traits such as growth rates and scan statistics," he says.

When Mr Maxwell is looking for a new ram for his flock, he goes by eye first and uses figures as a back-up. Last year he used a ram from Charollais breeder Charles Sercombe who won the EBLEX award last year. This animal had very good performance

figures and, admits John, may have contributed to him winning the award this year.

Loyal customers

Robert Vant along with his cousin Richard and his son Roger work a mixed family farm on the North Downs in Kent – with 142ha of arable, 300 beef suckler stores and 25 suckler cows and 400 North Country Mule ewes. They also buy up to 200 ewe lambs a year.

They put Charollais rams on the ewe lambs for the first time three years ago rather than a Suffolk, for easier lambing.

"We went to Ashford sale where John Maxwell's shearling rams stood head and shoulders above everything else that day," says Mr Vant. "Those were the first Charollais rams we bought."

And they have not disappointed; the Charollais cross lambs have been vigorous at birth and easy to lamb, and consistently earn a £2-£3 premium in their finished price over the Suffolk crosses.

"We trust John Maxwell completely as a breeder – his shearling rams are impressive and hold together well," says Mr Vant. "Pleasingly, the rams

once brought home do not melt away; they are fit and do an exceptional job for us."

Recording is key to progress "Buying rams with known, superior EBVs, allows pedigree producers to correct any weak areas and produce an end-product that customers will pay more for, over a relatively short period of time," says EBLEX sheep breeding specialist Samuel Boon.

"I am glad that John is trialling performance recording in his flock. He already does an excellent job supplying the type of animal his customers want – reflected in winning the award for this breed this year – but I still feel that having the figures will enhance his 'offer' still further in future years."

**For more informaion
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